

On Fijian Riddles

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On FIJIAN RIDDLES. By the Rev. LORIMER FISON, M.A.

INTRODUCTION.

THE riddle is called in Fiji *Vákaváttaváttaváralangi*, a word which doubtless has something of great interest hidden in it. *Vatavata* is a house built on piles; *i* = *of*; *ra* is the plural sign used before the names of chiefs; and *langi* is sky.

In east Fiji the word is *Vákasirindröndröláangi*. *Siri* (= *Mbau siro*) means to come down from a height; *ndröndrolangi* is the rainbow. The explanation given by the natives here is that, as the rainbow starting from the middle of the arc goes down in two directions, so the riddle has two meanings.

Riddle-propounding is quite an institution in Fiji. Sides are formed, each of which propounds a riddle in its turn, and the party which guesses the greater number is entitled to a feast at the expense of the vanquished. The propounders issue their challenge by chanting *Vatavatairalangi mai tu*—(Here is a riddle). Their opponents accept the challenge by chanting in reply *Mai tulituli thavatu?* a saying not easily translated. Literally *tulituli* is pottery-making, but the word is used colloquially in the general sense of doing anything, e.g., *A thava ko a tulia tiko* = What have you been about? The riddle is then propounded by the spokesman of the party, and their opponents go into consultation.

A point of considerable interest in connection with the word *vatavata* may be noted here. The ordinary Fijian house of any pretensions is built upon an artificial mound; and the greater the chief the higher his house-mound, that of the *Mbure-kalou* (god's house, or rather ancestors' house) being highest of all. "Their house mound is high," said of a family, means that they are of high rank. The *vatavata*, or house on piles, among these people is probably a survival, or perhaps a trace of the commingling of two races with different forms of architecture.

Even when the house is built on the level ground we find a reminiscence of its former elevation in the common invitation to enter *Thambe mai* ("Come up hither"). Sibree notes the same phrase in Madagascar, but supposes it to point to a time when the villages were always built on fortified heights ("The Great African Island," p. 156). It seems more likely that it points to the ladder leading up to the house on the mound, or on piles. All this, however, is a digression; but in writing on these subjects one is continually tempted to digress.

The following riddles about the gun, the white cowry, the two fish, and the cotton-bag, show that riddle-making is still going on in Fiji.

SELECTED FIJIAN RIDDLES.

1. *Riddle*.—I spit, and spit, and spit all the way to Tonga ?
—*Answer*. The canoe baler, which is kept continually at work in a seaway.

2. *R.*—I stand erect all the way to Tonga ?—*A.* The mast.

3. *R.*—I am in soak all the way to Tonga ?—*A.* The steer-oar, which is lifted out of the water only when the voyage is over. This explains the following riddle :—

4. *R.*—I dive in Fiji, and come up again at Tonga.

5. *R.*—Two fish are feeding in the sea. One eats with two mouths, the other with only one ?—*A.* A double canoe, and a white-man's vessel.

6. *R.*—A little child. When a full-grown man dives, it dives with him. The man is soon breathless, but the child is not ?—*A.* A louse !

7. *R.*—A Catholic priest in a long black coat. We go to see him, and he takes off his coat ?—*A.* The white cowry. While undisturbed it spreads itself over its shell. When disturbed it retires into the shell.

8. *R.*—A man who carries the "kitchen stuff" with which he is to be eaten ?—*A.* The taro (*Arum*) and its leaves. The leaves of the taro are boiled, and eaten together with the tuber.

9. *R.*—Twenty men with white turbans ?—*A.* Fingers and toes.

10. *R.*—A land. I squeeze it in my hand, it is hidden. I release it, it is a land again ?—*A.* A sponge.

11. *R.*—I enter a house, and run away with it ?—*A.* Hermit-crab.

12. *R.*—A lake filled with water. Presently a white cloud rises in the midst, and drinks the lake dry. Then the cloud grows, and has leaves ?—*A.* The cocoanut. When about to shoot, the milk solidifies into a soft white substance.

Note.—There are several versions of this riddle, e.g., "A little child leaps into a lake," "a coral rock grows up in the *ndaveta*, or reef-entrance," &c.

13. *R.*—Grass wraps stone, stone wraps food. Literally, "Wrapping, Sir Grass wraps Sir Stone. Wrapping, Sir Stone wraps Sir Food" ?—*A.* The cocoanut with its fibrous husk, hard shell, and kernel.

Note.—There are numerous riddles of this kind.

14. *R.*—A man. When he is born, he does not cry ; while he is growing he does not cry ; when he is full-grown he does not

cry; but when he is very old then he weeps?—*A.* The cocoanut which sheds its milk only when it begins to decay.

Note.—Any number of this sort of riddle might be given, e.g., “A man—when a child he was clothed, now that he is grown up he scorns clothing;” the bamboo, which sheds its sheathing.

15. *R.*—I pierce the world, and come out on the other side?—*A.* The root of the Ngi grass which frequently grows completely through the growing yam.

16. *R.*—Two men fight every day and all the day. Their fighting ceases at night, and begins afresh in the morning?—*A.* The eyes.

17. *R.*—Far to Mbulu (Hades), far to Langi, (Sky)?—*A.* The stopper of the waterpot.

18. *R.*—It speaks as I take it to the salt-water, it is silent as I return?—*A.* The *kitu*, or large cocoanut shell, used for carrying salt water. As it goes empty to the beach the wind blowing across its orifices, causes it to sound; when full of water it emits no sound.

19. *R.*—There is a chief who only speaks, and fowls, and pigs and men fall dead before him?—*A.* gun.

20. *R.*—A little child runs to and fro. As it runs a mist arises, and then the sun appears?—*A.* The fire-rubber, which in Fiji represents the fire-drill of other lands.

21. *R.*—The chiefs are in council. A base-born fellow comes and scatters them?—*A.* The stones used in heating the Fijian oven. When they are hot enough a stick is used to stir them up, and arrange them at the bottom of the oven. They are heaped together while being heated.

22. *R.*—Three fish, one on the top of the other. The shark below, the sting-ray in the middle, and the mullet leaps on the top?—*A.* The board on which the bark of the paper mulberry is beaten into *masi* (Tonga *tapa*) or native cloth; the cloth lying upon it; and the *ike*, or mallet with which the bark is beaten.

23. *R.*—White water on this side, white water on that side, deep water (*waitui loaloo* = dark coloured saltwater) in the middle. (Or shall we say “breakers on this side, breakers on that side, deep water in the middle”—literally “White water on this side, white water on that side, black water in the middle.” *Waitui loaloo*—black or dark salt water, is used for “deep-water”)—*A.* The eye.

24. *R.*—There are twelve women who conceive at different times, but all give birth on the same day?—*A.* A nest of eggs.

25. *R.*—A child who reaches up to the shelf. He can reach

the big upper shelf, but he cannot touch the little lower shelf. He is too short for it?—*A.* The hand which can touch the shoulder but cannot reach the bend of the arm.

26. *R.*—A stranger who comes to Fiji to eat. His feast is made ready; he eats it all, and is satisfied, eating no more for several months. Then he goes back to his own land, and his belly is emptied?—*A* cotton-bag.

27. *R.*—A house filled with food, and so straitly shut up, that no man can find the door. Then comes to pass a wonderful thing. The food becomes a man.* Only one man, but he fills the whole house. By-and-bye, he opens the house, leaps outside, and runs away, leaving the house burst and destroyed?—*An egg.*

28. *R.*—There are two who are always fighting, and to their fighting there is no end. One of them gets the better of the other for a long while. But at last there comes a day when he falls asleep. As he lies sleeping his *tutuvi* (covering) is thick and very heavy also. Then comes his enemy whom he used to conquer, and seats himself upon him, and oppresses him, and triumphs mightily over him?—*A.* Man and grass. In man's lifetime he keeps down the grass in his plantations, &c., but when he dies, and lies under the thick heavy "grave-tutuvi," the grass grows over him.

29. *R.*—A box into which goods are continually poured, but which is never full?—*A.* *A yalonda*—which the reader may translate "our souls," "our minds," or "our desires," as he pleases.

30. *R.*—There are two from whom we are continually begging. They give without stint or grudging?—*A.* Earth and water.

31. *R.*—In the morning it has four feet, and in the broad day it has two feet; when the sun is near setting it has three feet?—*A.* A man.

When I first heard this sphinx-riddle, more than 100 natives were present. "You got that from white man's land," I said, and straightway there arose a clamour of denial. Old men declared then, and have often since assured me, that they used to hear the riddle when they were little children.

I subjoin a specimen of a Fijian fable.

THE TERI† AND THE RAT.

The *teri* and the rat were great friends. One day they found a bunch of bananas, "I'll climb after those bananas," said the *teri*, "you stay below while I climb." "All right," said the rat.

* There is a nice play upon words here, which is lost in the translation. *Tamata* means both "man" and "addled."

† *Teri*, a long-legged bird haunting the muddy banks of rivers.

So the *teri* climbed up, and ate the bananas, and threw down the skins to the rat.

Then said Mr.* Rat, "Let us go to the reef," and there he found a *vasua* (gigantic oyster). He called his friend, "Come and take this food." The *vasua* was open, and Mr. Teri put in his foot to scratch out the flesh, whereupon the *vasua* shells closed upon him, and held him in a vice. He cried out "Alas! Sir Rat, I perish!" The rat said, "That pays you out for the bananas. You ate the good of them and made me wretched with the worthless part. Stay there and be drowned when the tide makes. As for me I am going to return alive to the shore."

I cannot resist the temptation to add the following "moral," appended to the foregoing fable by one of my Fijian students. I translate from his MS. now before me.

The *teri* is the rich man. The rat is Lazarus. The bunch of bananas represents the lordly state of Dives, while Lazarus was wretched. The reef is death. The *vasua* which caught the *teri* is the everlasting fire to which Dives went. The land, Heaven is its name.

Dr. E. B. TYLOR then read a paper "On the Affinity of the Melanesian, Malay, and Polynesian Languages," by the Rev. R. H. CODRINGTON. The discussion upon this communication was adjourned until the next meeting.

The following paper was read for the author by the Assistant Secretary:—

On the STATURE of the INHABITANTS of HUNGARY.
By JOHN BEDDOE, M.D., F.R.S., M.A.I.

SOME attention has of late been paid to anthropometry in Hungary, particularly by Dr. Körösi, and by Dr. Scheiber, of Bucharest. Of the results of their investigations some have considerable interest. For example, Körösi, operating on the recruiting returns for the whole of Hungary, found that the several races of that country stood in the following order, reckoning for the tallest to the shortest. First the Vends on the Styrian frontier, then the Germans, then the Croats, then the Slovaks and Serbs, then the Jazyges (people of Jaszag in Central Hungary, a Turanian race), then the Jews, then the Rumanians, then the Magyars, then the Ruthenians (in the Bukowin I suppose) and lastly the Kunen (query Kumanians).

* *Ra*, the plural sign.