

LAND: AN INDIGENOUS FIJIAN PERSPECTIVE

by

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ABSTRACT

“Land” literally means *Qele* in the Fijian language. It refers to actual turf for gardening and grazing cattle. The other word for Land that is used in this brief presentation is *Vanua*. This rendering has profound social significance for the indigenous Fijians. It includes not only actual turf but also values and value-systems, customs and ceremonies of different kinds, traditional properties, feastings and *meke* or dancing. *Vanua* has a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning. Both are inseparable from each other.

My work on land or place has been an ongoing concern for me since the late 1960s when the term “context” or “contextualization” in theology began to be taken seriously especially in developing countries. Churches in these countries have been saying within the wider ecumenical family that what they need is a *relevant living theology* for their situations. Over the years the search for such a theology has resulted in new and lively reflections of the Christian faith in different contexts. And this includes islands in Oceania. The setting for the articulation of Oceanic theology in the future is the sea, the Ocean, “a watery tract of the oikoumene”. But the sea cannot be divorced from the land. In many myths and legends of Oceania, sea and land are one. The sea is the mother of the land. A good deal of our creator-gods and goddesses are related to the sea.

Four hermeneutical keys are used here to open up our Fijian experience of the *vanua* and its significance. First, is *kunekunetaki* (conception, birth). This is an attempt to capture the Fijian’s sense of place and the experience they went through during the period they came into contact with especially the White settlers. Second,

mata (face) seeks to explore and describe the more tangible dimension of *vanua*. Third, *mana* (energy) signifies the “centre” or “power-house” of *vanua*. And fourth, *veirogorogoci* (ability and readiness to listen). This addresses the ethical responsibility of the *vanua* in present-day Fiji.

INTRODUCTION

Viti¹ (Fiji) is a group of more than 300 islands of which about one-third are inhabited. The Fiji group lies between latitude 15 and 22 degrees South, and longitude 177 degrees West and 178 degrees East in the South Pacific Ocean. The total land mass is 18,333 sq. km. The two major islands, Vitilevu and Vanualevu make up 87 per cent of the total land area.

The contemporary mode of land ownership in Fiji is a fact that was handed down from the colonial era when land was divided between indigenous Fijians and the White planters. Government land comprises 9.46% of the area (172,606 hectares) and is administered by the Lands department. The most valuable land is the 8.17% of freehold (149,085 hectares) originally selected and negotiated for by the settler immigrants, mostly Europeans, before Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874. The balance (82.37% or 1,503,662 hectares) is owned on a communal basis by over 5,280 Fijian landowning units known as *mataqali* (a primary division of a village).

Before I move on, let me very briefly say something about ‘Wisdom’ which is an important and significant part of this conference. The Fijian term for Wisdom is *VUKU*. The midwife in our culture is spoken of as *yalewa vuku* or ‘woman of wisdom’. When described in this way, Wisdom is understood to be feminine. This is closely

¹ Viti refers to action of the early Fijian ancestors "breaking small branches" as they made their way to Nakauvadra so that they might trace their way back should they get lost. This action (Viti) came to be adopted as the name for the whole group — Viti or Fiji.

related to the way this is understood and presented in the Bible. Wisdom in the bible is described as the 'daughter of God'. With her, God creates. She is a secondary persona or face of God in the work of mediation of creation.

The Hebrew word for Wisdom is *Hokhmah*. It is a feminine word and often depicted as a handmaid for God. This is feminine description of Wisdom is closely related to our Fijian sense of Place we call *Vanua*.

VANUA

Land in Fijian is known as *Vanua*. This rendering has profound social significance for the Fijians. It includes not only actual turf but also values and value-systems, the chief and chiefly-system, customs and ceremonies of different kinds, traditional properties apart from the land) feasting and dancing. *Vanua* has a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning. Both are inseparable from each other. *Vanua* encompasses many things and includes earthly turf, flora and fauna of a given place, rivers and mountains, fishing ground and forest. Simply put, it means place. A village, district or one's country can be called *Vanua*. When used in terms of actual turf, it includes practically everything on it.

For the symbolic meaning of the *vanua* or land, the following can be advanced:

VANUA AS A MOTHER

As a means of livelihood, it refers not only to food. More importantly, it is taken as 'mother' or source of life. There is an inner connection between land as actual turf and land as a religious symbol for Fijians. *Vanua* holds life together and gives it meaning. To be cast out from one's *vanua* is to be cut off from one's source of life; one's mother as it were. In many Pacific languages, the word for land is related or identical with the word for womb or placenta. The best examples are: *fanua* (Samoa) *fenua* (Tahiti or Maohi Nui) *fonua* (Tonga), *whenua* (Maori). They have parallel meanings with the Fijian *vanua*, referring as it does to the basis of life on earth.

There is an inseparable union between land and people in the Fijian understanding of *vanua*. *Vanua* is people and people *vanua*. Not only is this demonstrated in one's tract of land for gardening, it can also be shown by a father planting, for example a coconut tree on the same spot where the *wa ni vicovico* (umbilical chord) of his newborn child has been buried. Thus a part of the child remains in that place. This holds the belief that the child may be connected to the basis of life on earth throughout his or her life.

IDENTITY

A strong sense of belonging is attached to the *Vanua* in the Fijian understanding. A Fijian does not think of himself/herself as belonging within certain frontiers but as originating from the place where the founder-ancestor landed and after which the land was named.

The Fijian term for this is *icavuti*. Its rendering in English as 'title' is misleading. *Icavuti* implies 'belong to,' 'being owned.' One does not own the land; the land owns him. Humanity and land are one. The human person derives his/her name and for this reason his/her basic constitution as a human being from the *vanua*, which means both turf and people. The idea of a 'title' reverses this: the land belongs to the person in question. Herein lies a basic difference between Fijian views of the land and European.

This sense of belonging can be expressed through connection to a particular piece of land, a river or sea, hill or mountain, forest or generally the flora and fauna of a given area. These particular places bear names, names that carry memories of past events. They are therefore not empty spaces but significant places. It is this sense of place that Walter Bruegemann describes:

Place is something which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity across generations, .Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made and demands

have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the uncompromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom. ²

The mountain that overlooks a village is not just another mountain; it is the *ulunikoro* (head of the village). For the village is a body in itself with different parts. Bernard Narokobi speaks for all in Oceania when he says:

*A village is a cultural unit, an organ of civilization, technology and enterprise. All its members apply their talents at their own pace, without promises or inducement of higher pay, overseas travel or promotion. People work because it is right to work, and eat because it is pleasurable to eat. The only promotion our people expect is to be recognized for their generosity and helpfulness and to be appreciated. The only inducement they will expect is a promise to be buried with honor and dignity when they pass through time.*³

There is an air of sentimentality here, removed in some respects from today's reality, but that sense of bonding and connectedness is unmistakable.

Human identity under the light of *vanua* is also expressed through totems of each *yavusa*. The totems are normally a trilogy of *ika* (fish), representing the sea or river; *kau* (tree or plant), representing the dry land, and *manumanu* bird), representing the atmosphere. This signifies humanity's connectedness to the land or *vanua* and its different dimensions. These totems also stand for the interconnectedness of land, sea or river and sky or the atmosphere in the thought-world of Fijians. To know one's *yavusa*; its totems and their varied connections is to know oneself. Self-knowledge is

² The Land. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 5

³ The Melanesian Way. Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1980, p. 13.

in itself treasured knowledge in the life of the *vanua*. It is not an end in itself for by its very nature, it carries responsibility in the management and up-keep of the *vanua*.

I can feel what Professor Hauofa is saying when he refers to Oceania as "us". "We are the sea; we are the Ocean".⁴ This knowledge of belonging carries with it a sense of commitment and responsibility. We are responsible as people of Oceania to look after the world's largest 'liquid continent', Our care of it is our commitment to the whole cosmos; the whole world. For no one can show genuine regard for what is global away from one's own backyard.

VANUA AS WERE

A garden is often spoken of as *were-kalou* in the spiritual world of the Fijian. *Were* means garden and normally refers to the yam garden. And *kalou* means god or the deity. The hyphenation, *were-kalou* (garden-god) indicates that god is 'in' the garden or the garden is 'in' god. The two are interconnected that one essentially is in the other. Their relationship is ontological. The garden is in god and god is in the garden. This knowledge or epistemology is similar to the idea of 'panentheism,' meaning, 'god is in everything.' This is not the same as 'pantheism' which means 'god is everything,' a belief found in some non-christian religions.

The belief that god is in the garden and the garden is in god has always been associated with the *were* (garden). For this reason, the realm of the spiritual is central to ways of knowing of the Fijian. An old Fijian said these words to Rev. Allan Tippet in the 1940s: *Keimami qarava vata na Kalou kei na were*. (We [exclusive] serve together both God and the garden).⁵ Both God and the garden and the spiritual and the material essentially belong together in the world of the Fijian.

⁴ See *Our Sea of Islands*. University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1993, p. 4.

⁵ Tippet, A.R. in *Oral Tradition and Ethnohistory: The Transmission of Information and Social Values in Early Christian Fiji*. St. Marks Library, Canberra, 1980, p. 52.

The hyphenated *were-kalou* is speech borrowed from the Fijian story of creation, of how the world came into being. It speaks about Ratu (chief) who is described in the creation story as Ratumaibulu — [lit. chief from 'bulu' or below the earth]. Ratumaibulu is also known as Ratumaibula — [lit. chief from 'bula' or life]. *Bulu* (below the earth) is source of bula (life), the dwelling place of *Ratu* who also is the ancestor-god of growth and fertility in the *were*, and because of this in the entire ecosystem. There is a certain time during the year when *Ratu* leaves his dwelling place in *Bulu* and appears on earth. Such appearance is described as 'vura' and the place where he appears is called *vuravura*. This is the Fijian word for this earth or this material world.

WERE: BODY OF RATU

Ratumaibulu, ancestor-god of growth and fertility is the 'center' or 'life-force' of the garden. The creation story, by implication points out that *Ratu* is androgynous and therefore embodiment of the feminine and masculine. As center, she/he holds together life in the garden, gives it direction and purpose.

This center in the life of the garden is pivotal. Its bodily representative on earth is the *Turaga or Tui* (chief). The root "Tu" means 'to stand' or 'he who stands.' The chief is 'the standing one' in a given *vanua*. All the rest sit when the *Turaga or Tui* stands.

In the language or dialectic of the *were-kalou*, 'the standing one' also implies 'the sitting one.' The context here is the *were* — garden. The *Turaga or Tui* cannot be expected to be standing all the time in the garden. She/He should also sit or better still bend down to take part in the planting of crops or the pulling out of unwanted weeds in the garden. These standing and bending postures are pivotal to the epistemology of the garden. To 'stand' is to rule or to give the 'word.' To give the word at the right time and in the right place. To 'sit' or 'bend' is to serve. Both to rule and to serve must find expressions in the role of the *Turaga or Tui*, embodiment of the deity in the garden.

The chief or king in this sense is the center in the life of the land or *vanua*. The collapse of the center is the collapse of the whole life in the were. Things fall apart and become disjointed. This happened in the creation story of the were. In a dramatic and prophetic way, the story describes this 'fall' in this way: *Mai muri, era na veiseyaki na tamata. Ena dro na Tui ka yali na Turaga. Era na duivosavosa na tamata. Era na duavata ko ira era vosa vata. Sa na vukici na vanua me sega ni yaga.* ("...that in future, mankind will disperse. The king and chief will run away. People will speak different languages that those who speak the same will remain one. The land will be turned into uselessness").

This Fijian creation story also points out that *Ratu*, god of fertility has a 'body'. The entire garden is her/his body. Yams, *vudi* (plantain) and other crops in the garden are parts of her/his body. Sallie McFague has advanced the model of seeing the world as "God's Body".⁶ This she advanced in the search for a theological hermeneutic that will effectively address the present ecological crisis we now face. There is now an urgent need to re-own this knowledge in Fiji and for that matter in Oceania and fill it with new meanings to address the present environmental problems today.

This 'bodily knowledge' of god found in the were or garden requires retrieval today. At a time when so much attention is placed on things 'spiritual' - in some respects at the expense of things material or bodily, this language of *were-kalou* is critical knowledge as well and it warrants a hearing now. A new language that affirms this life is now called for. This language is not going to become an 'either/or' language — either *kalou* or were but *kalou and were*. A new language is required to challenge the false dichotomy between the spiritual and the material.

LIFE IS RELATIONAL IN THE WERE

Humanity as described in the hermeneutic of the were is relational through and through. This is expressed in the metaphor of *drua dadakulaci* (sea-snake twin — boy

⁶ McFague, S. in *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

and girl). The first human beings, male and female are collectively known as *Tomaniivi*. Incidentally, *Tomaniivi* is the name of the highest mountain in Fiji, This implies that the land of Fiji — Viti is a body whose head is *Tomaniivi*, its highest mountain. This collective name corresponds to the ancestor-god of growth and fertility, who is described as androgynous, embodiment of the masculine and the feminine.

The ancestor-god *Ratu*, being androgynous can only be known through the language of relationship or connectedness. In the same way, humanity is expressed in the language of the "Toma", meaning 'company' or 'helper'. In the collective name *Tomaniivi*, man and woman call each other 'noqu Toma' — 'my company', 'my helper'. Their children are twins — boy and girl, described as *drua dadakulaci* (sea-snake twins). A sea-snake is banded black and white and can live both on land and sea.

As can be concluded, the description of humanity in this story of creation is relational right through. This is derived from the deity, ancestor-god of growth and fertility who also is relational. This different layers of relationships in the garden is not simply outward, it is essentially inward for the centre and life-force of the garden is relational — androgynous. The *were-kalou* epistemology is here suggesting that humanity, in the person of man and woman finds completion in each other. Not only that but they remain incomplete if they are not related to the garden — its trees and flowers, birds and fish and all things that grow or exist on the *were*.

'LOU' AS FULLNESS OF LIFE

As already shown, the Fijian word for god is *kalou*. The last syllable "lou" refers to the state of the yam garden when it is all covered by the green yam leaves during springtime in October and November. *Kalou* therefore means 'that which is alive, living, and lifegiving. Lou stands for fullness of life in the were.

This fullness of life is the end result of right relationship in the entire garden - between humanity and *Ratu*, god of fertility and growth; between man and woman;

and between man/woman and the garden. This right relationship is expressed through man's responsibility in the were.

This responsibility begins from the period of garden preparation. This includes the choice of the land for the garden, the choice of yam seedling, the digging of trenches for yams to grow in. The weeds must be removed as time goes on and yams should be visited now and again. When they grow, they very much like to see the gardener visit them often. This *Lou* of the garden which is the end result of responsible living and keeping finds endorsement in the Christian understanding of peace as suggested by Dr Philip Potter of the Caribbean and former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, when he says that peace refers to:

*Entirety, totality, wholeness. It is the undisturbed freedom of life and movement, the unchecked growth and expansion of the self. Peace prevails in those who are united in acting together for the common good. It represent ... history as harmonious community. Far more than the absence of war, it indicates the state in which all human beings and all things are able to be and fulfil themselves unchecked and undisturbed*⁷

Problems we now face in the islands of the South Pacific are universal in substance and character. These include among other things, ecological concerns reflected in the changing weather conditions, possible rise in the sea-level, pollution of our waterways, globalization, identity — local, national and regional and the relationship between these and the rest of the world. These and others call for a new language, a new epistemology, a new way of looking at the world that will bring *sautu* or *Lou* (peace, truth and justice).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

⁷ In Life in All Its Fullness. World Council of Churches, Geneva, p.88.

I have deliberately spent more time on the symbolic meaning of land in this paper through the language of *vanua* and *were* or garden. I hope this is understandable. When land is translated into the Fijian language as *vanua*, it assumes a different understanding or epistemological connotation. But hard realities of land as actual turf must not be evaded. In the case of Fiji where the question about land is potentially a flammable issue, this must not mean that we steer away from it. This is a form of escape; it is equally dangerous and unacceptable. The nation and all stakeholders must face this issue and address searching questions related to it from all angles - economic, political, traditional and spiritual.

As indicated at the beginning, both the physical and the symbolic dimensions of land are inextricably tied together. One ceases to be apart from the other. Land ownership and the welfare of farmers whose land-leases have now expired are matters of national importance in Fiji now. This practical issue of the physical side of the land-question is equally critical and important as the symbolic.

Prayer

Ever living God who is beyond all our naming and all our defining
 God from whose being flows creative diversity and who is the source of our unity.
 WE WORSHIP YOU

God who was born into the depths of our life
 Who entered our history in Christ
 Enfleshed in the midst of every culture
 Incarnate in every struggle for truth
 WE WORSHIP YOU

Spirit of God who dances free of us all
 Calling us past boundaries
 Of race, gender, culture, system and nations
 WE WORSHIP YOU

We approach you in faith held fast by your love for the whole creation
And the whole world.

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