

## **Multi-dimensional ways of thinking about identity and belongingness in Fiji,**

Paper for ECREA Seminar on **‘Sustained Dialogue on Identity and Belongingness in Fiji,**

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### **Introduction**

I would like to thank the Faith and Society Programme of ECREA for inviting me to present to you a paper on, “**Multi-dimensional ways of thinking about identity and belongingness in Fiji**”. The objectives of the 3 day seminar are to (i) promote dialogue on identity and belongingness among people of Fiji; (ii) construct new ways of ‘knowing’ and appreciating other cultural groups (cultural, religious and civic values); and devise ways of ‘becoming’ together as a people for nation building. Given our current social, political and economic situation, dialoguing among our people on matters of identity, belongingness and national unity is clearly very important for nation building.

It is my hope that my paper helps in this process of dialogue by both raising issues and providing some structure to your deliberations.

When Pope John Paul II visited Fiji more than 20 years ago, he declared that ‘Fiji is the way the world should be’ for the reason that our culturally diverse people lived together in apparent harmony while celebrating their differences. However, shortly thereafter we had the 1987 general election and the historic victory of the Fiji Labour Party and its coalition partner the National Federation Party over the Alliance Party that had ruled the country since independence in 1970. On the pretext of bringing to an end the Taukei Movement’s efforts at fomenting instability, the month long coalition government of Dr Timoci Bavadra was deposed in the country’s first military coup.

The then Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka led elements of the Royal Fiji Military Forces in this extra legal intrusion of the barrel of the gun into the political affairs of the country. Since then Fiji has experienced 3 more coups and its citizens are living under an interim government that has been put in place by the military and which is backed by the military. Fiji has become known negatively as the ‘coup coup land’!

At the heart of this ‘coup culture’ and indeed national politics is what is referred to as ‘identity politics’. This means that certain forms of identity have emerged to struggle in the political arena to the detriment of peaceful resolution of many of our problems-and these forms of identity have been given such prominence that other forms of identity have been submerged. We, as citizens of Fiji have dwelt on the differences among us rather than what we have in common.

Our history, politico-administrative structures including our electoral systems as well as the way we think about each other and relate to each other have promoted 'racial' identity, and the politics of ethnicity. These have blinded citizens of the country to their common interests as neighbours and fellow travelers in the same Fijian boat. Seeds of suspicion and distrust were sown in the colonial days and we have nurtured the plants that have grown to be tall and strong trees. The leaves of these trees have become many and so thick that we cannot see beyond race!

Using the boating analogy, its like the Fiji canoe is being paddled simultaneously by paddlers in different directions –the country has traveled forward sometimes, and has gone either sideways or backwards at other times –or stood still in a state of disagreement and confusion as in the present time.

The current electoral system has promoted racial or ethnic politics leading to ethnic polarization rather than wider social cohesiveness and sense of nationhood.

This paper clarifies some aspects of identity and belongingness and argues that Fiji citizens need to move away from the promotion of exclusive forms of identity (which will be with us into the future) and to embrace more inclusive forms of identity – including a sense of national identity and belongingness.

### **Identity and Belongingness**

As human beings most people have a sense of 'who we are'. For the individual person the arriving at the answer to 'who I am' is part of a gradual process of growing up into young adulthood. Many influences bear on this process. Belonging to groups such as the immediate and extended families, the village, the settlement, the neighbourhood, the vanua, the religious group, the peer group, the class, the school, the occupational group, the media, significant individuals (reference groups/reference individuals –significant others) and society at large help in the process of individual identity formation. Self identification is accompanied by social identification which according to social psychologists contribute to our sense of well being and self esteem. Identity choices can be circumscribed by wider society (eg in US 'one drop of blood' rule' to define black). Transgender and sexual minorities cannot 'come out' in many countries and in many places in Fiji.

How we define ourselves and how others define us also depends on other socio-cultural markers: our place of birth, the location of our family home, by our gender (it is said that 'biology is destiny'), by our culture and religion (ethnicity), by the status of our family (poor, rich, middling, commoner, chiefly), by the work that we do (occupation), by our kinship relations (daughter/son, brother/sister, wife/husband, mother/father, aunty/uncle, cousin), by our age and by our health. Our sense of ourselves provide us with dignity, self esteem and well being. This sense of identity is closely bound with our sense of belongingness to the groups mentioned above.

Identities can change over time and space-and by the context.

Our membership of some groups mean that we belong to and identify with these groups and not other groups. We may acquire positive, negative and indifferent attitudes to other groups. Sometimes these attitudes are reinforced by selective experiences that we may have in our encounters and even relationships with members of other groups. Our attitudes and beliefs about members of the 'opposite sex' or gender, ethnic categories, farmers, workers, professions, business people are affected by our membership in groups and our sense of identification and belonging. In ethnic relations such attitudes especially if negative are collectively referred to as ethnocentrism. That is looking at other ethnic groups with the lenses of your group.

#### **From Multiple Identities to Simpler Identification**

In our daily interactions we tend to simplify the complex identities of others to make relations possible. For instance, the one person can be a girl/woman, daughter, sister, wife, mother, aunty. Grandmother, graduate, teacher, trade union member, member of a women's club, a Catholic, a mixed race person, a 'kai Macuata', a diabetic patient etc. Each one of us likewise has multiple identities. The individual person as well as the wider society can chose to bring one identity (eg 'race', Indian) or a mixture of some identities ( eg man, Fijian, Methodist) to the fore.

Identity is not fixed, depending on the context we have some choice in deciding which identity or combination of identities that we use. In Fiji we appear to have over-emphasised our racial identity -and there are historical and contemporary explanations for this.

#### **The State and 'Racial Identification'**

In Fiji, the colonial and post colonial states (and governments) have emphasized 'racial' categories and we have all become attuned to giving prominence to 'race'. This single identification in many ways is seen as the primary group that we all belong to, when nothing could be further from the truth.

But 'racial identification', labeling, stereotyping and discrimination have become our national past time. Parents, teachers, civil servants, doctors, nurses and religious leaders and others pay considerable attention to reinforcing racial identification. We have inherited electoral systems and politico-administrative arrangements that are based on dividing us racially.

ECREA recently launched a report by Tui Rakuita, entitled "**Living by Bread Alone: Contemporary Challenges Associated with Identity and Belongingness in Fiji**" (2007).

The timing of the research and the publication of the report is of significance as it is in the aftermath of Fiji's 4<sup>th</sup> military coup de tat. According to the author, the "struggle for

recognition” in the country takes ethnic lines and is seen as the major contributor to our social and political troubles and the current impasse.

It is quite clear from the study that the ‘sea change’ of Fiji society towards a non-racial one being contemplated and pushed by the current interim administration is near impossible without the effective participation and support of religious leaders and wider civil society. Tui Rakuita argues that there is a moral imperative to tackle the very important issue of national identity and sense of belongingness.

### **The Study and its Findings**

The title of his report “**Living by Bread Alone**” implies that in today’s world there is a tendency towards material things with not enough thought about other aspects that make us human. Some of you would recollect the famous writer and wit, George Bernard Shaw, saying that “people do not live by bread alone but with butter too”. Tui’s butter is a more positive role for religious and community leaders in more inclusive forms of identity formation and less parochialism.

The research was carried out in Suva, Lautoka and Taveuni and involved more than 350 respondents and dozens of focus group discussions. Tui Rakuita begins his analysis of the information he collected by considering the history of social groups and identity formation.

Clearly a historical understanding of indigenous Fijian identity formation, belongingness and world view is pivotal to our understanding of some current aspects of social grouping and identity formation. The author points out the critical importance of the vanua in anchoring indigenous Fijian identity and the dichotomy between I Taukei and vulagi – those who belonged to the vanua and those who did not. The establishment of confederacies, Christianity and colonialism expanded this sense of identity beyond the confines of individual vanua –to the broader notion of Kai Viti and I Taukei –the indigenous ‘first nation’ people of Fiji.

Vanua affiliations and sense of commitments informed their world view which valued relationships and group solidarity over individualism and materialism. A second order set of relations involving individuals and groups outside one’s vanua are tauvu and naita relationships. With proletarianization, colonialism, state formation and education, population mobility, the Fiji-wide identity of ‘kai Viti’ caught on.

More recent migrants and their descendents have been categorized as vulagi – a practice from pre-European times. In the case of Indo-Fijians the fact that most are Hindus and Muslims reinforce the notion of them being vulagi. The implication of this categorization is subordination to I-Taukei –the owners of the land. Tui Rakuita suggests that the Indo-Fijian world view of linking accumulation of wealth with religion is seen as sacrilegious and their individualism equated with selfishness. Although at the same time some indigenous Fijians expressed an admiration of this aspect of Indo-Fijian values with many

middle class Fijians sending their children to Indo-Fijian schools so that they could be exposed to such values.

Indo-Fijians on the other hand regard the failure of achieving material success as an outcome of communalism which makes for laziness and the lack of initiative and drive. Steve Ratuva in another study refers to both positive and negative stereotypes being present and a sharing—even hybridization of cultures.

Tui Rakuita also mentions British colonial practice or 'Divide and Rule' which compartmentalized and segregated Fiji's people according to their race and subjecting them to differential treatment as a factor in promoting ethnicity over broader forms of identities.

There are several significant research findings from the field study carried out by Tui Rakuita. First, that religion or religio-cultural dimension plays a pivotal role in identity formation. This applies to all the religious groupings. I-Taukei and some minorities associated with Christianity and Indo-Fijians with Hinduism (Arya Samaj or Sanatan Dharm) or Islam.

Second, religious leaders have tended to maintain these distinct identities in an exclusive way. This reinforces divisiveness rather than unity at the national level.

Third, while at one level religio-cultural differences are amplified, at another level, there is considerable scope to bring the adherents of different religions and ethnicities together. This is because there is a considerable degree of commonality in the teaching of various religions on 'loving thy neighbour', tolerance and mutual respect.

Fourth, economically indigenous Fijians feel that they are disadvantaged compared to Indo-Fijians; they expressed a dislike of their individualism and material success but also desired such material well being. Some understood that being landless, there were also very poor Indo-Fijians whose predicament was even worse than theirs.

Fifth, religious leaders therefore hold the key to current exclusive forms of identity formation and the perception of those who do not belong to the in-group—and also, most importantly, of changing such perceptions.

On perceptions relating to human rights (and democracy), indigenous Fijian respondents expressed a degree of antagonism because they were seen to be encroaching on indigenous values and relationships—the lotu with secularism. Such rights appeared to push individualism; whereas Indo-Fijians equated human rights with human dignity and saw them as helping in the struggle for justice.

Tui Rakuita in his recommendations suggest that Christian clergy need to educate indigenous Fijians about human rights and therefore enhance the prospect for greater inclusiveness and democracy.

In terms of changing Fiji's collective lifeworld ( Habermas' concept), he suggest that religious leaders must work together in organizations such as Inter-Faith Search and the Assembly of Christian Churches of Fiji to build greater understanding and trust so that they would be able to change collective mindsets, identities and belongingness toward nation building.

From the research data, he concludes that there is no place for the state to engage in grand social engineering. This should be left to religious leaders and civil society. The state should look at its policies and institutions to ensure that these are inclusive and representative.

He maintains that a common name and the push towards national identity building are desired by a majority of those interviewed but they have also suggested the need for wide consultation and gradual change largely led by religious leaders and civil society.

This is a most useful report for those wanting to build a better and inclusive Fiji. It puts great responsibility on religious leaders for the current types of exclusive identity formation and sense of belongingness which have contributed to the social and political difficulties that we are faced with, in the current period. It urges them to change their ways of molding their religious adherents' towards more inclusive types of categorization.

As a way forward he suggests that the introduction of the concept of 'mataveiwekani' or 'the process of inter/intra ethnic integration. This is derived from Ropate Qalo's piece in the Fiji Times of July 18, 2007, "When family ties matter".

#### Some Issues with the Book

As in the case of other reports there are areas that need further development and elaboration. There is a need for more coverage of minorities other than Hindu Indo-Fijians –Muslims, Pacific Islanders, Mixed race people, European and Chinese. It must be realized too, that each one of the ethnic categories identified as 'races' in the country are not monolithic blocks. There is considerable social, cultural and economic as well as political diversity amongst each of these categories. The category "Others" for instance is not only a derogatory residual categorization but does not capture the richly diverse people that it seeks to designate.

Attention needs to be drawn to the fact that each of us has several identities, with our ethnic or sub-cultural identity just one of other identities. At any given time depending on the circumstances, our interests and our choice, one or more of these identities may be used. Amartya Sen's, 'Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny, (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2006) which in many ways respond to the "Clash of Civilisation" thesis, maintains that many of the categories that we use to classify people not only adequately reflect the enormous diversity within the categories but also the commonality among some of the people in the different categories. For instance, common gender

identities, identities of place and profession. Moreover, each individual person has a choice in which identity (ies) he/she uses.

#### Conclusion

It is very clear from Tui Rakuita's the research report that religious leaders have contributed to the fragmentation and divisions in our society. However, all religions in Fiji have values, principles and norms which urge love and tolerance. These could be used as a basis for theological sound and broad based rebuilding of the a 'multicultural and just' society.

In Tui Rakuita's own words: "Indeed this concept (mataveiwekani) brings to the fore the need to address our current problems by looking at the fault-lines from where we can meaningfully engage in the transformation of our society. The timing has never been better, for the structure of our society has been undergoing a lot of changes-changes that have widespread implications to the kind of society we might have in the future."

In this time of globalization, there is a need for national harmony and stability to take Fiji forward for the benefit of all its citizens, religious leaders (indeed all leaders) have special responsibility in promoting a more inclusive sense of the nation that goes beyond ethnic exclusiveness.

They should read this book. Give serious thought to its findings and ask some profound questions about where they are taking their adherents and if they are really practicing their religions' fundamental tenets.

This book needs to be translated into Buan Fijian and Hindi so that it can be widely read by both clergy and lay people in the country.

We have many identities and we belong to many groups. The possibility of making choices about which identity we use depends on us. Certain of other identities can be divisive and of course 'race' is one such identity. Ethnic and racial identities will remain with us but we need to reflect on the necessity of giving them the prominence that we do.