NEW AMBITIONS: WORLD WAR II AS STIMULUS FOR THE BARK-CLOTH INDUSTRY OF VATULELE ISLAND, FIJI

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[NOTE: the photograph of barkcloth being beaten is different from that used in the original paper, but the attribution is correct].

Introduction

This is a story of a few hundred people (less than 400 in 1940, about 1,000 today) on the tiny island of Vatulele (about 30 square kilometres in area), their resourcefulness in coping with change, and the manner in which World War 2 stimulated that resourcefulness.

Though no fighting occurred on Fiji soil, the impact of the War on Fiji and its people was still dramatic. As one historian put it, 'in many significant ways the war cast a long, dark shadow over Fiji and left in its wake a legacy as troubling as it had brought to other Pacific islands that came into the vortex of the fighting itself' (Lal 1992:109). It would seem reasonable to assume that such levels of disruption would speed the demise of traditional and deeply culturally-embedded artforms such as bark-cloth, called *masi* and made exclusively by Fijian women from the beaten inner-bark (bast) of the paper-mulberry plant (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). While this has indeed occurred in some places, Vatulele's production increased dramatically after the War, to make it by the mid-1950s the largest producer of *masi* in Fiji, a position it has maintained ever since.

The purpose of this paper is to show that among the many factors which have contributed to this phenomenon over the years, none was more directly causative than the War itself. This was precisely because the people of Vatulele, as we have now come to understand is true of people everywhere, were not passive victims washed over by tides of change, but exercised considerable agency in maintaining control over their lives and sustaining an identity they felt satisfied with. The increase in their production of *masi* was not accidental or imposed, it was an intentional strategy, for which World War 2 provided the initial stimulus.

Vatulele and WW2

The invasion of Fiji was exclusively by 'friendlies' — first the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces during 1940 and 1941, and then the United States army and airforce following Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Their numbers eventually totalled over 8,000. It is only recalled that one group of soldiers ever visited Vatulele, some members of the NZEF to whom a presentation of *masi* was made 'as a thank-you gift because they were defending our country'. That was not, however, the limit of contact.

Unlike Kitchener's stiff-necked and racist rejection of eager 'native' Fijian volunteers in World War 1 (Scarr 1984:120), following the outbreak of war in 1939 Fijians began to be recruited for military service at home and overseas. Then, when in 1942 Fiji was selected as a forward base from which the US forces could deploy to fight in places like the Solomon Islands, there emerged a need for large numbers of Fijians to assist with stevedoring and other activities, and a labour battalion (which reached peak strength of 1,375 men), the Fiji Labour Corps (FLC), was formed in October 1942. The Native Regulations restricting movement of Fijians away from villages other than for employment by government or church were suspended for the sake of military necessity, resulting in the first major exodus of male villagers to the towns since enactment of the Regulations in 1877.

Vatulele was not exempt from this movement of people, despite the fact that ever since Fiji was ceded to Britain in 1874, its size, political and economic unimportance and geographical remoteness from the centres of power had ensured that it remained peripheral in the colonial administrators' vision. In fact, accounts of the elders make it clear that right up to WW2 most of the pre-colonial social and cultural structures of Vatulele remained largely intact, and the humdrum round of daily life remained much as anyone could remember it had ever been. Like most of rural and small-island Fiji, Vatulele existed in what has been described as a 'hyphenated stage of neo-native equilibrium' (Geddes 1945:1).

A 'work-group' beating paper-mulberry bast into bark-cloth. Ekubu village, Vatulele, 1980

WW2 recruits being inspected by Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna (centre) in Lau, S.E.Fiji (*Fiji Ministry of Information photo*).

Freed from the uncertainties of living with the almost perpetual internecine warfare that characterised Fijian polity, and with the constant struggles for power that had entertained their élites now curtailed by the codification of hierarchy and chiefly succession, people came to exist in a state of quiescence,

trusting in their chiefs, the government and its avowed support for what it viewed as old hierarchies and traditions. The people had never known anything beyond basic subsistence, and had no alternative social or cultural models with which to compare their norms. It is unsurprising, that, as a 91-year-old elder explained in 1993, 'We did not import the ways of other places or people. We were only a small island but we had our own customs, and we held to them'.

All of that was to change abruptly. Though only two Vatulele men enlisted in the army, and would serve with distinction in the Solomons, when the FLC was set up the government sent a high chief from Rewa, with which Vatulele has kinship, social, and political allegiances, to drum up recruits. 48 men stepped forward, nearly half of the able-bodied men on the island, and went to Lautoka in December 1942. For the women and old men left behind to maintain the villages, this was a time of unrelenting work and real hardship. They had to undertake all of the men's chores, particularly gardening for their principal starch-food vegetables. Although fish remained plentiful in the lagoon and on the reef, these had never formed the bulk of the Fijian diet, and there was little time left over for fishing. Though Vatulele was always a drought- and famine-prone island, people who were then children recall this time as particularly hard — they regularly went to bed hungry.

For the chiefs and men recruited to the FLC, conversely, it was a time of relative plenty (as the army imported Fijian food from many areas to feed them, much of it novel in their hitherto-restricted diet), and of exotic experiences that would drastically alter their sense of identity, their values, and their aspirations. As the next generation of village leaders, their transformation would soon affect all Vatuleleans. Many of these men had never been off the island, few had even had much contact with other Fijians. A contemporary observer pointed out that many Fijian men had, up until their induction into the Labour Corps or the army, not even imagined friendship based on other than kinship (Geddes 1945:4). But when these 48 Vatulele men reached Lautoka, they were thrown together with 1,500 other men from Cakaudrove, Bua, Macuata, Rā, Ba, and other parts of their home province of Nadrogā-Navosā. Only a few of these places had any traditional connections with Vatulele.

Such enforced communality with strangers generated tensions, particularly when they had to take orders from other than their traditional leaders (Lal 1992:114), since most were from tiny communities where they knew everyone intimately and knew their assigned status relative to everyone else. One veteran described the great feelings of inferiority the Vatulele men felt because they felt

uneducated, and could not speak Standard Fijian, let alone English. They had difficulty understanding the orders the Fijian non-commissioned officers transmitted to their work-platoons. He laughingly described how this was made more chaotic by the fact that few of those noncoms spoke more than a few words of English, so they had often not understood the instructions the Americans gave them in the first place. But the contact also heightened awareness of a shared Fijian ethnicity, and generated firm friendships which would persist long after war's end.

Even more novel was the daily contact the men had with both white and African Americans. Some veterans speak of the fear they had of *all* white men, about whom they knew little, others say they got along well with both white and African Americans, though none felt they had known any of the whites well, and never associated with them socially. This did not allay the misgivings of some Fiji Europeans about what they saw as the egalitarian nature of Fijians' contact with New Zealanders and Americans. One administrator wrote that it 'has had a profound effect on their moral character and their conduct toward Europeans in general' (cited in Lal 1992:115).

Contrary to such views, in fact life in the FLC did little to develop in Vatulele's FLC troops much confidence in the possibilities of racial equality. Veterans say that despite language problems they felt great affinity for, and had no difficulty communicating with, the African American soldiers with whom they worked shoulder-to-shoulder unloading ships. But the white soldiers, they say, kept apart from both, only gave orders and drove the trucks, and never did any of the manual labour. The manifestation of such a divide reinforced, rather than broke down, the lessons of race-based privilege and subjugation colonialism had taught them.

Returning at war's end to families, vegetable gardens, and chores such as housebuilding and maintenance, with the women and old men resuming their normal routine, life must have appeared to the men as though it would return to its sleepy pre-War state. But they were trojan horses for change. They had enjoyed a valued status, because the FLC was a military battalion, and though they never held a weapon, the volunteers wore army kit and were, and still are as veterans, referred to as *sotia* (soldiers) — to the Fijian 'warrior-race' the most prestigious of descriptions. They had also seen and participated in the cosmopolitan life of an urban centre, and lived in Western-style houses. They had received the same pay as regular Fijian soldiers, two shillings a day plus keep, average for unskilled labour at that time (Usher 1941:86), but

unprecedented wealth for islanders.

The veterans reflect on how all of these experiences meant that they came to see their lives and their island as impoverished, and on the evidence there was more than a little basis for these conclusions. Life was clearly very spartan, and it is interesting that not a single old person interviewed hankers after the 'good old days' except in relation to things like the sense of responsibility and good manners they now find lacking in the young — preoccupations of the elderly everywhere.

Notwithstanding their isolation, from early in the Colonial era the people of Vatulele had shown an interest in generating a cash income with which to play a role in the capitalist system and improve their quality of life. Since the only avenues for economic involvement the colonial regime had ever encouraged Fijians to consider was agriculture, they had attempted to overcome the island's limited agricultural potential and chronic lack of water, and on occasion had tried growing cotton and some market produce, but all of their efforts ended in frustration. Only coconuts provided any tangible return, but even that provided for only the simplest of needs.

Now, however, what had been a modest interest became a passion. Ways of making money were sought with more determination than ever before. Further, provincial taxes were increased after the War, and coconut production became unable to meet even this demand, let alone satisfy their new desire for possessions and a more affluent lifestyle. One of their first initiatives was to form a *Soqosoqo* ('Convocation'), a sort of Returned Servicemen's League, with the intention of setting up village stores which could buy goods in bulk and re-sell them. In late 1952 this became the island's first registered Cooperative. Also drawing on their experience of working in platoons, some of the FLC veterans formed themselves into 'work gangs' hiring out for six months at a time to cut nuts and make copra as far away as Taveuni, Kanacea, and other islands. A second *Soqosoqo* formed, which went regularly to Korotogo, Nadrogā and Nadi cutting cane.

At war's end the men of the FLC, like the fighting men, had been praised by officials from the governor down for their loyalty, sense of duty and contribution to the war effort, and this aroused what has been called 'traditional Fijian expectations of reciprocity' (Ravuvu, 1988 (1974):57]. They were to be sadly disappointed. Ultimately all that each man was sent home with was any back-pay owed them, plus a meagre toolkit consisting of an axe, a digging fork, a cane-

knife and a file.

While their disappointment added to their feelings of being a devalued people, the introduction to Vatulele of so many tools actually wrought a technological revolution, since previously cash to buy even these simple tools had been beyond the resources of most. Traditional slash-and-burn clearing of land for agriculture was facilitated, steel forks replaced the wooden digging sticks which up to then had still been in use by both men and women. Coconuts still continued to be overwhelmingly the only real 'path of money', so coconut plantations were increased in size and extended further afield, and men started drying copra themselves and sending it to Suva for sale, rather than just selling or bartering nuts to the Chinese storekeepers as they had done previously.

By the early 1950s, however, all of these efforts had seemed to achieve little more than paying their taxes and funding some village works such as replacing the toilets that had previously been built at the end of piers out over the sea with pit-latrines (an unfortunate decision, since it coincided with their digging the island's first wells, which soon became polluted), and fitting their houses with corrugated-iron roofs, to allow rain-water to be caught for the large concrete storage tanks the government had recently built in each village. But the men's ambitions went far beyond these modest changes. Casting about for other ventures, a couple decided to try again something they had briefly explored shortly before their 'call-up', selling some of the *masi* their women made, to Levy's jewellery and tourist-curio shop in Suva. Other events were to contribute to making this perhaps the most important decision of their lives.

Masi in Vatulele before WW2

Apart from its previously-universal functional utility as cloth and clothing (long supplanted by Western cloth except in the case of ritual dress), *masi* has always occupied a special place in Fijian society. It has always been a carrier of arguably the most diverse range of meanings of any Fijian artifact, relating to cosmology and religion, group-identification, gender relationships, assigned status, and wealth as an 'official valuable'. Its principal social role was and still is as ritual art, both as ritual vestments and accoutrements, and as a key item of ritual presentation. It has also always functioned as a commodity in non-ritual trade between groups.

Production and distribution via both ritual and non-ritual channels was carefully regulated through a form of 'social contract', by which its production was

'licensed', by agreement among the members of largely kinship-based networks, to certain designated places and groups of people. Vatulele's 'sanctioned product' was always, as far as anyone knows, the *masi* its women produced. In exchange for this they received from other licensed producers *their* sanctioned products, which were essential to Vatulele but which they were proscribed from manufacturing for themselves under the social contract. The most sought-after items were mats, but also needed were ceramic pots and bowls, salt, wooden articles ranging from bowls to sailing outriggers, and fibre articles such as sinnet for rope and lashing buildings together, and fishing and turtle nets.

However, this ritual and non-ritual intercourse was important not only in a practical sense, it was crucial to Vatulele's participation in wider Fijian polity, since it sustained kinship and geographical/political inter-group relationships. In pre-colonial times this maintained peaceful relationships with mutually-dependent neighbours and other network members, from whom military support could also be obtained when necessary. At a social level, the reiteration of sanguinal and affinal kinship ensured the maintenance of identity. Finally, the maintenance within the island of hierarchical and inter-group relationships depended on rituals and therefore on exchanges of goods, and though all groups made *masi*, this travelled back and forth as a sign rather than a needed commodity or even wealth. Therefore, even during the period of colonially-induced social torpor described earlier, *masi* continued to be needed, and old people say that all women made *masi* every week, and even if each woman made only a small amount on this regular basis, total production would not have been insignificant. But it was never sold before the War, and when they look back from today's vantage-point, the old women say that their production was modest, with young men preparing gardens and planting 'just enough *masi* for their mothers' and sisters' needs.'

The development of a commodity market for masi

Nonetheless, when they hit on *masi* as a potential cash commodity, the men certainly had an ample and constantly-renewed supply on which to draw. This was significant in itself, because in many places the social disruptions and dislocation of people caused by the War had caused permanent loss of some or all local artforms. When they had first established a small market through Levy's curio shop (from local estimates probably in 1941), the logistics of getting the *masi* to Suva remained daunting. The only locally-owned vessels were sailing outriggers with no provision for keeping anything dry, and the main means of transport to Suva was irregular inter-island ketches that brought in provisions

and took out coconuts and copra. Further, when they got the *masi* to Suva, the market for it was very small. Tourism in Fiji was at a relatively low level right up to the 1950s, and Fijian-made souvenirs largely consisted of items like coral, shells, seed and shell necklaces, and carved canoes. Tourists showed little interest in *masi*, in part because that sold in the markets was mainly large ritual cloths for sale to urban Fijians with no alternative source, but difficult for tourists and local Europeans to use. Fijian clients could not pay high prices, and it is doubtful whether, after paying for passage to and from Suva, those early entrepreneurs showed more than a few shillings profit each trip. It was more likely a pretext for visiting the 'big smoke' than a real income-earner.

When the 'soldiers' decided to revisit the possibility in the 1950s, a number of things either had changed already or were changing. First, tourism was expanding rapidly thanks to the increased air traffic using Fiji as a stopover port between the US and Australia, and in the 1950s the introduction of wide-bodied jet aircraft saw unprecedented numbers of visitors spending time in Fiji. In response to demand, more and better hotels were built, and in 1949 Northern Hotels established Fiji's first 'beach resort,' the Korolevu Beach Hotel, on the Southern Vitilevu coast due north of Vatulele, and right on the beach where vessels from Vatulele traditionally beached on visits to Vitilevu.

The hoteliers opened a small shop to market souvenirs to guests, and as locals who knew much of Fijian culture and language, they asked one of the men who had sold *masi* to Levy to supply them also. They sought and obtained custom-made pieces, small because of the weight allowances of the new breed of airborne tourists, and made in squares which were more appropriate for putting on walls or using as place-mats 'back home' than the traditional long or large *masi* (Clark 1993). With tourist preferences prevailing over tradition, this was an early, if not Fiji's first, example of the development of tourist-*tapa* — in effect, a 'sampler' or simulacrum of the *masi* in use within Fijian society.

The hotel shortly acquired a launch and organised *ad hoc* day-trips across the 30 km of sea to Vatulele, providing the greatest contact most islanders had ever had with Westerners. In a short time the vessel's approach became a signal to the women to display their tourist-*tapa* on the village common for direct-selling. By the 1960s, the shop was reportedly buying a considerable amount, and the men were emboldened to start approaching some of the rapidly-proliferating duty-free and souvenir shops in Suva, Nadi, Lautoka and Sigatoka. In a very short time they had developed into middle-men with a regular clientele, and the women were producing considerable amounts of tourist-*tapa* .

These small pieces of bark-cloth are still by an enormous margin the main form bought by tourists. The proprietor of the largest tourist-trophy outlet in Fiji told me that whatever else they buy, about 80% of his customers buy at least one such piece for a few dollars. He said that though he stocks some of the pieces that continue to have indigenous significance, these sell far more slowly as tourist commodities, while large ritual pieces are so difficult to sell that he seldom stocks them (Khatri 1995). Eco's contention that postmodern Westerners have come to prefer simulacra to the 'genuine article' (Eco 1987) would seem to be supported by this evidence.

Another significant change occurred when a Vatulele man plucked up the courage to borrow money to buy the island's first large outboard-powered boat, and started a regular ferry-service to the mainland. The erratic and infrequent shipping service gave way to regular and fast communication. Coinciding as it did with the tourism boom and growth of a market for tourist souvenirs, this other outgrowth of the post-War search for economic advancement greatly facilitated the commercialisation of *masi*. Over time, other individuals and groups acquired ever bigger and better craft, and today about half a dozen operate regular services (each normally doing the round trip in a day, thrice-weekly), carrying everything from foodstuffs to building materials to livestock, as well as passengers. No longer can Vatulele be thought of as an isolated island — the people now have more ready access to the urban centres than most mainland villagers.

There was one particularly unwanted legacy of the FLC members' 'sojourn in Babylon' that paradoxically also stimulated bark-cloth production. Virtually to a man, the FLC recruits had developed a great liking for alcohol. Diversion to their own ends of alcohol from the ships they were unloading had become an artform with the American soldiers — Vatulele veterans recall that the first lesson they were taught was 'Never steal a bottle, steal the whole case!' While not used to liquor, they *were* enthusiastic socialisers, and their parties were well stocked with liquor thanks to the supply ships.

After their return to Vatulele, the ambitions kindled by the FLC experience proving unrealisable for many of them, frustration generated a culture of alcohol abuse, which was passed to later generations. This reached a crisis in the 1970s, by which time, the men now admit, they had earned a reputation for drunkenness which reached to Suva and beyond. At its peak, ferries were bringing in 60 dozen large bottles of beer twice weekly, which reportedly would be consumed between 4pm and breakfast next day. Clothes, tools, ritual

valuables, indeed anything of value was pawned to raise drinking-money. Brawling and rowdiness were commonplace, work in gardens and *masi* patches was fitted in between boat trips and hangovers.

Over this period women stepped up their *masi* -production in an effort to establish some financial independence and keep pace with the drain on money, but these earnings were also often taken from them, sometimes by force. Some women rebelled, attacking the men with their *ike* (*masi*-mallets). It is recalled that on one occasion a flying-boat had to be summoned from Suva on a mercy-flight to airlift to hospital one such victim of his wife's rage, so strong was her beating-arm and so severe his injuries as a result.

The chiefs, while not models of sobriety themselves, were frightened by what was happening to their village, and in 1977 banned the importation of alcohol to the island. But the battle was not won until a strong-willed Wesleyan minister was appointed in 1978, and announced that drunkenness would be punished by removal from the church register — the Wesleyan equivalent of excommunication. The men had also lost ground in another direction. The War had forced the women to fend for themselves during the years their men were in Lautoka, and now indirectly it had forced them to become economically self-sufficient. It was a lesson they learned well, and to this day, even among Fijian women, always characteristically independent-spirited, they remain exceptional.

The traditional artform

If the development of an industry producing tourist-*tapa* was the end of the story, it might be concluded that the War did not so much stimulate a traditional, culturally-embedded indigenous artform, as stimulate its transformation into a new one. That indeed is the simplistic conclusion many have reached. What in fact occurred is more complex and far more subtle. The tourist commodification of bark-cloth certainly caused the women to develop a new artform, and to produce it in large quantity. But it is maintained by the makers that production of cloth for indigenous use always continued to exceed that made for the Western market.

One of the reasons was that the increase in production for tourism appears to have been at least matched by a dramatic increase in the number and type of rituals on the island, and a corresponding increase in ritual art, namely *masi*, to service these. One reason that may be suggested is that ritual was invoked by the group's élites to reassert the *status quo ante*, both from their own status

anxiety and because they had no idea how to deal with any other social system than their traditional one. Another is that the men's sense of self-worth had been so shaken by their experiences on the mainland that they sought reassurance in the rituals which reaffirmed for them the values and traditions that made up their group identity, and also provided them with a mechanism through which they could readjust their world-view within the traditional template.

The other point is that similar increases in demand for identity-signs and ritual trappings were occurring elsewhere in Fiji, and Vatulele was increasingly called upon to provide these. The experience they had gained expanding their activities into the new field of tourist art, with high-volume production and capitalist economics, was applied to their traditional trade in *masi*. Traditional networks continued to provide channels for increased non-ritual and ritual exchange of *masi* for other goods, particularly mats. But new market networks also developed, as the very public evidence of their industry increasingly prompted other Fijians who needed *masi* for ritual and other purposes, to approach the women of Vatulele to produce it for them, even when they had not been traditional network partners.

These approaches are still conducted in the traditional manner, through mutual contacts. Also, while it is recognised that these 'orders' are a new phenomenon, and even though increasingly it is money that is exchanged for *masi* rather than goods, these transactions continue to be regarded as distinct from sales that are made to shops or directly to tourists. In the indigenous context money is re-imagined as though it were a socially-sanctioned product, in order to allow the transactions to remain personal and community-reinforcing, rather than declining into the impersonality of the Western market.

The stresses and uncertainties which beset Fijians following the War have continued to increase, some might say exponentially, and the indigenous market for *masi* has continued to grow commensurately, while the tourist-souvenir market appears to have declined from a high-point in the early 1980s. Today, based on detailed figures the makers have provided for me, about 80% of their income derives from indigenous trades and sales, and that does not take account of the great amount they continue to make for their own use. Their bark-cloth industry has provided the people of Vatulele with the income necessary for their increasingly complex needs and obligations as they are inexorably drawn into the global community. But unlike many income-earning enterprises they might have engaged in, it has provided continuity of traditions and security of identity. It

provides employment and purpose for their young people and prevents the levels of urban drift which are so debilitating for other island communities in Fiji. While not without problems, the bark-cloth industry of Vatulele must be judged one of the most vigorous traditional artforms in Fiji. It would seem difficult to argue against the proposition that, for all the stresses, anxieties and undesirable after-effects WW2 caused the people of Vatulele, its wake-up call was timely, in that it permitted them to take advantage of a remarkable conjunction of factors and ensure their viability and independence as their country assumed *its* Independence. Accidental though it may have been, the ambition the War awoke in them has allowed their special artform to remain just that.

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