

ETHNIC TENSIONS IN THE FIJI ISLANDS

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The events of May 14, 1987 have been etched into Fiji national history as a day in which the long standing racial divide of its inhabitants came to a critical head. On this day Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka led the Indigenous Fijian¹ military staging a coup d'état against the Fijian Coalition Government. Some Fijians believed the Coalition government instilled too much political power to the Indo-Fijians² populous. The political power in essence usurped Fijian authority, which was a major issue within Fijian society and politics.³ The coup d'état ended a "century-old experiment on multiracialism" which was comprised of both Fijian and Indo-Fijian citizens. For three days, the Fijian and Indo-Fijian Coalition parliamentarians were held captive until being released at 10pm on Tuesday, May 19, 1987.⁴

Following the coup d'état, the newly deposed Prime Minister

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1. "Fijians" is the appropriate term for the largest indigenous Fijian population and from this point they will be referred to as simply "Fijians." The Fijians are ethnically Melanesian society that arrived on the islands approximately circa 1500 B.C.E. Other ethnic groups in Fiji include Indo-Fijians, the Rotuman people, and minority communities, which include Caucasians, Chinese, and other Pacific Islanders.
 2. "Indo-Fijians" refers to the Fiji-born Indians who permanently reside in the Fiji Islands. These Indo-Fijians could be referred as Fiji Islanders per their nationality but for the purpose of this discussion they will be referred to "Indo-Fijians". The term Indo-Fijians will denote a different culturally identified group of Indians while the terms "Indians", "laborers" and/or *girmit* will denote the Indians who still identified as nationally India.
 3. John Wesley Coulter, *Fiji: Little India of the Pacific* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), 42.
 4. Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 280.

Timoci Bavadra traveled to Great Britain wanting an audience with Queen Elizabeth to discuss Fiji's recent political turmoil. Bavadra was under the false pretense that she was the Queen of Fiji and therefore obligated to listen to him.⁵ Upon arriving in Great Britain, Bavadra was met by the Queen's assistant, not the Queen. The Queen felt no need to meet Bavadra on the issue, as it was not in her best interest to interfere with Fiji's politics.⁶ Rather, the Queen's message asserted that the regional government of Fiji would deal with the situation themselves. The Queen of England, on behalf of her nation, simply turned her back on the multi-racial issues in the Fiji Islands, which the British Imperialists created 108 years prior.

The Age of Imperialism was a period of expansion for the European powers, but no other European power expanded as much territory as the British Empire. Successful global hegemony was necessary for the British to establish world economic control and racial stratification based on their own status of superiority. Though many of their policies altered the landscape of their colonies, the most dramatic policy was that of the indentured servant program. From 1879 to 1916, 60,537 Indian indentured laborers arrived to supply the cheap labor force to establish the cash economy in the Fiji's new sugar industry.⁷ The intention was not to create a multiracial society. But the British Empire's neglect with dealing with potential consequences caused the Fiji colony to create an ethnically polarized society with constant simmering friction.

The Indian population in Fiji both voluntarily and involuntarily joined into *girit*⁸ with the expectation of achieving economic prosperity and the desire to break the chains of a stagnate caste based society.⁹ The majority of indentured servants chose to remain in Fiji at the end of their contracts and began to identify themselves as Indo-Fijians. The decision to remain, as was their right as British subjects, established a permanent multiracial society that would maintain conflict until present day.¹⁰ From the very beginning, several individuals noticed the potential issues regard-

5. Ibid, 281.

6. Ibid.

7. Ahmed Ali, "Indians of Fiji: Poverty, Prosperity and Security," *Economic and Political Weekly* 8 (1973): 1655.

8. *Girit*-contract of labor

9. Ali, "Indians of Fiji," 1655.

10. Ibid, 1655.

ing racial divisions in Fiji;¹¹ however, potential issues were ignored over and over again due to a lack of understanding of Fijians and Indians in the Fiji Islands. This issue was paramount in 1987 when their fears of Indo-Fijian social and political superiority began to grow into fruition.

The discussion of the ethnically based relationship between Indians, Fijians and the British is not a new study; however, it is a progressive history that has been studied from the colonial period and the introduction of the *girmityas*. In researching this topic it has come to the author's attention that a great majority of source material is housed in the Fiji National Archives and Australian universities and is not readily available to those outside the two countries without a fee. For this reason, a portion of the primary source material that is used throughout this paper is found in the secondary source materials. Many of the secondary sources, primarily from historian Brij V. Lal, provide a vast array of photographs, source documents, etc., that have come from the Fiji National Archives. Although they do not stand alone, this should not discount their legitimacy and importance within the discussion. Taking this into account, the discussion at hand will continue chronologically providing the reader with a full understanding of the formation of a society based on ethnicity and race and how it erupted into political disruption thus creating a cycle of coup d'états that still plague the Fiji Islands today.

Pre-Colonial Fiji

The Fiji Islands is an island nation in Melanesia in the South Pacific Ocean. The Fiji Islands are comprised of 332 islands and was first encountered in 1643 by Abel Jans Tansman and soon became regularly visited by Europeans in 1820.¹² The Fijians prior to colonial Fiji had their own stable social, political, religious and economic organization that was not understood by missionaries and other Europeans.¹³ Fijian society was organized into smaller communities, but under the control of a powerful chief and each community within the kingdom was self-sufficient. All things were considered common within the community; therefore Fijians were not

11. John Wear Burton, *The Fiji of To-Day* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1910), 267 and Coulter, *Fiji*, 3.

12. Coulter, *Fiji*, 19.

13. *Ibid.*, 20

accustomed to individual progress.¹⁴ The native Fijians did not possess a written language, but with the help of Christian missionaries a written language was established based on the phonetic understanding of the Fijian language.¹⁵ Many Fijians readily converted to Christianity yet still maintained much of their native culture and practices, which was fostered by their European rulers.¹⁶

Colonial Fiji

The Fiji Islands was officially recognized as a nation when the *Deed of Cession* was signed into effect on October 10, 1874. The *Deed of Cession* was a crucial document that was the basis of the ethnic conflict and confusion between the Indo-Fijians and Fijians because of its intent to protect the paramount interests of the Fijians and the Europeans.¹⁷ The agreement between Sir Hercules Robinson, Lieutenant Governor of New South Wales, and the Fijian Chiefs indicated that the Fijians had “determined to tender unconditionally” their sovereignty to Queen Victoria and her successors. Robinson promised, on behalf of the crown, “the rights and interests of the said Tui Viti¹⁸ and other high chiefs the ceding parties hereto shall be recognized so far as is and shall be consistent with British sovereignty and colonial form of government.”¹⁹ “The Fijians had hoped to promote a stable government for all its residence, native and white.”²⁰ The *Deed of Cession* did in fact do so for the two parties outlined; however, this would provide conflict upon the arrival of the Indian indentured laborers.²¹

Sir Arthur Gordon, Fiji’s first Colonial Governor (1876-1880), wanted Britain to look proudly upon at least one of its colonies where its subjects were treated with justice and fairness. Gordon had pushed for a system of indirect rule, which called for the prohibition of Fijian land sale

14. Burton, *The Fiji of To-Day*, 54.

15. Ibid., 56.

16. Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Rigby, 1970), 130.

17. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 85.

18. *Tui Viti*: the term used by the Indigenous Fijians to refer to themselves -- literally meaning “people of Fiji.”

19. *Deed of Cession of Fiji to Great Britain*, Fiji Memory, <http://www.fijimemory.org.fj/about.aspx> (accessed November 7, 2011).

20. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 11-12.

21. Ibid., 12.

as well as the preservation of the Fijian way of life by institutionalizing and codifying their social structure and initiated a tax system that did not require the Fijians to work.²² The British meant to preserve the Fijian way of life by sheltering it from the common British practice in their colonies—putting the natives to work. The use of Indian indentured laborers was already the main labor source in the British Caribbean Islands with the discontinued use of slave labor. Gordon was very much aware of this new labor source provided by Indians and interested in bringing this work force to the Fiji Islands.²³

Gordon recognized a need to establish some sort of capital in Fiji, which was found to be the sugar industry. Gordon invited the Australian sugar manufacturer Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) to extend its operations into the Fiji Islands. Accepting this invitation, the CSR began its operations in Fiji in 1882 up until 1973. The capital industry recognized and forged by Gordon and CSR quickly became the backbone of the Fijian economy until modern day.²⁴ In an effort to establish this sugar industry the British needed to obtain cheap labor, but did not want to use the Fijians for such difficult labor.²⁵ The approach to protect the Fijians from becoming the labor source within its own country was a unique aspect of British colonialism in the Fiji Islands.

The British colonial efforts in the Fiji Islands are unique because it would set the stage for future multi-ethnic conflicts between Fijians and Indo-Fijians. First, the method of colonization was the lack of violence in obtaining the colony, which did not cause an overwhelming loss of life, liberty and least of property on the part of the Fijians. Second, Gordon's actions to preserve the Fijian customs by avoiding using them as a labor source saved them from a common fate for native populations within European empires.²⁶ The British chose not to make the Fiji Islands a settler colony, which is how they colonized Australia and New Zealand. In this ac-

22. Nicholas Thomas, "Sanitation and Seeing: The Creation of State Power in Early Colonial Fiji," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (1990): 147.

23. As the governor of Trinidad and Tobago, Gordon had first hand knowledge of the use of Indian indentured laborers where it was introduced in 1839. *Ibid.*, 148.

24. *Ibid.*, 165.

25. *Ibid.*, 166.

26. Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies, 2004), 36.

tion, they changed the colonial approach.²⁷ It was a common belief held by Europeans that the Tropics were not a desirable place and caused degeneration for the white races.²⁸ The British instead believed the Indians were well suited for such labor under such conditions.

Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of State for India, agreed upon the conditions of labor with the expectation that the laborers be treated fairly and to promote their overall well being. In Lord Salisbury's last paragraph from his dispatch, as quoted from Brij V. Lal's *Grimityas*, states the following:

Above all things we must confidently expect, as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements...the Colonial laws and their administration will be such that Indian settlers who have completed their terms of service to which they are agreed as return for the expense of bringing them to the Colonies, will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.²⁹

Lord Salisbury's statement was written with the Indian labor emigration in mind. This was written before the Government of Fiji had started participating in Indian labor emigration. However, the statement has been perceived as speaking on behalf of all Indian laborer emigrants from that time forward. This is a significant statement because it affords all Indians with equal rights within the British Empire, as they were recognized British subjects. Lord Salisbury's statement contradicts the "expressed" superiority of Fijians interests as outlined in the *Deed of Cession*.³⁰ The political discourse surrounding the implied and stated meanings of the two contradictory sources continued to play a critical role in the future political relationship between the two major ethnic groups.

Indian Indentured Labor

In 1879 The Government of Fiji established their contract with the Government of India for laborers. The conditions of emigration for Indian laborers required the following: the free passage to the colony; a five year

27. Burton, *The Fiji of To-Day*, 93.

28. *Ibid.*, 93.

29. Lal, *Grimityas*, 46.

30. *Ibid.*, 46.

labor contract; upon completion of the five years an opportunity to continue working under contract or to return to India or another British colony at his or her own expense; if a total of ten years of labor was completed then the return passage would be provided back to India or another British colony at no expense to the laborer. Regardless of the future opportunities to migrate to other colonies, each laborer reserved the right to remain in Fiji as a permanent resident as British subjects.³¹ Indian immigration into Fiji under the *girit* continued from 1882 until 1916 when it was finally abolished. The total number of *girimityas* totaled 60, 537, but this figure did not include immigrants from Punjab and Gujarat who migrated between 1928 and 1930.³² To further support the Indians emigrant's rights as British subjects and to ensure that their rights were never waived the Government of India established a specific method of documenting their persons and origins.

The *Emigration Pass* that was provided for each Indian emigrant contained the following information: depot number, sex, caste, name, father's name, age, district of origin and registration. The information was necessary to provide the emigrants with the ability to return home and to be able to find the next of kin.³³ The Emigration Pass was the document given to the migrating Indian labor as a form of identification and passage to travel and employment in Fiji. This pass is a valuable source of information for families wanting to locate their kin in India for the past fifty years. Often times a person's caste was altered because the *arkathis*³⁴ felt that Hindus of higher castes would not be accepted for migration.³⁵ This perpetuated the misconception that the Hindus that traveled to Fiji were less educated, less civilized and less cultured which would pose a lasting racial stereotype.³⁶

The rate of immigration into the colony was determined by the

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31. "Conditions of Service and Terms of Agreement Which the Recruiters is Authorized to Offer on Behalf of the Agent to Intending Emigrants," in *Grimityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, Brij V. Lal (Lautoka: Institute of Applied Sciences, 2004), 64-65.
 32. K. L. Gillion, "The Sources of Indian Emigration to Fiji," *Populations Studies* 10 (1956): 139.
 33. "Emigration Pass," in *Grimityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, Brij V. Lal (Lautoka: Institute of Applied Sciences, 2004), 29.
 34. *Arkathis*-Indian recruiters.
 35. Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and the Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1991), 59.
 36. Ali, "The Indians of Fiji," 1655.

demand for labor, which in turn was controlled by the sugar prices. The CSR, as the leading sugar producer, often sent requests to the Government of Fiji, which transmitted their request to the Fiji Government Emigration Agent in India.³⁷ The method in which the *arkathis* obtained recruits to fill this demand has been considered morally questionable. Their tactics varied from promising great fortunes to tricking the Indians under false pretenses to go to the boat depot. Often, the *arkathis* lied about actually leaving India because many Hindus were fearful of *kala pani*³⁸ because it caused a person to become impure and lose their caste status. Regardless of the trickery that took place by the *arkathis* there were other factors that either encouraged or discouraged migration. Many people volunteered to escape the caste restrictions in India that required that they remain in the same economic trade forever. But indentured labor would provide, after five years, an opportunity to earn money and change their lives.³⁹ Another reason for migration was the numerous famines plaguing India and most countries in the southern hemisphere causing the complete destruction of life due to British mismanagement.⁴⁰ Regardless of the primary reason or method for migration, many of those who left never returned to India.

Upon arrival to Fiji laborers had to quickly adapt to their new environments and their new social situations. They could no longer apply stringent caste restrictions to their new lives. The caste lines established by hundreds of years of understanding in India could not be maintained in a country that was not their own with the loss of religious and social leadership.⁴¹ During the journey to Fiji they were forced to drink from the same bowl and to sit within each other's company and work together.⁴² This sort of interaction and the crossing of the *kala pani* without the ability to perform the necessary rituals had caused permanent impurity. The journey to the Fiji Islands and the journey as laborers had almost completely erased caste notions. That which remained was traditional rituals, traditions

37. Gillion, "The Sources of Indian Emigration," 140.

38. *Kala pani*: black water.

39. Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 65.

40. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2000), 271.

41. Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 71.

42. Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years*, 62.

and religion, which remained to be the backbone of Indian society.⁴³ Few *girmityas* were able to document their journeys at the time, but missionaries often recorded oral histories for later generations.⁴⁴ One source from a *gimit* survives today written by Totaram Sanadhya.

Totaram Sanadhya, a Brahmin who migrated from India to Fiji, worked as a *girmitya* for five years and later became a leader amongst the laborer population. Several notions regarding the social structure within the Indian community can be seen in his memoirs, which were written when he returned to India. He often referred to other Indians as his brothers and sisters and made little mention of caste distinction unless speaking of its erasure.⁴⁵ The information he provides gives the reader insight into the lives of the laborers, but also provides snippets of information regarding the relationship between the immigrant Indian population and the Fijians, which is extremely rare.⁴⁶

Relationship between the Indians and Fijians were limited in the early years. "Fiji's true inhabitants cannot do the work of a labourer well. Their nature is wholly unsuited to this activity. In the cane fields, has to do the very same work every day...the Indian coolies are utterly well suited..."⁴⁷ He was referring to the Fijians way of communal living which did not require constant laboring. Totaram had a unique relationship with Fijians because he fluently spoke the Fijian language, which was not common. It is also noted in other source materials that the Indian laborers had arrogance and an attitude of superiority against the Fijians who they viewed as savages regardless of their own current status.⁴⁸ This unhappy feeling towards each other was mutual as "Fijians saw Indian as usurpers likely to take away their land which for them was the source of their existence and survival"⁴⁹ The British wholly supported these stereotypes and often placed the Fijians in a higher position and warned them not to come in contact with Indians and

43. Ahmed Ali, "Indians in Fiji: An Interpretation," in *Indo-Fijian Experience*, ed. Subramani (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), 8.

44. Lal, *Girmityas*, 30.

45. Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years*, 44.

46. *Ibid.*, 44-47.

47. *Ibid.*, 59.

48. Ali, "Indians in Fiji," 4.

49. *Ibid.*, 4.

to not provide them with any shelter in their villages.⁵⁰ Indians and Indo-Fijians would establish themselves in Fiji under the following notion of their role in the Fijian Islands:

Fijians were saved by government sympathy from a typical fate of colonized people – being made plantation typical fate of colonized people – being made plantation collies in their own country. But this salvation had a cost, and the cost was paid not by Fijians, but by the Indians brought in and made coolies in their place...they perceive that Indians owe them a great debt for being allowed to profit off Fijian lands. But in general they do not comprehend the great historical debt that they owe Indians.⁵¹

This dynamic relationship is often times skewed to make one group superior to the other for it was often misconstrued that the British favored the Fijian way of life over others and that is why they preserved it and the Indians felt that they suffered to protect the Fijian laziness that the British could not break.⁵²

Abolition of the Indentured System

In 1920 the indentured labor system had been abolished and all existing contracts were canceled. With the end of the indentured system, came a whole new Fiji that was completely different from the earlier colonial period. The question remained as to whether or not free Indians were going to function within a system that allowed them to be permanent residents, yet still consider them second-class citizens. Several Indians left India with the intention of earning money and returning to India after their five year contract; however, many Indians did not return home.

There were several reasons that prompted the stay of those Indians at the end of contracts, but the two main reasons were the fear of not being accepted in their native villages due to lose of caste status and because they have had become disassociated with their lives in India. Prior to the 1920's, "Indo-Fijians tended to be socially isolated, economically depen-

50. Ibid.

51. Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years*, 28-29.

52. Ibid., 29.

dent, culturally disoriented, and politically disorganized and voiceless”.⁵³ The Fiji born Indians were learning from their parent’s generations and had a different outlook on the social organization and economic environment of which they were very much involved. The Indo-Fijian population had now become removed from their romantic ideals of India and they prepared to establish themselves in Fiji.⁵⁴

Prior to the independence of the Fiji Islands, the dominant political and social question that lingered were how the three main groups would be able to interact. The European population wanted to ensure their privileged position and the Fijian leaders, who at this point had more in common with the Europeans, also wanted to maintain their ultimate control on Fijian society.⁵⁵ In 1928, the first secretary of Indian Affairs, J.R. Pearson, said “the problem was that Indo-Fijians were impatient for change, Europeans too resistant to it, and Fijians too willing to side with the Europeans in order to restrain the Indo-Fijians”.⁵⁶ As the Europeans and Fijian controlled the political climate and land rights the Indo-Fijians still provided the backbone of the cash economy focused on sugar cane production.

CSR had become the sole milling company on the island when it had recently established a monopoly in the sugar industry. A mass labor shortage occurred with the end of *girit* immigration in 1916 and the end of the program in 1920. CSR chose to transform their industry from full-production to simply leasing land to Indo-Fijians, as independent contractors, for production. The CSR made efforts to ensure control over their contracts by establishing specific provisions that restricted the method of planting and harvesting and reserve the right to control sugar prices based on government imposed increases on production.⁵⁷ Regardless of the tight constraints, Indo-Fijians had become more independent economically and would continue to play an important economic role in the coming years.

The end of the indentured laborer program did not discontinue immigration, but instead saw an influx of Indians from Punjab and Gujarat during the late 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁸ The Punjabi immigrants primarily

53. Ibid., 74.

54. Ibid.

55. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 60.

56. Ibid., 87.s

57. Ali, “The Indians of Fiji,” 61.

58. Gillion, “The Sources of Indian Emigration,” 140.

focused on agricultural, but were not often recruited because of negative stereotypes of being troublemakers.⁵⁹ The Gujarati immigrants were primarily business orientated and today own the largest handicraft and other retail chains in the Fiji Islands.⁶⁰ Both the Gujarati and Punjabi populations continued to limit their integration with the general Indian population, which descended from *girmitiyas*. As the Indian and Indo-Fijians population increased so did their need for political recognition and representation.⁶¹

The Indian laborers often felt removed from India, but as laborers they were not removed from their privileged position within the Government of India. This therefore caused a point of contention between the ethnic parties. Indian laborers often communicated their grievances about the conditions of employment and of life in the islands directly to the Government of India instead of the colonial government of Fiji. Indian laborers felt their position in the islands as subordinate and thus found their only recourse to communicate with the one government that recognized them as British subjects. This approach only continued to maintain a divide between Indian laborers and the European/Fijian government.⁶²

Social Interactions

Although the Indo-Fijians and Fijians lived in the same country there was little social blending amongst the two populations. Often there were misconceptions of the two ethnic groups that affected their ability to work together. Indo-Fijians continued to view Fijians as backward natives who represented nothing more than a bunch of lazy savages. Whereas Fijians had the preconception that the Indians who migrated were of the lowest ranks of Indian society and were always inferior to Fijians.⁶³ As Indo-Fijians continued to gain higher economic ground in 1940s and 1950s wartime economy, they were perceived to be greedy, conniving and isolationists.⁶⁴

The British-Fijian relationship was a two sided relationship in

59. Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 43.

60. Ali, "The Indians of Fiji," 1657.

61. Subramani, "Introduction," in *Indo-Fijian Experience*, ed. Subramani (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), ix.

62. *Ibid.*, 87.

63. Karen J. Brison, "Imagining Modernity in Rural Fiji," in *Ethnology* 42 (2003): 338.

64. Ali, "The Indians of Fiji," 4.

which the British did not relinquish their position of superiority and did not divulge this information to the Fijians. The British utilized the method of placing one ethnic/racial group above the other by using positive racism to ensure friction between the lesser races to their own advantage. The British sheltered the Fijians from undergoing common fates of colonized peoples, which only further strengthened the mirage of Fijian superiority in the colonial context.⁶⁵ On one hand, the Fijian community held a stronger connection with the British method of government. On the other hand, Indo-Fijians had a longer history with the British form of government and often held strong anti-British sentiments.⁶⁶ The Fijians could not understand this anti-British sentiment because they had never experienced the method of colonialism as the *girmitiyas* and Indo-Fijians had experienced.

During World War II the socio-economic divide between Indo-Fijians and Fijians became a large gap. During war-time, Indo-Fijians had the option to either join the military forces and support the British Empire or continue working as agriculturalists and abstain from war-time efforts. The former would legitimize the British colonial position and subsequently the Indo-Fijians subordinate place in the Fiji Islands. The latter, allowed the Indo-Fijians to maintain their work as CRS contractors as opposed to abandoning their only source of income. At this point the choice was obvious—most Indo-Fijians refused to participate in the war effort.⁶⁷ Indo-Fijians would not fight against oppression when they themselves could not overcome the oppressive nature of the British Empire. The British propaganda and the Fijian war effort had painted the Indo-Fijians as disloyal and Japanese supporters although there was never any evidence to substantiate this claim.⁶⁸ This continued misunderstanding between the Fijians and Indo-Fijians only perpetuated the social divide.

During the wartime economy many Indo-Fijians remained in business and agriculture and reaped much of the benefits. The Indo-Fijians community had become the new bourgeois while most Fijians continued to live off of subsistence farming. Indo-Fijians had luxury-imported vehicles and large luxurious homes in towns while the Fijians continued living

65. Anuradha Kumar, "Deepening Divides: Ethnic Conflict in Fiji," in *Economic and Political Weekly* 35 (2000): 2387.

66. Ibid, 2387

67. Ibid, 2389.

68. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 135.

communally within the traditional villages despite owning eighty-three percent of the land.⁶⁹ Due to the increase in the Indo-Fijian presence both in numbers and in financial strength many Fijians began questioning their authority in the colony.

A survey in the 1950's found that sixty-three percent of Fijians were intolerant of the Indo-Fijians presence while twenty-five percent wanted them to remain in the country, but only as long as they remained under terms that were favorable for Fijians.⁷⁰ Although Indo-Fijians and Fijians lived side by side throughout their daily activities, there remained a constant power struggle.⁷¹ It is in this context that politicians began revisiting the *Deed of Cession* and the Lord Salisbury's statement to understand the true position that each party held within the colony. Both statements are vague and make assertions as opposed to clearly stated intent. This therefore made the discussion quite theoretical at a time when both groups were in need of a real solution.

The Deed of Cession vs. Lord Salisbury's Promise

Indo-Fijians always sought full enfranchisement; however, they had settled for partial representation with the hope that one day they would obtain full rights as Fijian citizens as written in Lord Salisbury's statement. The statement was made during the beginning of the indentured program, at a time prior to the agreement with Fiji. This claim has been negated due to the agreement between the Fijians and the British in the *Deed of Cession*. The *Deed of Cession* does not clearly indicate that Fijians would always remain superior, but it has been instead inferred to as a gentlemen's agreement of such an act.⁷² The British approach to leave many issues ambiguous without providing clarity has often played to their imperial advantage by informally and formally favoring one group over another.⁷³ In an effort to reconcile the situation, the Government of Fiji commissioned an independent review of the state of affairs in the Fijian society.

69. Ali, "Indians in Fiji," 16.

70. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 146.

71. R. G. Ward and O. H. K. Spate, "Thirty Years Ago: A View of the Fijian Political Scene—Confidential Report to the British Colonial Office," *The Journal of Pacific History* 125 (1990): 106.

72. Ibid, 104.

73. Ibid, 103.

In 1957 the Government of Fiji commissioned Professor O. H. K. Spate to review the socio-economic relationship between Indo-Fijians and Fijians and determine how this relationship could hinder the development for both parties. The confidential report was released to the public thirty years later after the thirty-year period of confidentiality passed. The report titled *Thirty Years Ago: A View of the Fijian Political Scene: Confidential Report to the British Colonial Office, September 1959* was released in June 1990 in the *Journal of Pacific History*.

Spate argued that the day-to-day “relations between the various races are friendly enough, and although there are symptoms, both amongst Indians and Fijians, of political and social dissatisfaction, it could hardly be said that these are as yet very acute”.⁷⁴ However, this equilibrium is quite unstable. The Fijian leaders and the European businesses tend to deny that there is any racial disharmony when addressing the Indian challenge.⁷⁵ In the same breath, Spate also points out one of the many causes of a potential problem.

At the same times as Fiji is passed off as a Model Colony (characteristically, this does not imply any credit to the Government!), where everybody loves everybody else and there is nothing to learn from outside, no opportunity seems to be missed of rubbing in the alleged superiority of Fijian culture and *mores*, until it is almost implied that the ‘alien’ and immigrant Indian community (85 percent Fiji-born, against 20 percent for Europeans) is in Fiji only on sufferance.⁷⁶

Further in his observations, he recommends that the educational system be a multi-racial system fostering both Fijians and Indians. All children should be educated together in primary school and learn from each other.⁷⁷ This potential solution could close the divide of animosity that is forced upon the generations by the government, European businesses and notwithstanding the Indian elites. The Indians and Fijians were in a locked situation—that was not necessarily created by them—however it was their responsibil-

74. Ibid., 104.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid., 105.

77. Ibid.

ity to settle things between them.⁷⁸

Spate acknowledges that although Indians and Fijians continue to function quite harmoniously in day-to-day functions, there is a constant state of friction that will most likely disrupt the situation in the foreseeable future. Indians and Fijians are able to generally cohabitate because they do not often cross paths with one another due to forced or recommended separation.⁷⁹ Indo-Fijians were restricted from living in Fijian's villages. If they were accepted in Fijian villages, the colonial officials removed them. Indo-Fijians and Fijians were not allowed to go to the same schools, regardless if they were neighbors. Although these fundamental restrictions limited the ability for the two societies to live on the same footing, they still engaged in cultural borrowing and adaptation, yet inter-marriage continued to be disallowed.⁸⁰

Ethnic divisions based on labor were codified based on the assumption that Fijians were bearers of true cultural traditions and therefore held a propensity for political leadership and guidance while Indo-Fijians, lacking this traditional background, were more appropriately accustomed for economic enterprises.⁸¹ These ethnic stereotypes were adopted by both groups and embraced as a symbol of pride. Fijians felt their culture made them more superior and their job was to continue to foster their traditions and the Indo-Fijians embraced the belief that they were true bearers of modernity and individualism.⁸²

Spate recommended that inclusionary actions should be taken to provide Indians agency within the Fijian Islands. He noted that the Indian population was the majority in Suva and Lautoka, yet there are no street names with Indian names to politically and culturally acknowledge their impact. The Indian community was extremely prominent, but the only religious holidays that are nationally observed are Christmas and Easter, but not *Eid* and *Diwali*.⁸³ In recommending the adoption of these holidays he

78. Ibid., 117

79. Ibid.

80. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 107.

81. Brison, "Imagining Modernity in Rural Fiji," 338.

82. Ibid.

83. *Eid*: A Muslim festival that takes place at the end of Ramadan; *Diwali*: known as the "festival of lights" celebrated across Indian and amongst Indian communities between mid-October and mid-December. What are they celebrating? Spate, "Thirty Years Ago," 118-119.

indicates that it “is a small thing and one easily remedied, but not without its importance; the holiday has religious significance for those who want it, but is an occasion for enjoyment and cordiality for all...this is a very valuable social lubricant in a multi-racial community.”⁸⁴ Today the Prophet Mohammad’s birthday and Diwali are national holidays.

The Road to Self-Government and Independence October 10, 1970

In 1929 Indians were afforded three representatives, Europeans afforded five representatives and Fijians seven representatives to the Fiji legislative council. The Indians gained their right to representation at the behest of the Government of India who supported their rights as British subjects.⁸⁵ Although the Government of India did not dictate to Government of Fiji how to manage its colony, they did hold political weight within the larger colonial context. However, as expected Indo-Fijians were not completely content with minimal representation and continued to strive for full representation regardless of European and Fijians fears.⁸⁶

In response to the growing Indo-Fijian demands, the Great Council of Chiefs⁸⁷ stated that “the immigrant Indian population should neither directly nor indirectly have any part or direction of matters affecting the interests of the Fijian race.”⁸⁸ The dialogue was further quieted by Ratu Sukuna, a prominent Fijian leader, who stated the concept of democracy was not natural within Fijian society, who put all their faith of proper leadership in the Great Council of Chiefs, which “was best suited for the temperament of the Fijian people” and “above the influences of local interests and prejudices.”⁸⁹ The Great Council of Chiefs’ position on Fijian government is contradictory to the concept of modernity and of democracy, which would be the only effective way of running a multi-racial society.

The Office of Fijian Affairs Board sent a letter called *The Wakaya Letter*, which clearly stated that the Board would be prepared to move to-

84. Ibid., 118-119.

85. Brij V. Lal, *Politics in Fiji: Studies in Contemporary History* (Hawaii: Brigham Young University, 1986), 35.

86. Spate, “Thirty Years Ago,” 120.

87. Great Council of Chiefs-*Bose Levu Vakaturaga* in Fijian was established in 1876 by Governor Sir Arthur Gordon to be the governing body over the indigenous population in Fiji.

88. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 92.

89. Ibid.

wards internal self-government if there was a constitution that “would make provision for the safeguarding of Fijian interests, building on and strengthening the spirit and substance of the Deed of Cession”.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the Board requested that there be no deviation from the *Deed of Cession*, a guarantee of Fijian land ownership and only under these requirements would they co-operate with other “principle races” to establish self-government.⁹¹

In 1963 all Fijian citizens, including other “principle races”, were enfranchised therefore establishing a Fijian electorate, which focused much of its attention on the Indian problem. In 1965, the Indian population had reached fifty-one percent, but less than ten percent of the electoral category. “The elections that soon followed the new constitution saw the emergence of party politics as well as the establishment of race as the crucial factor in political behavior.”⁹² “The 1963 elections caused a euphoria of bipartisanship, especially between the two leaders; Ratu Sir Kaminese Mara and Mr. Siddiq Koya...with the departure of the British, Indians and Fijians would live in harmony and trust with equal opportunities for all.”⁹³ This harmony between the two leaders would be short-lived and cause disconnect within the multi-racial political organization following into independence.

The Fiji Islands was declared independent from the British Empire on October 10, 1970, which came and went without affecting the political issues that prevailed. Independence provided leaders an opportunity to propose sweeping decisions that would address the multi-racial problem once and for all. Sakiasi Butadroka, a parliamentarian, had proposed a motion to repatriate Indians back to India. Butadroka argued that the Indian population was the main problem in Fiji and they did not need their skills and they could return to their backward country and assist in developing their own nation.⁹⁴ Kaminese spoke out against the statement, but not to the extent that Koya wanted, which caused discontent within the government and amongst the two racial groups in general. For the next seventeen years the Alliance party, ethnically Fijian based, would dominate politics and the issues at hand until the 1987 elections that truly reflected the demographics

90. Lal, *Politics in Fiji*, 54.

91. “The Wakaya Letter,” in *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, Brij V. Lal (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1992), 189.

92. Ali, “Indians in Fiji,” 17.

93. *Ibid.*, 19

94. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 235.

of Fijian and Indo-Fijian society.⁹⁵

The 1987 elections ousted the pro-Fijian Alliance party and inaugurated the pro-Indian National Federation Party (NFP). The NFP took a bipartisan approach by accepting an ethnic Fijian, Dr. Timoci Bavadra to lead the Coalition. It was the first time that a democratically elected multi-racial/bipartisan coalition was in power; however, this coalition would be dismantled by Lt. Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka who on May 14th 1987, staged a bloodless military coup, “ending not only the life of a month old Coalition government, but an era in Fiji’s history.”⁹⁶

The Cycle of Coup D’états

The coup had altered the political and social relations between Fijians and Indo-Fijians in the Fiji Islands, which continues to persist into present day. On September 25, 1987, the constitution had been revoked and the pro-Fijian government ruled the country with the military’s force. The Republic of the Fiji Islands, as it was referred to after the coup, had been expelled from the British Commonwealth and was not recognized as a legitimate government by many leading nations including Australia and New Zealand.⁹⁷

The results of the 1987 coup caused obvious developmental challenges within the new Republic and only continued to disintegrate the fragile ethnic/racial relations. In an effort to support a pro-Fijian environment most public positions required the forced resignation of Indo-Fijians and filled the vacancies with unqualified Fijians, which caused mismanagement on all levels of the government. The political, economic and social impact of the coup caused many Indo-Fijians to flee the country over the next two years, causing a major drain the Republic’s economic stability. The mass exodus to Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America allowed Fijians to gain a majority representation and to legitimize their claims to political control.

The 1987 coup established precedence by legitimizing military control by force, which only continued to control the Republic’s political scene. The September 1987 coup was carried out of frustration for the lack of movement towards a pro-Fijian government, but by July 1990 the Fijian

95. Ali, “The Indians of Fiji,” 1659.

96. Lal, *Broken Waves*, 275.

97. Lal, *Politics in Fiji*, 75.

majority was able to make strides to establish complete control over the government.⁹⁸ However, due to international scrutiny the constitution was ratified and elections took place in May 1999 electing the first ethnically Indian Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. Subsequently the Republic was readmitted into the British Commonwealth in October 1999. In May 2000, George Speight, an ethnic Fijian civilian, took the Prime Minister and his entire cabinet hostage. Power was handed to the military, the Great Council of Chiefs and the President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo on July 28, 2000.⁹⁹ The pro-Fijian forces felt the need, for a second time, to assert primacy by force. Although the military supported the civilian government, internal squabbles caused the military to ignore the government and take matters into their own hands in 2006.

“On 5 December 2006 Fiji’s military leader, Voreque “Frank” Bainimarama, seized power from Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase in a coup”¹⁰⁰ Bainimarama argued that Mr. Qarase was corrupt and heavily biased toward the ethnic Fijian community. At that time he indicated that the take-over was not permanent; however, up until now there has not been a scheduled election. Fiji is currently under military control and according to Bainimarama undergoing the construction of a new constitution that will encompass all citizens of Fiji regardless of ethnicity. He indicated he would “abolish the system in which Fiji’s majority indigenous population and minority Indians vote for candidates of their own ethnicity”.¹⁰¹ Commander Bainimarama, an ethnic Fijian, has instituted martial law on the Island and censored any negative press.¹⁰² The international community has spoken against the illegal methods of obtaining control and asks for a return to democracy.¹⁰³

98. Ibid, 78.

99. Ibid, 82.

100. “Deep Divisions in Post-Coup Fiji,” *BBC News*, December 15, 2008, accessed October 4, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7746519.stm>.

101. “Fiji Constitutional Unveiled,” *BBC News*, July 01, 2009, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8128211.stm>.

102. “Climate of Fear under Fiji Army,” *BBC News*, April 20, 2000. Accessed October 3, 2011. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8007615.stm>.

103. Ibid.

Conclusion

The problem that persists in the Fiji Islands is the contradiction between traditional Fijian life and the concept of modernity. Forced modernity, a colonial construction, is necessary to function within a global cash economy. If traditional Fijians cannot overlook the stagnation of rural life then they will never be able to compete within this global economy. To do this, they must embrace the Indo-Fijian presence. The British colonial approach in Fiji did not consider the consequences of sheltering the Fijians from modern development all the while forcing immigrant Indian laborers to work on their behalf. Indian laborers and Indo-Fijians had many years of experience to learn to adapt to their environments and to adjust within the larger colonial context, which probably puts them at an advantage. However, for Fijians to adjust in their current economic and political climate they too must be willing to relinquish the naivety of traditional society within a non-traditional country. Both parties feel a sense of entitlement for their own reasons, but the only people who suffer are those who live in a society that will not politically and socially accept its neighbors. Can either group be blamed for such a thing? There are several arguments that can be made to place blame on the British, Fijians and Indo-Fijians, but to whom does it benefit to pass blame. The period of decolonization is not complete and many former colonies are establishing national identities, but to ignore the affects of imperialism is simply ignorant. For this reason, both Fijian and Indo-Fijians will continue playing their roles in a game established by the British many years before.