

## Whose Story is it? Colonialism, Syria Ship Wreck, and Texting Race Relations in Fiji

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### Abstract

*The available narrative of Syria shipwreck would lead one to believe that the passengers and crew of the indenture ship Syria, carrying 497 indentured workers and 43 crew, were rescued by a search party organised by a senior colonial government official. This paper examines a wider set of archival documents on the rescue efforts and argues that the official narrative was not only misleading but was also a deliberately designed narrative to eliminate the roles of all other entities, but particularly the indigenous Fijians, in rescuing crew and passengers from the Wreck. The texting of the rescue records by the colonial government officials had a long term and continuing effect on race relations in Fiji.*

### Introduction

On the evening of 11 May 1884 the passenger ship, *Syria*, ran onto the Nasilai Reef, got wrecked, and gradually broke apart.<sup>1</sup> The ship was carrying a cargo of 497 Indian indentured workers and their children, and a crew of 43 of which some were Indians (called *lascars*). A number of those on Board - the actual number still uncertain 133 years after the event, but ranging from 55 to 59 - were unaccounted for, many of them presumed dead. In terms of numbers missing/dead, this remains the worst maritime disaster in Fiji to date.

1. *Syria* was a 1,010 ton, iron sailing ship built in 1868 for the primary purpose of transporting indentured workers from India. Prior to coming to Fiji in 1884, it had made 4 trips to Trinidad (1872, 1873, 1877 and 1878), and one trip to Nevis (1874). See 'Syria (ship)' in Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria\\_\(ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria_(ship)). She was chartered by the Crown Agents for Colonies to take 'Coolies from Calcutta to Fiji' at a rate of £11.10 per adult (CSO, 1077/84).

There are two critical aspects of this disaster: one concerns the technical aspect of the ship - its seaworthiness, its compliance with maritime and passenger shipping laws and regulations, competency of its captain and crew, insurance aspects, maritime charts of Fijian waters, and the like. The second concerns the human side of the disaster, principally the rescue of the passengers and the crew, the post-rescue handling of passengers/crew, and the handling of the wounded and the dead.

This paper deals with some aspects of the second component. In particular it examines the operations surrounding the rescue of passengers, the documentation of these operations, and the impact of the recording. An earlier paper argued that the colonial government and its officials, at best, excluded from recording as an official report, the critical role played by the ship's agent in rescuing the ship-wrecked passengers (Chand, 2016). This paper builds on this theme and examines in detail the official reports, and assesses the impact of this on race relations in Fiji.

Other than for the report of the Chief Medical Officer Dr. William McGregor written in 1884, stories of the wreck remained un-narrated until well after Fiji's independence. None of the Fijian history books used in the country's schools have a mention of the Syria wreck. Even Gillion (1962), regarded as the first authority on Indenture in Fiji, has only a brief reference to the wreck. On the rescue of passengers, he wrote: 'The mate went in the sixth [boat] to get assistance but nothing could be done until morning, when Dr. McGregor, the Chief Medical Officer and Acting Colonial Secretary, took charge of the rescue operations carried out in boats and Fijian canoes' (Gillion, 1962: 64).

It was not until 1979 when Brij Lal (1979) wrote a lengthy account of the events, that the story came to the fore. Lal acknowledged that the 'full story is lost to history.... important *Syria* papers, including the ship's log and the ship list which would have illuminated the events preceding the disaster, were lost at sea... And in Fiji, no record exists of the impressions of those who survived the disaster, while the recollection of the children of the *Syria* immigrants and some indentured labourers still alive [in 1979] is evanescent' (1979: 153-4). Lal's work was based on sources which included the official report of William McGregor, then the Chief Medical Officer for Fiji as well as Acting Colonial Secretary of Fiji.

The details of the Syria wreck had been almost erased from official Fijian memory. The closest that there is now to recall the wreck is the Syria Park in Nausori Town, named in 1983 in memory of the ship and the wreck. The *Syria Monument* in the Park notes that there was a terrible sea accident in which many indentured workers died; it lists those who received medals for their rescue efforts.

But no one had examined the events in detail for decades. Interest in the event increased after Lal's paper, then subsided to rise again in 2004, when Indian Fijians marked the 125th anniversary of the arrival of indentured workers in the country. The gradually increasing attention being paid to Girit since 2004 began to place attention on the Syria wreck too. More recent examinations by NGO's have begun to produce a narrative which is quite different from the official story.

This paper examines the official story on the Syria wreck, and notes the gaps contained therein. It proposes that the official story was to a large extent incomplete at best, with significant long term impacts on how inter-ethnic relations developed in the country. The paper provides at least a part of the story which may help in making a fuller narrative.

### The Official Annual Report

The official report on the *Syria* ship wreck disaster is contained in the Annual Report of the Agent General for Immigration for the year 1884, which was presented to the Colonial Legislature. The Report contained the following on the disaster of the ship *Syria*:

4. The voyage of the "Syria" was so unfortunate as to terminate, within sight of her port, in a calamitous shipwreck. After a prosperous voyage of unusual celebrity the vessel struck the outer edge of the reef opposite Nasilai, during a dark night in boisterous weather, and speedily went to pieces. It was only with the utmost difficulty, and by the help of energetic assistance from Suva (14 miles distant) that most of the immigrants were ultimately rescued. But after every possible exertion, carried on during no less than 58 hours, 439 out of the 494 on board, together with all the crew, were safely landed, though a few were in so exhausted a condition that they had to be conveyed at once to hospital. At the muster, 55 were found to have been lost in the wreck. There had been but 4 deaths during the voyage, all infants, of whom 3 had died from bronchitis or pneumonia and 1 from general debility and malnutrition.

5. The wreck of the "Syria" occurred on the 11th of May; and this vessel was followed by the "Howra", which arrived on the 26th June after a voyage of 79 days.

The annual report was presented to the Colonial Secretary on 7 May 1886, almost 2 years to the date of the ship wreck.

However, much earlier, within days of the disaster - on 16 May 1884 - the 'Colonial Secretary's Office' had written a report, in the form of a letter, to the 'Officer Administering the Colony'. The 30-page handwritten report, under the signature of Dr. William M. McGregor (CSO 84/1068), was filed on 23 March 1884 as the official inward correspondence of the Colonial Office (CSO 84/1068), also under the signature of William McGregor.<sup>2</sup>

### The McGregor Narrative

The 'official' narrative goes as follows. At 8.30 pm on Sunday, 11 May 1884, the ship was wrecked on the Nasilai Reef. Fifty nine passengers, which included 56 indentured workers and 3 lascars died in the accident. There were 6 lifeboats on the ship, all of which but one got destroyed in the wreck. The remaining one was deployed with volunteers from the ship to seek assistance. The boat reached a Fijian village on Monday 12th, from where a Fijian pilot took the team to Levuka, reaching there by midday on Monday. From Levuka they were taken to Suva in the boat USS Penguin, reaching Suva late that evening. By then the news of the wreck got known in Suva, through, inter alia the arrival of SS Thisle from Levuka which had seen the wreck on its way. Almost simultaneously the ship's doctor arrived in Suva separately and went to seek help from the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. William McGregor, who organised a rescue team and took a number of boats to the wreck, rescuing the indentured labourers and crew.

McGregor's official report to the 'Officer Administering the Government', dated 16 May 1884, and to the Governor, dated 11 June 1884, provide the official story of the wreck. It provides extensive record of how McGregor learnt of the wreck of the ship, and of his actions subsequent to that.

### *Official Narrative: The Rescue Party*

McGregor's report holds that the surgeon on the ship, Dr. Shaw reached McGregor's home at 9pm on Monday 12th May, the day after the

<sup>2</sup> This document is reproduced in full as *The McGregor Report* (2016: 145-154). Two clearly distinct hands are found to have penned the letter, taken here as the norm in penning long documents by hand. Dr. William McGregor signed documents in Fiji under the name 'McGregor'. His biographer, R. B. Joyce (1971), titled the biography 'Sir William McGregor'. Here the original 'McGregor' is used.

Syria wreck 'in a state of exhaustion', reporting the accident and the danger to the lives of those on board. 'He had arrived partly by wading and swimming, and partly by means of a native canoe'. The incident had also been reported to the 'Officer Administering the Government'. McGregor's report states: 'a note from yourself that reached me through Capt Hedstrom about 10pm showed that the "Syria" was on the Nasilai Reef'.

McGregor began organizing a rescue party. The SS Clyde was 'at once got ready for sea ... and the SS Thistle was engaged to start at daylight with stores, and provisions for the Indian Depot at Nukulau'. The rescue party comprised 5 government boats ('all that were available at the time'), as well as a boat lent by Capt Hamburg of the Ship Rewa then in port, and a life boat of the SS Penguin. The CSR's General Manager also made his boat, a fast and powerful steam launch, available for the rescue mission. From Levuka, SS Penguin, which had arrived into Suva that evening, had joined the party. Earlier on its way to Suva, Penguin came 'as near to the reef as was deemed prudent, but nothing was seen of the wreck by those on board'. The eight vessels, thus, comprised the rescue party from Suva.

Hedstrom's boat was under the command of the Acting Superintendent of Police John Fowler. Its crew comprised Fijian prisoners, two crews of police constables under the direction of the native officers Ratu Jolame and Ratu Roseati. Acting Agent General for Immigration, Henry Anson's crew comprised 20 men of the Armed Native Constabulary. Dr. Patallo, Dr. Shaw and Lt Malan also accompanied 'the expedition'. The mission started soon after midnight on 12th May.

The 'expedition' was divided into 3 groups. The Penguin was to 'skirt along the reef to give from outside what aid she could'. The Clyde, with her canoes, was to go inside the reef. The 3rd party was to go up the Rewa River and descend through the Nasilai distributary. The shore party reached the wreck by noon on Tuesday 13th May; the river party reached by 3 pm.

The parties found that the ship was:

on the point of the Nasilai reef, about four miles from the nearest land, where the native town of Nasilai is situated ... broken shallow reef extends from the ship for about a couple of miles towards land, covered at most places by a depth of water varying from one to three or four feet at low water, but with certain large areas of deep blue water intervening here and there. A large part of deep water is situated about a quarter of a mile from the ship right between it and the land. There are one or two broad channels of deep water near the shore again which

could be crossed only by a boat. Large portions of the reef are covered thickly by a spiny branching stag[illegible] coral into which our feet and ankles sink, and which renders walking exceedingly painful and dangerous.

### ***The Rescue***

When the 'first' rescue boats reached the scene around noon on Tuesday the 13th, 'the majority of the Indians were in the water on the reef, making as far towards the land as they could, but a considerable number were still in the wreck vessel, chiefly women and children ... The Captain of the "Syria" was the only European found on board struggling heroically at the constant risk of his own life to get the women and children extricated'.

The people from the first group reaching the wreck 'made every effort they could to rescue those that were drowning in the water within their reach and to transport all that had left the ship across the first deep water, in which no doubt any left behind would have been drowned at night'.

The Captain 'did not leave the wreck until he believed that all the people were out of it, then he started from the after portion of the ship bringing an Indian woman who was half drunk, along with him. He had to conduct her across a piece of broken mast.... The Captain 'was faint from loss of blood, having bled most profusely from a wound of a foot but he persevered in his efforts to render assistance at and near the wreck until he was utterly exhausted and quite unable to save himself'.

McGregor reported that it was 'a matter of much regret that one man, a drunken lascar, was left on board and could not be rescued. He was brought out of the wreck once and put into a position where he could have saved himself, but he watched an opportunity of scrambling into the wreck again'. After 'all others had finally been rescued, a return was made to the ship... but the unfortunate man could not be found ... another man was unexpectedly found whom Joshua with some assistance brought off successfully and who is now alive'.

By 3pm, the party which came through the river arrived. 'Up to this time it appeared as if the majority of the Indians would be drowned, in spite of all that could be effected to save them', but with their arrival 'came fresh courage to all'.

'Soon afterwards, the Revd Mr. Langham arrived with his boat, which as the tide was now rising, proved of great use. This team rescued 'no fewer than forty-eight Indians'. The Rev is described as 'a man with

cool courage and hopeful fearlessness', and his crew as 'disciplined and prepared to obey every behest of its master'. Another reverend, Rev Lindsay 'also arrived with his boat, and rendered every assistance he could. The reverends were not part of McGregor's rescue mission.

The last boat to take the survivors out before darkness set in, was the boat in charge of Constable Kingston. 'He went to a sandspit on which a number of men stood, and took in as many as his could carry. But I shall ever regret that he was unable to remove all. He reported that he left some eight or ten men. What became of these is not known; it is possible that they got on shore by means of one or two canoes that were about, but at present it cannot be affirmed that they were saved.' Three boats returned to search for them around 9 or 10pm - as soon as the moon rose. The boats 'cruised about all over the reefs, but there was then there no living human being, so that the fate of these poor men is still uncertain'.

By '8pm the last of the boats reached the native town of Nasilai, the chief of which had rendered much aid in the afternoon, and who received the Immigrants and all others hospitably, providing them with quarters and water, and next morning breakfasting, of his own motion, the European and their crews. Sufficient food for the Indians had been brought by the relieving boats'.

McGregor's report states that 'from all data at hand by then about 50 Indians, 'chiefly adults ... drowned'.

The report further states: 'But for the perseverance, courage and devotion of those that took part in the work of rescue it is fearful to contemplate the loss of human life that could have occurred'.

### ***Post-Rescue***

Immediately after the rescue - on the evening of Tuesday 13th - 'it was arranged at the town of Nasilai that the Colonial Sugar Company's launch ... should come to that town next morning at high water - about 9am - with the large iron-built lighters belonging to the Company to carry the whole of the Indians to Nukulau by way of the Rewa River'. But 'in spite of all good intentions and perseverance on his part, [the officer in charge of the barge] failed to get beyond the Rewa branch, and was unable to render further aid'.

'A little before high water all the Indians except about a hundred of the strongest men were embarked in the eight boats taken from Suva, and in the boats of the Rev Mr. Langham and the Rev Mr Lindsay, and brought on to the Rewa branch of the river' from where they were taken to Nukulau Island. The 100 left behind were 'marched from Nasalai to the

town of Rewa on Wednesday the 14th' and on the morning of Thursday the 15th taken to Nukulau on the CSR barge.

### ***Rescue Issues***

McGregor pointed out that about 'two hours after' the three boats from his rescue team arrived at the wreck, 'three Fijian canoes appeared from the direction of Naselai. Only one of these seemed really desirous of rendering active assistance. It belonged I believe to the Chief of the town of Nasalai and was brought as near the wreck as the state of the tide would admit. It was the largest of the three, and as at that time many people, in spite of every endeavour, were drowning', aided in the rescue.

However,

[c]ertain Fijians, I believe from the two other canoes, manifested a callousness that to those who were straining every nerve to save people drowning all around them was exasperating in the extreme. With men, women and children dying helpless before their eyes, with the bodies of the drowned floating all over the reef, and their struggling forms of the feebly living in the water for a last chance for life, some five or six of these [word illegible] Fijians went on collecting bundles of blankets, calico cloth, and so on that they could have stolen just as easily next day and would not and did not give up their occupation to aid in the work of humanity.

One of 'the same plunderers, frightened by the threat by instant violence', did aid a woman and child.

McGregor further reported:

Unfortunately of a few Fijians, supposed to be men of Notho, I can speak only in terms of disgust & reprobation.... [T]ruth requires that it should be told that the bodies of dead and drowning Indians were being driven about all over the reef under the eyes of these same Fijians so that they certainly knew the danger in which the Indians were, and moreover several of them paid no attention to the signals and to the frantic appeals for help made to them by the Europeans present.

But a majority of the villagers came forward to help: 'It is, however, pleasant and refreshing to know from these few inhuman wretches to what it is gratifying to say formed the great majority of the natives, who willingly and fearlessly risked their own lives whenever called on to do so to save their fellow creatures'. Four of the natives were specifically

named and recommended by McGregor for medals of the Royal Humane Society as well as pecuniary rewards of £5 each. These were: Emosi (the man put on board the boats by one Davis of Nasaota, a tiny island off the mouth of Rewa River); Ratu Joshua, the native Inspector of Police; Constable Aprama, and Police Corporal Swani.

McGregor also commended the efforts of the Armed Native Constabulary, the native prisoners, the Europeans involved in the rescue efforts and the 2nd mate of *Syria*. He recommended the curtailment of the remaining sentences of the prisoners, and cash rewards to the policemen and the Europeans.

On the villagers, he wrote, further:

all along the route beginning at the native town of Nasilai across the Delta to Rewa town, the natives received the Indians as they marched across with great kindness, and cordiality, presenting them with food and fruit in the most warm and generous manner, which renders all the more unaccountable the heartless indifference and stupidity of the few wretches cited above as coming out to the reef to pilfer in the midst of drowning men, women and children.... I remind you of the kindness, and generosity of the Chief of the town of Nasilai, who rendered all available aid, who has, I believe, lost one of this best canoes, broken by the weight of the people put on her, who has undertaken to bury the dead and to collect what he can from the wreck and preserve it. I would recommend to this chief a gratuity of £20'.

### ***McGregor's Heroism***

McGregor has been projected as the hero of the rescue mission, to the extent that a reader would think that had it not been him, a majority of the Indians would have drowned or died.

McGregor's own, often quoted account (Joyce, 1971; Lal, 1979), written on 11 June 1884, is as follows:

...I hardly like to mention the matter because the press and people have spoken of myself in connection therewith in a way that makes me feel ashamed, and that I tell you honestly hurts me very keenly ... The scene was simply indescribable, and pictures of it haunt me still like a horrid dream ... People falling, fainting, drowning all around one; the cries for instant help, uttered in an unknown tongue, but emphasized by looks of agony and the horror of impending death, depicted on dark

faces rendered ashy grey by terror; then again the thundering, irresistible wave breaking on the riven ship, still containing human beings, some crushed to death in the debris, and others wounded and imprisoned therein; and all to be saved then or never ... [Some sacrificed their lives to save others; some, such as the strong lascar crew] thought only of themselves, and rushed into the boats surrounded by dying women and children. One of these lascar seamen I took out of the wreck paralyzed with terror; afterwards by brute force I threw him twice out of a boat to make room for drowning children ... in spite of everything that could be done the loss of life was fearful. At 2 pm I was almost faint with despair, and I did not then think that a hundred or so could be saved. As I had somehow got to have charge of the whole concern, you can imagine the crushing weight of responsibility I felt, and you will, I am sure believe me when I tell you that I do not feel the same man since. I fear you may think it strange that fifty-six people should be killed and drowned and I, whose duty it was to see that assistance was given in the worst cases, came off with only a few bruises and slight wounds that were healed in a week. I can only say that I did the best I could. I did not ask any of those with me to risk their lives in going into the wreck with myself, save the four Fijians, whom I have recommended for the medal of the Royal Humane Society: and I could not know each time, for I went many times, whether I could return alive, especially as I am no swimmer of any use - although in the breakers there swimming was not of much avail. I feel it almost ludicrous to offer, as it were an apology for being alive: but I am sure you can understand the feeling that I entertain, half fearful lest you should think that because I am alive I did not do all that might have been done (report to Governor Gordon as cited in Joyce, 1971: 72-3).

McGregor was awarded two medals for his leadership and bravery - the Albert Medal from the UK, and the Clarke Gold Medal from Australia. John Fowler, the Acting Superintendent of Police, received Clarke Silver Medal (Joyce, 1971: 73), and the 4 Fijians recommended by McGregor received bronze medals from the Royal Humane Society.

McGregor came to be regarded as the hero - the one who organised and led the rescue mission and who saved the labourers who were almost on the edge of death. The *Fiji Times* wrote:

'foremost of all stands Dr. McGregor who took a leader's place and kept it by his tireless energy, and the cool daring with which he exposed his life repeatedly in his successful attempts to succour and save the drowning (21 May 1884 as in Joyce, 1971: 73).

R. B. Joyce, McGregor's biographer, regarded the *Fiji Times* account of the rescue and McGregor's role, as a 'typical press report', saying that even in a remote place like Newfoundland where McGregor went on posting, or in Aberdeen, similar accounts of his heroic role were published; one even stated that McGregor 'rescued the emigrants, clambering along a broken mast and carrying them one by one to safety on his back' (1971: 73).

Joyce devoted less than 2 pages out of the more than 450 pages in the biography to the Syria Disaster and the rescue of the passengers, of which about 75% itself is a quote from McGregor; Joyce's focus on Syria was only to the extent of McGregor's involvement in Syria; not on the Syria disaster, despite it being the biggest sea disaster in Fiji, itself.

The reports examined above provide the core 'official account' of the rescue of passengers and seamen of *Syria* after it struck Nasilai Reef. Even McGregor's report - that when the first rescue boat from his team reached the scene around noon on Tuesday the 13th, 'the majority of the Indians were in the water on the reef, making as far towards the land as they could, but a considerable number were still in the wreck vessel, chiefly women and children - has remained the official/government statement on the commencement of the rescue work.

There is no information in McGregor's report on the 'native canoe' in which he reports the ship's doctor reached Suva within 24 hours of the accident, nor on the 'one or two canoes that were about' who may have taken the 8-10 passengers left behind on a sandbank by the party headed by Constable Kingston. Since the official narrative, no one else has raised the question of that 'native canoe', or on other native canoes. There is also nothing further on record of the two boats taken by the Christian priests - Rev Langham and Rev. Lindsay - to the rescue. The *Suva Times* reported that Rev. Langham 'arrived in his boat from Bau' (21 May 1884). How Frederick Langham learnt of the disaster in Bau when official records hold that the survivor team seeking help went to Levuka, and the ship's doctor went to Suva, remains undocumented in the official narrative.

Fortunately some archival documents are available which make references to rescue efforts. These documents are examined in the rest of

this paper.

The totality of these documents demolish the McGregor rescue narrative almost completely. The most critical set of documents in this regard is the set of testimonies of the ship crew to the Marine Board Inquiry on the accident. While the Inquiry dealt only with the cause of the wreck, evidences given to it contain considerable information on the rescue of the passengers which have not been brought into the Syria discourse so far.

### The Marine Board of Inquiry

The ship wreck was officially reported to the Marine Board on Friday 16 May by the agents for Syria. The Board convened a 'Court' and started the inquiry on Saturday 17 May. The inquiry team comprised Captain Humburgh, Captain Barrack, Lt. Malan and Mc Stewart (secretary). The report was handed to the Colonial Secretary on June 19th. The terms of reference of the inquiry revolved predominantly around the cause(s) of the accident. However, in the course of the inquiry evidences were given by the Captain, officers and mates of the ship. The Inquiry produced a number of interesting facts on the rescue efforts.

The evidence given by William Henson, first mate of *Syria*, on 17 May 1884 to the Board, was a first-hand evidence from a senior crew:

We did not know it was a reef on Viti Levu. Thought it was the Astralobe reef ... After boats were broken, Capt ordered me into only boat left, to take volunteers, & go for help. I went at once, *landed at a Fijian village, got a pilot there and sent another man, a native from the village, to the ship to render assistance as he had a sailing boat....* Left ship about 9.15pm. ... No lives lost that I know of when I left ship.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence of the 3rd mate, Edward Penny, is also worthy of a quote:

Capt ordered boats out. Three were broken. One on the davits left. I went in that boat with first officer as a volunteer.... First mate, carpenter, engineer & 4 lascars came in boat. We got into boat before she was carried.

.... I had no idea where we were. We went to *a native town, got a pilot who took us to Levuka. We told him we wished to go to Suva. He did not understand. Got to Levuka 3 pm on Monday....*

<sup>3</sup> Italics in the quotes from the colonial records documents in this paper are added to emphasize the point.

On Tuesday we came back half way from Levuka, lost an mast & broken 2 oars, returned to Levuka. I came to Suva in Penguin on Thursday.

The Ship's carpenter, John Reid, gave evidence; the pertinent sections from this relates to his observation of the night of the wreck and the next day. The captain

ordered us to leave ship and go ashore for assistance..... We got into boat the only one unbroken. ... We went into *a native hut about 6 miles from ship. We got a pilot there. He took us to Levuka. He would not stir (sic) till we gave him 10/-.*

We told the owners of a sailing boat to go to the wreck. *The natives went off in their own boats to ship.*

Reid also stated that no lives were lost when he left the ship the day after the wreck (Monday 12th).

Some of the lascars also gave evidence, but the records of the Inquiry do not carry the details of their evidences.

There is no name in any document to the village where the group of eight landed. The party left Syria at 9.15pm. There is also no evidence of the time they landed at the village; after midnight or thereabouts would not be a far off estimate. The evidences show that while one villager piloted the team to Levuka, some, unspecified number, of the villagers left in their canoes to the wreck the same night. This corroborates with the evidence given by the ship's apprentice, Alfred Potts, who had stayed on the ship wreck:

There was great confusion. We tried to clear up sail. Everybody was sober. The coolies kept very quiet below.... I went overboard twice, thinking ship was going to break up.... A lot of coolies jumped overboard intending to swim ashore. We tried to keep them below. I think some were drowned in swimming, & some were washed off the deck. I saw a *canoe at a distance on Monday.* I got a cork belt put around me. Nothing was done on Monday at all towards saving life. She bumped heavily all day.

The lascars took all the life bouys on Sunday night & I did not see any again except one (lascar). They assisted to get boats out. By Monday they had all disappeared.

Walter Johnson, the 2nd mate of Syria, gave his evidence on 19 May. He stated:

I left ship on Monday afternoon; did not *return till next day*.... I was on board all Monday morning. When foremast fell *I was in a canoe near.* Captain remained on board the whole time....On Monday *Fijian canoes came off and took men on shore.*

The Captain, Master Charles Belson, gave his evidence the following week, on 20 May 1884. He stated:

After ship struck we did everything possible for saving life. On Monday *Fijian canoes came off and took men on shore.*

.... On Monday at day light I saw land & knew where we were. *The first canoe came off at 8 a.m.* I sent the Dr. off in her. *Three or four more came afterwards.* The lascar crew and some coolies went in them.

....

*About 60 or 70 got ashore on Monday in canoes.* No body at all was washed overboard.

One consistent information from the Marine Board Inquiry depositions is, as stated by the Ship's captain, that '[n]o lives were lost except one man and 2 children, at the ship. Most lives were lost after they left the ship trying to get on shore.' The Captain further deposed:

On Monday & Tuesday whenever the Coolies saw a boat coming they would jump overboard. They would not listen to me. I did all I could to regulate their leaving the ship but to no purpose. The ship would have lasted another day & fewer lives would have been lost had the coolies remained by her till each boat that came was filled up & their occupants taken to land.

McGregor's report is silent on this. Whether McGregor's operation on the site had planned for such panic scramble at getting onto rescue boats, is not known.

The testimonies and evidences given by the ship crew have not been challenged or controverted. These show clearly that the villagers had started going to the wreck on the same evening of the wreck, and had started rescuing the passengers and crew without delay. This was at least 30 hours earlier than when McGregor arrived on the scene. The only uncertainty which remains is the identities of the villagers and the identity of the village(s) they belonged to. The descriptions would indicate that the villages were either Vuniselala (present day Navilaca) or Nasilai, or both.

It is on official records that Rev. Langham and Rev. Lindsay went to

the rescue in their own boats. But these two persons did not go alone. Even McGregor's own report states: 'Rev. Langham's boat from its size, the discipline of its crew, prepared to obey every behest of its master, carried ashore, not without risk in the darkness, no fewer than forty-eight Indians'. Both these boats had all native crew, who came without any instruction or remuneration from the colonial regime; at least one boat came from Bau with, presumably, Bauans as crew. That Langham learnt of the ship wreck is also not a matter of triviality; Langham's source were almost certainly villagers around the coast closer to the wreck, evidences point to them being Nasilai villagers. The possible imputation that the villagers were at best passive participants in an operation led by the colonial government, McGregor specifically, which is what one gets from McGregor's report, Gillion (1962), Joyce (1972), and Lal (1979), for example, is certainly far from the full picture.

### Other Reports

There are two sets of other reports which provide some details on the matter of the rescue of the passengers and crew.

First, there is a rather long report by Dr. Shaw to the Colonial Secretary, written on 19 May (CSO mp 84/1040). The report is of events he witnessed from the time of the wreck on the evening of 11th to midday the next day when he left the ship to bring further assistance. The report notes the following:

- the first party, led by the First Mate, was asked to leave the ship to find 'land and get assistance'; they left around mid-night on Sunday 11th; they 'got away without mishap'
- some of the crew were seen leaving the ship with their cork belts and life bouys. The ship's engineer was also seen preparing to leave, but was missing from sometime after midnight.
- About noon on Monday 12th, 'a native canoe' came for rescue, on which he (Dr. Shaw) left; 'after a long slow journey the canoe reached Suva' (CSO mp 84/1040).

The General Manager for James McEwan and Co., the Agent of Syria based in Suva, one Alex Cockburn wrote to McGregor, on 21 May (CSO 1884/1065). His report shows:

- that they were advised of the wreck by Monday evening: 'Captain Knight at half past eight called at the Office here, & reported his arrival with the SS Thistle from Levuka, also that a large ship was on the Nasalai Reef'.

- [Knight] 'stated that Captain Hedstrom on the Thistle arrived in port came on board & informed him that the Administrator had in the afternoon seen the wreck from Government House. This satisfied us that the Government were in full possession of all the information at hand at that time'.

In his report, Cockburn attached an extract from *the Suva Times* of that day (21 May), saying that the report spoke in detail of what he wanted McGregor to know, with his letter only adding to what was in the media report. The *Suva Times* provided the following information:

- 'Mr. Cockburn, Manager of Messrs James McEwan and Co., the agents of the ship, was the first to make a start for the scene of the disaster', starting the rescue operation on the night of Monday 12th, well before the Official rescue party started the next morning. They were 12 miles from the wreck by 8am the next morning.
- 'A canoe manned by natives came up at that time and did good work in saving those which the boat could not take.
- With thirty saved, making thirty-seven in the boat' Cockburn proceeded to the shore.... 'all were landed safely'.
- At 7.30pm that evening, they landed at Nasalai Village and reported their rescue operation to a police sergeant 'so that any responsibility in landing the thirty men, at another point of the coast might lie with the authorities'. He also reported this to McGregor. He then, on the evening of Tuesday, started for Suva taking despatches and instruction from McGregor, reaching Suva at 4.30am the next morning. (CSO m.p. 1065/1884)

There was no response to this report. Neither McGregor nor any colonial administrator commented on the *Suva Times* article. This report, thus, confirms, first, that Cockburn was the first of the Europeans from Suva to start the rescue operation; second, that villagers had already been involved in rescue operations when Cockburn was on the reef; third, that Cockburn had landed the 30 he rescued at another part of the shore, it not being Nasilai village, and fourth, that McGregor was informed of the rescue done by Cockburn team and the location of the survivors on 13 May.

The newspaper had provided a hard-hitting statement on the official report by McGregor:

[That Cockburn was the first to start the rescue operation], and the great assistance rendered by Mr. Cockburn, he hav-



ing rescued no fewer than thirty drowning people, sight has been ... altogether lost in the official despatch.... It appears very strange that no mention of this shall have been made by the officials' (CSO m.p. 1065/1884).

Apparently in response to Cockburn's memo and the newspaper article, the Acting Agent General for Immigration wrote a memo to the Colonial Secretary the following day (22 May). He stated:

I have no recollection of knowing how many people were landed at the town of Vuniselala, on the evening on which we brought Indian Immigrants into Nasilai town.... I understood that 10 had been landed by some European and 18 by the natives.

.... I picked up 20 men in all at Vuniselala.... I was most curious to know how many people were at Vuniselala and on counting coolies on Wednesday morning I allowed for 10 coolies at [word illegible, but letter formations indicate *Noco*] (CSO 84/1066).

Another memo by the Acting Agent General to the Colonial Secretary dated 30 May stated that a number of trips were made to the wreck by people before the arrival of the official McGregor party. One such group rescued the 2nd mate and some Indians on Monday, and made 3 trips on Tuesday rescuing Indians in their canoes (CSO 84/1126). The Agent General thought that the group was a part of the Police or Colonial Secretary's Boat Party, but this was not so. He wrote further: '[The] Turaga ni Koro of Vuniselala, and Ratu Beni an inhabitant of Vuniselala ... superintended the landing of 18 Indians .... [The Turaga in Koro] housed and fed 20 coolies for about 2 days taking one man with a large cut on his leg into his own home' (CSO 84/1126).

Another critical piece of information relates to whether the passengers themselves tried to reach land. McGregor had received reports from the Provincial Department and Police teams which went to investigate McGregor's complaint that some villagers had defied his instructions. The report by the Provincial Department, dated 22 May 1884, established that passengers had reached shore on their own (CSO 84/1060). Both, the *Dau in Nakelo* and the 'ovisa' at Nasilai stated that 4 Indians came on shore on Monday 12th May.

The statement by the Nasilai people, as contained in the report to McGregor has significance in terms of noting the responses of the villagers. All those interviewed stated that initially they were hesitant in going to the wreck until the four Indians came on shore when they immediately

went to the aid of the rest, succeeding in bringing 20 Indians on shore on Monday, and another 10 early in the morning of Tuesday. Furthermore, on Tuesday morning 'all the available canoes, six, went to the wreck and continued assisting in the saving of the Indians till late that night'. Another villager informed the team that 'he and his crew had been out on Monday night to the wreck and by daybreak had saved 15 Indians. Later he got 5 more ashore and on the third trip ... the canoe smashed up' (CSO 84/1060).

There also is a report by the Acting Superintendent of Police, John Fowler, who was asked by the Colonial Secretary to investigate the conduct of the natives after the wreck. The investigating team visited the wreck and the Villages of Nasilai and 'Noco' on 20th May. He reported to the Colonial Secretary on 23 May as follows:

On questioning the people it was found that no natives from any other town than Nasilai visited the wreck on the 13th Inst, several of them admitted being called by the white men to assist... On Friday last [16 May 1884] some natives from the town of Noco were discovered stealing from the wreck. The articles stolen were taken by the purchaser Mr. Forsyth....

So far as I have been able to learn all dead bodies recovered have been properly buried.

The Nasilai people reported having buried 29 bodies, namely:- 13 men, 11 women, 3 boys and 2 girls.

The Noco natives buried 6 dead bodies namely 5 Indians and one whiteman, the latter minus legs and arms.

It was reported that a dead body had been seen in wreck but on visiting it, I was unable to discover any thing of it.

The wreck is in much the same position as when I was there on the 13th Inst,.... A large quantity of property has already been removed partly by natives and partly by Mr. Forsyth....

I saw Mr. Forsyth on the subject and he has agreed that all articles recovered belonging to the Immigrants or seamen, shall be handed over...

... from all I have been able to learn the conduct of the natives at Nasilai, with the exception of the few who refused to assist at a critical moment, has been most praiseworthy and they may credited [sic] with having saved a large number of lives (CSO 1054/1884).

The police report provides no information on the whiteman 'minus

legs and arms' buried by the villagers. Nor is there any report by the ship crew, or by the state officials on this person.

The police report, however, does reveal that one European - 'Mr Forsyth' - was involved in the plunder of the wrecked ship and in fact buying goods recovered by the villagers from the wreck. The official reports on file after 23 May went silent on the European stealing the belongings of others, but there continued to appear repeated references to natives of Notho/Noco stealing belongings of those shipwrecked.

In the report on the team sent by the Colonial Secretary to investigate the conduct of the natives, McGregor's note in the column read: 'I was present & put more [4 words not legible] people on the canoe myself - but all this is beside the matter as it does not concern those that had been there stealing about ½ mile off' (CSO 84/1060).

The police report, and the report from the Chief Investigation officer, re-inforce McGregor's imputation that firstly, it was villagers from Nasilai and no other area who played any role in the rescue, and second that the role was that of rendering assistance to the McGregor rescue mission and burying the dead. The imputations in the reports are that Noco and other Fijians played no role, other than burying 5 indentured workers and a white man, and otherwise stealing the belongings of passengers, crew and the ship itself.

The Captain had earlier reported that between 60 and 70 had been rescued by villagers on Monday alone. But there is no report that these were at Nasilai Village when the McGregor party arrived there.

The Agent General reported of 18 being rescued by villagers and 20 being housed and fed by Turaga ni Koro of Vuniselala. Cockburn reportedly rescued another 30 on Tuesday landing them at a village other than Nasilai. The Agent General picked up only 20 from Vuniselala, and 'on counting' on Wednesday, 'allowed for 10 coolies' at Noco. Then there were at least 20 who were rescued by Nasilai villagers on Monday 12th, another 10 the following morning, and unknown numbers the whole of Tuesday, all of which without the knowledge or instruction of any colonial government official.

While the above information is contained in various documents which McGregor and other senior colonial government officials had at their disposal, the information did not find their way into any government or official narration or report on the wreck. The reasons for these could possibly be constructed with reference to the wider socio-political foundations of Fiji which was being built by the colonial regime, which we shall discuss later in the paper.

## Media Reports

The newspaper *The Fiji Times* gave three reports on the Syria Wreck. Its first report came out on 14 May, where it reported that Syria left India with 180 passengers on board, got wrecked and at 11.30pm on the night of the wreck, the boat seeking help left the ship. It further reported about the passing of the steamer Penguin and the sighting of about '25-30 passengers', but who they could not pick up because of the logistics. It carried further reports on 17 May, 23 May and 27 May.

The largest part of the coverage by the *Fiji Times* was given to the report McGregor wrote for the Administrator of the Colony. The McGregor narrative, therefore, became the narrative which the public got to know.

There is a reference to *The Suva Times* by Cockburn, the General Manager of the agent company for Syria in Fiji. The *Suva Times* had carried a scathing report on 21 May, questioning why the official reports had totally ignored the rescue efforts of Cockburn, who had not only led a rescue mission before the 'official' mission started, but who had also rescued thirty passengers before the official rescue party had arrived.

The newspapers also went silent on the Syria matter from after May 1884.

## Records on Survivors

The day to day responsibility in the colonial government for indentured workers was with the Agent General of Immigration. There, however, is no report in the National Archives of Fiji on the survivors or the dead filed by the Agent General of Immigration.

There appear to be at least 5 groups involved in the rescue operations, each on their own initiative: villagers from Vuniselala, villagers from Nasilai, the Cockburn team, the Langham/Lindsay team, and the McGregor party. The official government report makes no mention of the first 4 groups, except for a few sentences on Langham and Lindsay. The official report provides extensive space on how Dr. William McGregor organised his team and on how some of the members of his team saved the passengers. His report, however, provides no detail on the number of people his team had saved, let alone their names. The entire orientation of the report is to take total credit for saving almost all the passengers and crew.

On the basis of an examination of the various reports which McGregor had the privilege of receiving, it is fair to state that McGregor

wilfully ignored each and every report of others involved in the rescue efforts. That it mattered not the least bit to him that rescue operations had begun at least 30 hours before he even learnt of the disaster or that passengers had also been making to the shores on their own, can only be explained in terms of a conscious attempt to document the event as he wanted history to record it.

The CSO documents from May 1884 to May 1885 kept at the National Archives of Fiji, do not contain any report or any reference to any report on the number rescued by different rescue parties.

There is also no reference to any detail on the dead or missing other than the total numbers missing and their gender. There is no list of those who went missing or had died as a result of the wreck.

A normal action taken in modern accident and disaster situations is to engage in a process of counselling and de-briefing of survivors. Whether this was also a norm in the 1880's is not clear. It is also not known whether the passengers received counselling or even spiritual support after the terrifying accident. What is known, however, is that there is not a single official record from any passenger of accounts of the disaster and their survival or rescue. Whether the Agent General for Immigration talked to them is not known.

The McGregor and Anson reports do not even hint that passengers were making to land on their own through swimming, wading, floating on wreck materials, etc. Even the reports on swimming abilities seem to be poles apart. It was a subsequent visit by the Police that documented that passengers had been reaching land on their own.

From at least 1882, the colony compiled annual reports on Indentured Workers (Gillion, 1958). These reports, by rule, were tabled in the Legislative Council as Council papers. The Legislative Council papers for 1885, 1886 and 1887 carry only the Annual Report for 1885, though the annual report for the Polynesian workers for 1884 was tabled.

### *Immigration Passes*

A critical issue concerning the dead/missing relates to their 'Immigration Passes'. Immigration Passes are single page documents which provide the basic personal record of each passenger. Passes were issued for all indentured recruits.

The understanding so far has been that these passes were filled by the Agent General at the port of embarkation and given to the Ship's Surgeon for delivery to the Agent General of Immigration upon landing.

What is not known, however, is the actual location or time when the passes were given the serial numbers. Each pass, and official book records of colonial administrators that go with each worker, had a number. The originals of each pass have these numbers written on the top right hand corner of the document.

The Syria records indicate that these numbers could not have been issued at the port of embarkation. For the Syria passengers, the passes kept at the Archives are numbered from 2355 to 2792 - a total of 438 workers. The number 2793 and onwards are assigned to the workers from the next ship Howrah, which landed in Fiji on 26 June 1884. Those passengers who were missing do not have pass numbers on their immigration passes.

McGregor's report dated 16 May stated: 'the Indians are comfortably housed at the commodious and comfortable Depot at Nukalau, and, in about a couple of weeks from now, many of them will, I think, be able to proceed to the plantations on which they are to spend their period of indenture'.

Given that the ship's log was retrieved at the earliest on 16 May, it is highly unlikely that the records and the workers at the quarantine depot could have been reconciled by 16th May. In his official report, McGregor wrote that all 'except about a hundred of the strongest men' were taken from Nasilai village by the 8 rescue boats and the boats belonging to the two reverends, who were then taken to Nukulau, together with the 100 who came by foot, in CSR barges:

Of those brought thether in the boats some came on to the Depot at Nukulau in boats, others were taken on board the Colonial Sugar Company Steamer "Ratu Epeli" which was promptly sent on by the Company representative in place of the steam launch that could not get over the shoals. The strongest of the men, as mentioned above, were marched... from Nasalai to the town of Rewa on Wednesday the 14th and in the morning of Thursday the 15th brought in by the Ratu Epeli to the Depot at Nukulau.... seriously wounded have been [illegible] to the General Hospital at Suva.

On 20 May, the Acting Agent General sent a tabulated report to the Colonial Secretary on the number of workers landed at Nukulau on Thursday 15 May. Table 1 shows this:

**Tale 1: Syria Ship Passengers and Survivors, 1884**

	Embarked	Died on Voyage	Born on Voyage	Landed at Depot	Missing
Men	290			258	32
Women	127			112	15
Boys	29			26	3
Girls	24			19	5
Infant-Male	14	2		11	1
Infant-Female	13	2	1	11	1
Total	497	4	1	437	57

(Source: Acting Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 20 May 1884, CSO 84-1041)

The Acting Agent General's report shows that there was no survivor who was injured to an extent requiring inpatient treatment at the hospital in Suva. Yet official records show that one passenger (with the immigration pass number 2793) was admitted in hospital, who later died in the hospital. McGregor's official report also refers to a lot of wounded survivors. He wrote on 16 May: 'The seriously wounded have been [illegible] to the General Hospital at Suva. Of these two cases will required amputation. The others will without much doubt make good recoveries but it is only natural to expect a certain number of severe cases of illness, such as inflammation of the lungs, diarrhea, and dysentery consequent on prolonged abstinence and immersion in the water' (CSO 84/1068).

The McGregor and Anson reports indicate that none of the Indentured workers were left in the villages by 15 May. Oral evidence from Noco, however, suggests that unspecified numbers of indentured workers who were either injured in the wreck or in the rescue operations, or were too weak, were cared for by Fijian villagers. Vuniselala/Navilaca village itself took care of a number of survivors for more than a few days. None of this has found its place in official records or in Fiji's official history.

Likewise, there is no record of any of the indentured workers reaching shores of their own and/or being sheltered by the villagers around the coast close to the wreck. The Fiji Times wrote on 17 May 1884, 6 days after the wreck, in the 2nd issue of the paper since the wreck: 'There is, however, hope that some of the people may yet be in the Fiji villages adjacent to the scene of the disaster, and that when they are all got together the loss may prove to be lower than is now reported'. There were no subsequent reports on any such finds.

## Colonial Recording and Race Relations

The report by colonial administrators on the Syria ship wreck contained at the National Archives of Fiji leave huge gaps as far as facts are concerned. There is no list in any official report of those who did not make it to the Quarantine depot at Nukulau. Names and details of the 57 passengers, comprising 32 men, 15 women, and 10 infants, are unavailable. The immigration pass numbers issued are also not certain to be correct or complete. There is no certainty whether the number of missing indentured workers is 57 or 56. Nor is there any record on whether all those missing actually died.

There is no official report on the number of dead who were identified and buried. There is no documentation on the burial either. A police team noted that Nasilai villagers 'reported having buried 29' and Noco villagers buried 6, of which one was a limbless white man. A member of the same team reporting separately to McGregor confirmed that the 'bodies buried number in all 35 - viz 19 adult males, 11 adult females, 3 boys and 2 girls' (CSO 84/1060). There is no mention of the other 21 or 22 making the total of 56 or 57 not on the official records of having made it to the custody of the immigration agent or colonial government.

The priorities of the colonial administrators were quite bizarre - a police party was sent immediately after the rescue was completed to investigate the conduct of the villagers a few of who were reported to have defiantly not heeded the instructions of McGregor (which the police report established to be untrue). Yet no team was sent to find the missing, or confirm deaths. Nor was any official team required to report on the burials of the dead.

No official team ever visited the graves of the dead - from 1884 all through the colonial reign. It is quite a matter where a state - be it colonial state - carries no record in any official report of upto 57 dead who were in its custody and responsibility, let alone no marked graves or records of the burials or locations of the graves. This is nothing short of criminal negligence on the part of the British administration in Fiji.

The Buli of Nakelo informed the Provincial Department on 20 May that he was seeing that the dead were buried 'in accordance with letter received from the Native Department' (CSO, 84/1060). Oral evidence in some areas in Noco Tikina, however, holds that some colonial regime official told the villagers to bury the dead in a mass grave. This was, oral tradition holds, defied by the Navilaca/Vuniselala villagers, who buried 35 dead in individual graves. The story carried down generation after generation is that the village had turned to Christianity in the 1840's, and

as committed Christians, they saw it as their duty to bury the dead strangers with the same dignity as they would bury their own dead.

For generations, the Navilaca village has pointed to a site on land which falls in their boundary as the site of the burial. Oral history holds that after the burials, when village fishermen would go to rest or would camp/sleep in the vicinity of the graves, they reported hearing voices in a 'strange language'.

This referred to site is on solid ground a few meters from the shore surrounded by mangrove swamp. The colonial administrators did not mark this grave. They also did not identify any other grave where the dead could have been buried. It, thus, remains unconfirmed if the Nasilai villagers buried the 29 which the police claimed they did, in Nasilai or in Navilaca/Vuniselala, or on another piece of land. It also remains unconfirmed whether they had done this on their own or jointly with the Vuniselala villagers. There is quite a bit of silence on the graves and the burials.

The Bauan high chief, Roko Tui Bau, the late Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi advised researcher Sashi Kiran of FRIEND in 2012 that the burial story is not their story; that indeed it is not the story of Tailevu/Nakelo; rather it is the story of Noco (personal communication with Kiran).

For a fact known by all concerned, 'Nasilai Reef' was always the territory of Noco Tikina, with a part of it going to Nasilai Village only in the 1980's through a quiet boundary re-demarcation which possibly may be under challenge now. This fact was known to all in Noco and Nakelo Tikinas. For one village to enter into the territory of another was a taboo; protocol would have prevented Nasilai villagers from entering the Nasilai Reef. But if protocol were to be breached on account of emergency, then there would have been traditional reconciliation on this afterwards. There is no oral history on any such reconciliation.

While the Roko Tui Bau stated that the Syria story is not their story, one particular report shows that at least 4 Indians had landed at Nasilai and that Nasilai villagers saved many - over 30 at least - Indians and buried at least 29 dead. These details are contained in a report by an officer of the Provincial Department dated 22 May 1884 (CSO 1884/1060).

The *Dau in Nakelo* informed the team sent by McGregor to investigate the conduct of the villages in defying his instructions to assist him, that his people (Nasilai) did not go to the reef though they became aware of the wreck on Monday morning. The reason was that they were afraid to go to her on account of their frightening experience in a prior wreck where the boat crew 'flourished axes at them'. Only when 'four Indians came on shore' did they leave for the vessel (CSO 84/1060).

The statement attributed to the 'ovisa' (police) of Nasilai added: when the 'four Indians came on shore he had sent a messenger to Buli Nakelo at Bau [and] that he and others went off with three canoes and succeeded in bringing 20 Indians on shore, the third canoe with 10 in it was swamped and did not return till the morning' of Tuesday'. He further stated that on Tuesday morning 'all the available canoes, six, went to the wreck and continued assisting in the saving of the Indians till late that night'. He also makes references to them using a canoe belonging to 'some Noco people who had left it there a few days previously' (CSO 84/1060).

Another villager, Mosese, was also interviewed; he told the team that 'he and his crew had been out on Monday night to the wreck and by daybreak had saved 15 Indians. Later he got 5 more ashore and on the third trip ... the canoe smashed up'.

The Buli of Noco is reported to have told the investigating team that he 'did not think of sending a message to Suva and did not go to the wreck as he thought the Nasilai people would do all that was necessary'. He further stated that he had given orders for all goods floating from the wreck to his coast to be taken to the chief of the town at Nasilai' (CSO 84/1060). This statement is inconsistent with the report from the Agent General of the Turaga ni Koro of Vuniselala rescuing and hosting at least 20 passengers.

What is the actual story of the Syria shipwreck rescue, then? More generally, whose story is the Syria story? McGregor would have it that it is predominantly his and that of the colonial administrators'.

Archival records and oral stories, however, show that this is far from the case. Evidences show that the Agent for Syria began a rescue operation before the colonial administration got its act together (Chand, 2016). A significant role was also played by two missionaries, Revs Langham and Lindsay. Church historian Harold Wood attributes most of the rescue to the missionary Rev Langham.

The heroic initiatives taken by the villagers generally remained out of the official Syria narrative all along. But records show that the activities of the villagers, taken on their own volition, occupied a central place in the Syria rescue effort.

Some uncertainties on aspects of Fijian involvement, however, remain. First, while the 35 dead were supposed to have been buried, (29 by the people of Nasilai and 6 by the people of Noco) the story on the graves of these 35 is incomplete. Second, the roles of Nasilai village vis-a-vis other villages, particularly Navilaca/Vuniselala in Noco, is open only to

reconstruction. Third, the numbers left behind in the villages to recover, is not known. Fourth, there is no detail on the number of passengers arriving on shore on their own soon after the wreck. Fifth, there is no mention of any issue of villagers from one tikina entering the territory of another tikina.

There is official evidence that Nasilai village was used as the administrative centre by McGregor. A part of the McGregor rescue party had descended to the ocean through the Nasilai River, on whose mouth falls the Nasilai Village. McGregor had also landed the survivors he and his teams rescued at Nasilai village. The General Manager of Syria's agent in Fiji also went to Nasilai village to report on the number he rescued and the location of the survivors he had dropped off.

Nasilai village is remembered by outsiders because of the Nasilai Reef on which Syria was wrecked. While the reef itself is in Noco waters, the name 'Nasilai' is the same as that for Nasilai village, which is in Nakelo/Bau/Tailevu. There are also references in the official records to 'Nasalai' and 'Naselai'. There is another area, up the Nasilai river almost at the point where the Nasilai river breaks off from Rewa River, called Nasilai. McGregor's river party descended to Nasilai Reef through this River. There also is/was an area in Rewa called Nasilai. Confusion over names is not unlikely.

Nasilai village is a part of the Nakelo Tikina; Navilaca/Vuniselala village is a part of the Noco Tikina. But both these villages are related in history, as both descended from Bau, being the chiefly traditional fisherman (*gonedau*) for the Bauan High chief. On their migration from Bau, one group settled in Nasilai in Nakelo, and the other moved on to Navilaca in Noco. The two are essentially divided, physically, by the Nasilai River, a distributary of Rewa River (personal communication, people of Noco).

The issue which needs further examination is that of the relationship between Nasilai/Nakelo and Navilaca/Noco in the 1880's. The possibility of a united coastal people can not be ruled out; land and boundary demarcations, which signal the tikina and provincial demarcations, is a product of early 1900's.

What is clear is that the official records - the records by which government goes - portray the villagers as playing almost no active role in the rescue, care, and hospitality of the Indentured Indian workers of Syria. Despite occasional references in McGregor's report of a majority of the villagers playing a huge role, the public projection by McGregor was that he was the hero without who the Indians would not have survived, while the indigenous people, except a few who were rewarded with cash or

medals, were defiant plunderers, stealing the belongings of Indian workers, meagre as they were, and uncaring of Indians in trouble at the very least.

Such a projection is not what would contribute to a positive image of the villagers in the minds of the wreck survivors, the indentured workers, and the indenture descendants generally.

The police reported purchase of stolen property from the ship by a European, as well as actual theft and plundering by the same European. Upon being visited by Police, the person agreed to return the property so stolen and purchased. There is no official statement on whether this was done, and what became of these goods. Nor is there any report on action taken against the plunderer; yet the report states that 'some natives will be prosecuted for stealing from the wreck' (CSO 1060/1884). There is no report in the *Fiji Times* at all of the plunder by this European, but a report on 'certain scoundrels from Noco' plundering from the wreck while bodies of the drowned were floating all over the reef (*Fiji Times*, 21 May 1884).

Only a day later (22 May), the investigating team lodged its report which confirmed that there was 'no evidence' to the charge of wrecking or stealing of goods as alleged by McGregor. The report also concluded that 'there could have been no Noco people present at the time stated viz Tuesday' (CSO 1060/1884). McGregor received the investigation report, yet did not correct the media report on native plunder of the ship, or of Noco people as plunderers. Nor did he amend his own official record on this. To the contrary, he dismissed this finding of the investigation team, writing on the report itself that the report showed 'very clearly how difficult it is to arrive at the truth in inquiries concerning natives' (CSO 1060/1884).

The *Suva Times* had expressed its dismay at the absence of any record in official reports on the rescue effort of the agent of the ship, this being, in its view, 'the first to make a start for the scene of the disaster'.

But there was no similar dismay at the absence of mention of the villagers in the rescue mission by the colonial administrators. In fact there was not even a word in the press on those who had already begun the rescue operation before McGregor or Cockburn even learnt of the disaster - the pilot who took the First Mate and his crew of 7 to Levuka, the villagers who immediately went out to the wreck on the night of the wreck, the villagers who took the ship's doctor from the wreck to Suva, those who saved at least dozens of passengers, the 'one or two canoes that were about' in which the eight or ten men left on a sand bank could possibly have reached the shore (CSO, 1884/1068), those who fed and cared for

the survivors and those who buried the dead.

There is also no mention of the action taken by the Administrator who saw the wreck from the Government House on Monday, yet not taking any action until that evening when a note was sent to McGregor through a boat captain.

The documents preserved in the National Archives - specifically the correspondences and documents of colonial government officers for the period May 1884 to June 1885, and the legislative council papers from 1884 to 1887 - show that the colonial regime was silent on any effort made at rescuing and caring of Indian workers by the indigenous. The only official history that there was to remain was that the ship survivors were rescued through the heroic effort of the Chief Medical Officer and the Acting Colonial Secretary Dr. William McGregor. People - colonial administrators, European settlers, Indian Indentured workers, and foreigners had to view the villagers, correspondingly, as nothing but either working only on the direct instructions of the colonial administrators in saving the passengers, and otherwise as plunderers of the bare minimum which the Indian labourers had brought with them. This was a part of the setting within which race relations in Fiji was evolving during the colonial period.

### Concluding Remarks

The official narrative of the rescue of the survivors from the wreck of Syria was penned by Dr. William McGregor. This narrative holds that a vast majority of the indentured workers were rescued by the rescue mission organised by him. No native played any leading or prominent role. Nor did any European other than Reverends Langham and Lindsay, play any role.

Yet written records held at the National Archives show that the villagers had not only started the rescue operations on the same night of the shipwreck, but that they had rescued dozens of people before McGregor had even left Suva with his rescue party. Colonial record keeping - ranging from the activities of various rescue parties, numbers rescued by different rescue parties, the names of those missing, burial details, the issuance of immigration pass numbers, and the numbers taken to the quarantine depot by 15 May - clearly was in an unacceptable mess during this period. But worse was the treatment in the official records of the role of the villagers in the rescue operations.

The absence of native involvement in the rescue, as per the official narrative, kept any discussion of 'natives rescuing Indians', or 'natives car-

ing for Indians', or natives on their own volition extending a hand of assistance and compassion, well out of the public domain. What this reinforced was the separateness of the two peoples - in good times, and in times of disasters. The silencing of native involvement in the Syria shipwreck, and the deliberate projection of them as looters and plunderers of items belonging to the Indian workers, contributed in no small measure to keeping the indigenous and the Indians separate during the indenture period, and to maintaining the ideology of racial divide for over 130 years now.

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