

Decolonising Fiji: Reclaiming Indigenous Fijian Psychologies

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Creating meaningfulness in an unstable, confusing environment can redirect one to sift through the chaos for the very basic, forgotten things in order to make sense of the world one lives in. This paper represents a process of searching for these simple things to make sense of the indigenous Fijian world, with particular reference to the people of the *yavusa o Cu'u* (Cu'u tribe).

For more than a century, indigenous Fijians have struggled to live in dual worlds torn between the pull of modernization and traditionalism. Modernisation represents the new foreign life that leads many Fijians to view their traditional ways skeptically and question whether traditions are worth hanging on to. With decades of these struggles, very little makes sense anymore. The more we are pumped with foreign aid to make us modern, the more we are lost in new types of psycho- social challenges that baffle everyone, young and old alike.

Our health statistics in 2006 indicate that indigenous Fijian youths account for 83% of persons diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (Fiji Government, 2006). Almost every crime that is committed in the country has at least one Fijian youth involved making our prisons the largest establishment that house young Fijian criminals. Fiji prison statistics show that of the 1024 prisoner population in 2006, 781 were indigenous Fijians (76 %) (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Many of these crimes are drug related. Our education system produces a large number of school dropouts and 'pushouts' every year. In an employment survey between 2004 -2005, 62% of those that were of school age but were not at school were indigenous Fijians (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Many Fijian youths who are

psychiatric patients are addicted marijuana users. The only psychiatric hospital in Fiji, St Giles Hospital, revealed that of the 222 people seen at the hospital in 2006 for drug abuse, 64 % were indigenous Fijians (The Fiji Times January 31, 2007). One is then left to ask, is there a way out of this mess?

Parents are often blamed for the chaos. They have been accused of neglecting their children or lacking commitment to each other and their families. Others have blamed the economic disaster of the country. A widespread concern is the faulty economic policies of previous governments which result in the increased gap between rich and poor. The same bad policies have been blamed for forcing many Fijians to look for jobs in the international labour market as fruit pickers, security guards, soldiers in Britain and as care-givers in the USA.

The economic gains that families get are nothing in comparison to the social displacement of young children who now have 'absent parents'. Many of these parents have not been home in a decade. Their children now grow up in an environment that lacks the necessary scaffolds to uphold them socially, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. All these, are pointing to a socially disadvantaged society that can no longer support a system that prolongs its own social ills. These ills are almost reaching terminal proportions.

In the last 20 years Fiji has experienced a series of coup de'tat. We now name them coup 1, coup 2 and coup 3 and so forth. The cost of these coup de'tat has been estimated at \$9.4 billion dollars (The Fiji Times, December 10, 2007). Some people have gone to the extent to name our country

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the 'coup-coup' country. On a more serious note, these unfortunate incidents are surfacing as the ugly head of a problem that established its roots during the time colonizers stepped on our shores. Nothing has been the same for Fijians since then. The struggles are symptomatic of social dislocations caused by the disruptions in a way of life that was meaningful to *Vitians* (Clunie, 1986) later to be known as Fijians. Our dialect refers to these foreign terminologies of our people as '*ai Viti* or *Tau'ei*'.

Over the years, efforts have been made to address the instability through reconciliation programmes. Unfortunately, these have failed because the initiatives were unfamiliar to our context. The objective of this paper is to present an alternative framework based on the psychology of the *vanua* and *vanua* epistemology. We hope that this framework will lead to the development of workable solutions to provide stability in Fiji.

Our perceptions of important basic things lie in the notion of *vanua* epistemology or the ways of 'knowing and being' of indigenous Fijians (Nabobo – Baba, 2006). *Vanua* epistemology was disrupted, ignored and made reference to by the colonizers as the 'other' knowledge (Nabobo-Baba, 2006) that was best forgotten for the purpose of modernization. The colonizers were successful in ripping the social fabric that gave meaning to the indigenous Fijians. Sadly, this colonial practice has continued in modern forms to the present day.

For indigenous Fijians to stand on stable ground, we need to claim our space in the body of formal knowledge and hold up *vanua* epistemology. *Vanua* and indigenous Fijians are synonymous. *Vanua* is the receptacle that holds Fijian identity. *Vanua* is our land, our tribe, our past, our present, our future, our relations, our knowledge and ways of doing things, our being and our spirituality. In other words, *vanua* is the pulse on which the Fijian heart beats.

More than a century ago, the Fijian's experience of *vanua* 'heart attack', began with the erroneous diagnosis that we were a hopeless contributors to economic advancement (Rao, 2004). To address

this 'anomaly', a particular attempt was made by the colonisers to relocate Fijians from their villages into settlements to release them from the 'burdens' of *vanua* commitments (Ravuvu, 1987). This arrangement was known as *tu galala*. *Tu galala* created the ideal space for western ideas to set in, highlighting the importance of self-accumulation of resources and every other idea that went along with the concept of modernization and individualism (Durutalo, 1986). *Tu galala* was one of the tools designed to break the support system of *vanua* and smother its knowledge. Education was one of the strategies used to enhance economic goals through knowledge specialization. In addition, *tu galala* became the glaring advocate for western ways and ideologies.

We, as products of *tu galala*, along with many other indigenous Fijians today, are sifting through the mess and trying to make sense of our fragmented indigenous world. The time has come to claim our space for the recognition and acceptance of *vanua* epistemology as important knowledge.

The next part of this paper, will discuss two aspects of *vanua* epistemology and these are *vanua* consciousness and *vanua* knowledge. We perceive the two concepts as possible vehicles in restoring meaningfulness and purpose to the Fijian society. *Vanua* consciousness is the state of being culturally aware of the knowledge and ways of the *vanua* and its appropriate applications to everyday life (Nabobo – Baba 2006). For the purpose of this paper, this is expressed as *vanua* knowledge.

Since *vanua* holds indigenous Fijian identity, the recognition of its knowledge and structural network should be vigorously sought. In this way, a social and psychological safety net can be woven to 'catch' those who may fall through the faulty structures of a changing society. Faulty structures can create insecurity as a result of weak *vanua* identity and the loss of a sense of belonging. Such situations result in hopelessness and meaninglessness which become ideal breeding grounds for psychosocial challenges and sociopolitical mayhem.

Individualism through arrangements like *tu galala* encourage weak *vanua* identity. To illustrate this

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point, we will share some of our experiences growing up in tu galala. We grew up in a settlement called Cu'u, some distance from the main village of Waini'a where the rest of our clan live. In this way, aspects of vanua epistemology were vague to us. We spent much of our young days getting educated which meant entering boarding school at 11 years of age, only to come home after each school term.

We grew up believing in the 'goodness' of western knowledge and ways but missed out some of the important basic things that have meaning to the people of Cu'u. For example, learning the art of weaving *iluvatu* the special mat of Cu'u, appreciating the connectedness that binds each tribe member to the other, the skill to fish, the knowledge of *veiwe'ani* (relationships) expressed in different ways, the caring of other people through *ta'ita'i* or to experience the inclusive nature of the large tribe we belong to. These things spell our identity and define our space of belonging. We want to highlight the richness of ways that provide the quality of life and wellbeing of our people.

Please recall the concepts of vanua consciousness and vanua knowledge. We will dwell on these two derivatives of vanua epistemology in order to articulate the quality of subjective well-being and life satisfaction for the people of Cu'u. To have vanua consciousness means the cultivation of the cultural and spiritual senses so that one is sensitive to the appropriate behaviour that needs to be applied at a particular time. This involves the nurturing of a sense of knowing.

Through vanua consciousness, health and wellbeing of people are maintained because of their relational connectedness (Comstock, 2005). Relational connectedness is a continuous thread of relationship and bonding between tribe members that ensures the quality of many things in life and life itself. It is seen in the actions of people in everyday activities.

The boundaries of vanua for the Cu'u people are expressed in *lotu* (Christian faith). Faith is the underlying factor that defines the quality of their

lives. Prayer begins every function, be it a simple meal or a village feast, a *soqo* or a village meeting. It is the deeper connection to God that stabilizes people. For example, even though Kuku Tupou is a widow in her eighties and lives on her own, she is happy and satisfied with her life. She can still weave *iluvatu*, harvest 'ie from the bush to make mats and sweep the leaves from the big *ivi* and *tivi* trees near her house. The village people depend on her to make their children's school uniforms.

Recently, while visiting Waini'a, we stayed with Kuku Tupou for a week and found the reason for her wellbeing and satisfaction. God is supreme in her life and she expresses her faith in the things that she does every day. She cares about people and people care about her. At every meal, Lote and Mili's children (ages 6-12), bring a bowl of cooked food for her even though she has cooked a meal herself. This is called *tai'ta'i*.

The practice of *ta'ita'i* serves well to make sure no one is hungry, a visitor is welcome and to ensure that the welfare of old people like Kuku Tupou is taken care of.

Kuku Tupou's simple, one big room house may not be much but her lifestyle is not considered poor. The concept of poverty is usually built on western economic terms and is different for the people of Cu'u. Poverty, from our tribe's perspective is the absence of relational connectedness seen in simple actions such as *ta'ita'i* which shows *vei'auwaita'i* (care) and *loloma* (love). Kuku's Tupou's happiness and life satisfaction are built on the knowledge that she is secure among the people that surround her. She is regarded as a useful and productive member of the tribe. People let her know that she is needed.

One of the struggles old people go through, is society's failure to recognize them as people who have needs to be connected and needed by others. As a result, loneliness sets in and life becomes meaningless and purposeless. The same goes for our young people. Many indigenous Fijian youths are lonely and miserable because the opportunity to be relationally connected has never been provided or lost through modern lifestyles.

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Vanua consciousness also provides the opportunity to share burdens when there is a wedding a death or *'au mata ni yalai* (literally, taking the face of a child). This reduces the high stress level that is associated with heavy economic responsibilities. On these occasions, people contribute collectively to the proper functioning of the *soqo* (social gathering) so that the appropriate amount of goods are presented or exchanged.

The concept of vanua consciousness includes collective emotions. This means that there is collective shame, collective joy, collective sadness and so forth. The collective celebration of success is a remarkable feeling. When the first PhD graduate from our tribe completed his doctorate, we celebrated as a vanua. The PhD was everyone's degree. After the celebrations, the next village asked for a copy of the PhD certificate, framed it and hung it on the wall of their village hall.

The idea of sharing is not confined to emotions only but extends to land ownership as well. Communal ownership ensures that every family has a piece of land to farm and a spot to build their house. In this way, all members of the tribe have a place to belong. Belonging is an important aspect of being *'ai Cu'u*. It embraces the principle of inclusiveness which ensures connectedness and maintains relational ties. It is a reminder that one belongs to a family, tribe or vanua (Nabobo – Baba, 2006). This concept will work well for the multi racial society in Fiji. Sixty per cent of Fiji's population are indigenous Fijians who are already operating inclusively. The extension of this concept to the rest of the population is a meaningful option to bring about reconciliation and settlement of land disputes.

Closely linked to communal land ownership is the tribal headship. The headship title has a communal concept. This means that the title is bestowed on one through tribal consensus rather than being inherited by a particular family line. In many ways, indigenous people in Fiji, struggle with this concept and are usually caught in ugly legal battles of who should be the chief and rightful owner of a certain piece of land. From our perspective, vanua

consciousness allows ownership to be seen within a less threatening type of power structure.

Within the framework of vanua epistemology is the important element of vanua knowledge. The people of Cu'u learn the ways of 'knowing and being' from the *matua* (elders). The *matua* have lived with age and experience and make it their responsibility to see that their knowledge is imparted and *yalomatua* (wisdom) is acquired. However, this teaching-learning experience is not limited to the *matua* only. There is always someone around to teach knowledge, a skill or an appropriate behaviour. This means that the framework of knowing and learning has the consistent and continuous 'scaffolds' usually provided by the *matua*. This support is vital the lives of the people of Cu'u. For example, as a young girl my cousin Manaseva asked me (Sereima) to help her cook their dinner. She asked me to prepare smoked fish for the soup. When she found out that I did not know how, she showed me straight away. Manaseva was only two years older than me but she stepped in to teach me something I did not know.

The presence of the scaffolding role provided in the network of relatives gives the assurance that learning or the transmission of knowledge and skills are passed on to others. This is how the skills for *'ena dau* (specialized knowledge) are acquired. For example, Veidre and Epi are the village carpenters with outstanding skills and *yalomatua* learnt from their parents. Veidre builds boats as well. At present, they are building the village church helped by the men of the village. They do not get cash payment for the work they do because their specialized knowledge belongs to everyone and they have the responsibility of using that knowledge to develop the vanua.

Another source of specialized knowledge is Kuku Tupou who is the village midwife. Recall Kuku Tupou, the senior citizen who is a productive member of the tribe, her knowledge as the *'ena dau ni veiva'asucumi* (midwife) is still very useful, learnt through observing Nana Liana and later, with extra coaching by qualified district nurses over the years. The remarkable thing is that she has

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been in 'practice' for about 50 years. When she delivers a breach birth, she makes sure there is silence in the room. Loud noise could startle the baby in the birthing process and could spread out its arms causing complications. Kuku Tupou recounted to us the care she took in delivering the rare monozygotic twins, Ruci and Mili, and the discovery of new knowledge and skills in the process. Mili and Ruci are now married with children of their own who were also delivered by Kuku Tupou.

The personal relationship between the mother, baby and Kuku Tupou and a familiar environment, makes the birthing process a less traumatic experience. Kuku Tupou is very careful, very patient and connects in a personal way when the birthing is taking place. This is because the mother and baby are parts of her. The special bonding of connectedness remains throughout the birthing process so that every mother and baby is handled with care.

Vanua knowledge is very wide and diverse with the people of Cu'u. The type of specialized knowledge and skills acquired are significant because they have a personal touch when being used among the people who share it. The relational connectedness of the people involved make the existence of these knowledge and skills special and unique. Vanua knowledge was ignored for the sake of modern knowledge. We believe there is a place for 'ena dau' because of their usefulness and the mode at which they have been transmitted and learnt. For things to work for the people of Cu'u, there needs to be an articulation of these things.

The whole support system of the vanua is a safety net that stabilizes the indigenous Fijian society. The system works for the people of Cu'u and we believe it can work for the rest of the Fijian society. Therefore, for any attempt to restore stability or to enhance human development in Fiji, it is worthwhile to consider the vanua epistemological framework as its base.

In conclusion, where Fiji is at today, it is quite difficult to sift through the mess and make sense of our world. The whole world may try to put up

theories to explain what is happening, we may be called the coup-coup land or whatever else but we can still hear the distant call of wisdom, we can now see the *ta'ia* (canoe) of hope in the horizon and most importantly we still feel the pulse on which the Fijian heart beats. This is the heart that treasures the *i tutu'uni* of our 'awa which are the stories of our genealogies, the heart that *tagi* (cry) when our land is torn apart with violence and disrespect.

Our cry is echoing in the spirit. It is in the spirit – the part of the vanua which connects us to God, where we find *sautu* or stillness and peace. This brand of peace can only be found through *lotu*. This peace is the light in the tunnel. In vanua terms today, this light is expressed in our faith in Jesus. When his words such as "I am the light of the world" or "my peace I give unto you not as the world gives" are heard in our spirits, it gives us a sense of security and hope that preserves our wholeness and being despite the external instability.

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