

Tomasi Vakatora's *From The Mangrove Swamps*
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Jone Dakuvula

This paper examines the autobiography of a prominent Fijian's life. Tomasi Vakatora was a prominent Fijian leader. An essay over a quarter of a century the publication of the autobiography would make greater sense if we attempted to contextualise his views in Fiji's present situation. This paper attempts to do this as well.

Tomasi Vakatora was involved in the foundation of some of Fiji's important national institutions such as the Fiji National Provident Fund, Fiji Electricity Authority, Ports Authority of Fiji, and. He was involved closely with the Alliance Party, Fiji's first government after independence.

Vakatora: Growing Up

Tomasi Vakatora was born in Navilaca Village, Noco Tikina, Rewa Province on 18 September, 1926. This village is surrounded by mangrove forest swamps. Within the traditional village social structure, he belonged to the 'Gonedau' or fisherman of the Chief, Tui Noco. His was a very traditional village upbringing where children respected and obeyed the words of their elders without question.

Very proud of his humble background, he had two brothers and two sisters. He learnt to be a fisherman, including trapping crabs like *mana* and *qari* – a traditional delicacy that the Rewa mangrove swamp people are well known for in the Suva and Nausori Markets. Fishing in the Rewa river swamps was quite arduous – it meant often waking up early before the tides came in. He hated his regular occupation as a child. Once more occasions than one, he survived sea accidents. Fish was an income earner; fishing was done collectively and the income shared, especially during

the busy fishing period before Christmas and New Year. Fish were cheap then – about 9 good sized fish for a shilling, equivalent to about \$5 today. But to avoid the daily chores of fishing – especially during the cold months - he would escape to Taci, his mother's village where as 'Vasu' he had greater freedom to roam around and consume whatever food was around - which could not be refused to him as a 'Vasu'.

In 1937 he reached Class 4, topping his class at Noco District School. He then was transferred to the Methodist Boys School in Toorak, Suva. This was a multiracial school; his horizon widened as for the first time he started to get to know Indo-Fijians and youths from other parts of Fiji.

In Suva, he lived with a cousin of his mother who was married to a man from Navatu, in Natewa Bay. It was a big house at the corner of Rewa and Ratu Mara Road where the BSP Bank in Samabula stands now. As the youngest of the lot, he was expected to make errands for all adult relatives from both sides of the family. They cooked food from firewood – mainly collected from Samabula North hills. The land belonged to Punjab Singh, the father of Gurmel Singh of the now Kundan Singh and Sons Limited; Singh had two vicious dogs who used to chase young firewood collectors like Vakatora. He also dug wild yams from the hill near Ruve Park. These areas are now concrete jungles.

Donnelly, a New Zealander, the headmaster of the Methodist School, was his mentor. He used to remind Vakatora, even when he began to hold senior positions in government to always 'remember that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Years later, as an adult politician, this was a warning he failed to remember in 1987 when he co-operated with the military coup of Sitiveni Rabuka that restored the defeated Alliance government of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

Vakatora learnt to be self-reliant as a primary school student. His father sometimes could not pay the 12 shilling a year school fee, so he used to work before and after the school, chopping firewood for the Chinese baker; as a garden boy to some of the European households, and doing odd jobs at the school to pay the school fees himself.

His village background, where he was expected to work hard, and his own experiences as a lone child putting himself through school up at Class 8, moulded this intelligent Fijian into the outstanding success that he was during the late colonial period and after independence of Fiji.

Adulthood, Military and Civil Service

Vakatora joined the Fiji infantry regiment after the outbreak of

World War 2. The Americans, supported by the New Zealand Armed Forces, had taken over many public institutions, like the area where Suva City Municipal Market is, QVS School in Nasinu (where Fiji National University now is), the Methodist Boys School and even Vakatora's village in Rewa as places needed for defence against the expected invasion by the Japanese. In 1945 one morning Vakatora heard that Japan had surrendered; there is no indication in the book of any information or awareness that the surrender came with the horrible and unnecessary dropping of Atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands. Vakatora was then 20 years of age. He was advised by the British Rehabilitation officer to join the new Teachers Training College based in Nasinu, to be a teacher.

In Nasinu, the students were influenced by a strike by the workers at the Emperor Gold Mines against Europeans because the 'tyrannical Head Teacher', Card Bay, had expelled two students for what Vakatora thought were trivial reasons. In 1948 he started as a Teacher, Grade V on seven pounds ten shillings a month salary, and was posted to Adi Maopa Government School in Lomaloma, Vanuabalavu. On a trip back to Suva on the copra boat, he had the terrifying experience of a hurricane with thirty foot waves pounding the ship mercilessly. They were fortunate to find shelter back in Lomaloma when the captain decided to turn the boat back. In the early 1950's Vakatora taught in Rewa Central School, Noco District School and Namalata in Kadavu. Through his playing for Rewa Football Club, he met his wife Wainiqolo; they married in March 1951. As a teacher he had ambitions to advance his education and applied for scholarship to study abroad, but met rejections. He was determined and even enrolled for an extra mural BA at Auckland University but did not complete the programme. Then in 1952 he decided to join the 2nd Battalion RFMF (Territorial) as a lance Corporal; he rose through the ranks up to the rank of major and was commissioned in 1958. He became ADC to the last two colonial governors, Sir Kenneth Maddocks and Sir Derek Jake-way.

He was restless to move up in the colonial world. In 1958, he had a change of career and joined the Labour Department as Inspector Class III. He travelled the country widely, inspecting working conditions, especially in the copra estates in Vanualevu and experienced dealing some with hostile European planters and other odd characters. Within 5 years he had impressed his Colonial masters and got rapidly promoted up to Class I Inspector with a salary of \$750 pounds a year. Then in 1959 he was sent to London to a training programme of the UK Ministry of Labour. He was lonely and homesick and returned early after he read about

the 'Riots in Paradise' – the workers strike led by Apisai Tora and James Anthony (1959).

He was promoted to Labour Officer branch in Lautoka – where he became familiar with Mr AD Patel, the representative of the Canegrowers Union.

He still had ambitious to further his education, and in 1961 he was awarded a scholarship to study at Ruskin College, Oxford. He met students from all over the world there. For him, Ruskin College was rife with politics with more students leaning towards the Labour Party. There were marches organized by students but he was not part of these – having joined the Oxford Territorial Unit. In the holidays he worked as a mail sorter at Islington General Post Office with young Fijian academic Dr Rusiate Nayacakalou. They joined a group of 19 students and visited France, Belgium and Holland. He returned to Fiji in 1965 and was promoted to Senior Labour Officer at an annual salary of £1,536. In the same year he was granted 144 days leave (accumulated over 5 years) and decided to take his wife and 2 daughters to the UK where his former Oxford Tutor helped them visit places of interest in London and Scotland. Upon his return he was promoted to Deputy Commissioner of Labour with the salary £2,541 per annum.

In this position he assisted in the establishment of the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) and the Employers Levy Grant Scheme that founded the Fiji National Training Council, now part of the Fiji National University as the National Training and Productivity Centre. His judgment that these were important social and economic reforms for Fiji as a new country was prescient, for these institutions still remain vital contributors to the livelihood of people and the Fijian economy, almost fifty years later. Obviously Fiji had benefited from having a social democratic Labour government in the UK at the time that supported these reforms on the eve of independence.

In 1969 Vakatora was promoted to the top position in the Labour Department as Secretary and Commissioner for Labour. He was involved in the preparation and drafting of new labour and immigration legislation in preparation for Fiji's political independence in 1970. Local senior civil servants had to take over from the British heads of department, many of whom either retired or went to Hong Kong when Fiji was granted independence. The period just before and after independence, Vakatora said, was strenuous for the new local heads of department. In 1972, he became Secretary for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Energy. In this position, he was involved in the establishment of the Ports Authority of Fiji, the negotiation for the transfer of the Suva City Council electricity

stations to the new Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA), and the renegotiation of a number of new air traffic agreements. In the setting up of the FEA, the Suva City Council was strongly opposed to the reform and the Fiji Government had to find an excuse to dismiss the whole Council so it could achieve the transfer of assets; this was a few years after Vakatora retired.

In 1974, Vakatora decided to retire at the age of 47 after 25 years in the civil service. He did not know what to do and decided after a week to establish Vakatora Ltd and bought a Chinese Catering business, 'Coconut Fronds' in De Veoux, going into the line of baking cakes, pies, scones, etc., that supplied schools and eating houses in Suva. It was a different experience from being a civil servant where, he observed, if you needed money you just filled in Treasury Application Forms. With the cooperation of his wife, children and employees, working 14 hours a day, he had three shops. It was difficult, he wrote, especially with old equipment, which was costly to repair.

Ram Swamy (a retired nurse) – then owner of Coconut Frond building refused to renew Vakatora's lease after 3 years but did not continue the business as he had indicated. His family was also mistaken that their lease at Morris Hedstrom would be renewed when it expired. But then Managing Director Lyle Cupit, refused renewal of the sub-lease. Jim Ah Koy also told them, the next day, he was selling the building and wanted them to move out. With nowhere else to move, they decided to close down the business. It was a bitter experience as they had just bought new baking equipment on a loan. Though he did not say, a hint there might have been a conspiracy against him as he was rising up in the world of business and politics. Vakatora seemed to have the experience and commitment to succeed in business but unfortunately there was no support from business people who could have helped him. Coconut Fronds became one of Jim Ah Koy's foundation businesses.

Politics

Vakatora's interest in politics began in Britain after some beers with some Fijian students in 1962. He became involved in the re-activation of the Fijian Association in 1964 and then the formation of the Alliance Party in 1966, but taking a low key role as he was then still a civil servant. In 1973 when he resigned from the public service, he became gradually more active. In the 1977 General Election he stood candidature against Sakeasi Butadroka in Rewa/Namosi Fijian Communal Seat. They were both from Rewa Province and Butadroka was the leader of the Fi-

jian Nationalist Party, formed after Butadroka had been expelled from the Alliance Party. Senior positions in the Public Service and the wealth of experiences did not count amongst Fijian voters. He observed: 'they wanted someone who told them things they wanted to hear even if those things were impossible to achieve'. Butadroka was a wily and persuasive politician. In some villages Vakatora found he was not accepted and even openly resented and abused. In his own village, his maternal uncle and a strong supporter of Butadroka told him to leave the Alliance and join Butadroka. Butadroka defeated him with a majority of 500.

He experienced for the first time defeat in an Election; he observed 'I was dejected and suddenly felt tired. With my supporters we went home with great sadness'. However, there was another General Election after 6 months, in September. In 1977 the National Federation Party that could not unite to form a government rapidly enough. Those were interesting times. The Fiji Times headlined its paper: '*Koya appointed Prime Minister*' only to withdraw it from circulation by mid-morning of the day. This time Vakatora knew where his support was weak and where the floating voters were, and he defeated Butadroka by a margin of 2000. He was appointed Minister for Transport, Tourism and Civil Aviation (his old Ministry) in Prime Minister Mara's re-elected Alliance Government. With his past experience, he reorganised the Ministry, dealt with various private sector interests, some of whom regarded him as uneducated and not capable of dealing with technical areas in aviation, shipping and tourism. He viewed the attitude of some of these Europeans from the Colonial days as 'archaic'. But he had a strong ally in his Permanent Secretary, Robert Dods, a local born European.

His account of his failed attempt to persuade the politicians from Samoa, Tonga, Nauru and Solomon Islands to have Air Pacific as a regional Airline with Pacific Governments as shareholders is interesting as a problem of dealing with political egos and national pride in the Pacific region, a persistent problem today in regional co-operation. Each country wanted to maintain or have their own airline. Fiji ultimately decided to run Air Pacific in terms of commercial interest which meant, modernising the fleet, negotiating metropolitan international routes beyond the Pacific islands. Regional co-operation came in reciprocal land rights and sector sharing arrangements with the Pacific Islands national airlines. As Minister he was also involved in the negotiation and handing over of the Nadi International Airport from the New Zealand controlled South Pacific Air Transport Council to the new Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF).

Vakatora was quick thinking and could take, and give, insults. Once he went to Paris to negotiate an Air Traffic Agreement and the head of

the French delegation, who had been speaking all day in perfect English, decided to speak in French when he hosted them for lunch. He did not understand French so he spoke in his Rewa dialect when he stood up to respond.

In shipping, Vakatora experienced local resentment from shipping interests in the establishment of the Ports Authority of Fiji. One individual told him it will be over his dead body for Scott Street was to be given to the PAF; the man remained alive when this process was completed.

For tourism, Vakatora appointed the first local businessman, Mahendra Patel, as Chairman of Fiji Visitors Bureau Board. He was critical of the Tour Fiji Tourism Industry Annual Conventions which were days of lavish eating, drinking and passing resolutions that were not actioned.

In the 1982 General Election, Vakatora again won his seat against Butadroka with a majority of 4,000. It showed that extremist ethno nationalism in Fiji was a minority, Vakatora believed, which could swing votes and upset elections only temporarily. But support for the Alliance was beginning to waver with seats reduced from 36 to 28. After the elections, Ratu Mara asked him to become the Speaker of the House. The NFP opposed his nomination and maintained this throughout his term. During one session then Opposition Leader, Jai Ram Reddy, refused to stand up to address the Speaker. Vakatora ordered him out of Parliament precincts. Reddy refused to leave and was escorted out by the Sergeant at Arms. After a while, the Opposition walked out and stayed out for two consecutive meetings but returned on the third to avoid automatic vacation of their seats. Jai Ram Reddy then resigned as leader of the Opposition and also from Parliament vowing he would never return there. He did return in 1987 as Attorney General under the FLP/NFP Coalition Government; this government lasted only a month when Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka overthrew it in the first Military Coup in Fiji on May 14, 1987.

Vakatora's observations about the role of Speaker are educational. He wrote that he would have preferred a Speaker who was not a Member of Parliament so the office could be above politics and non-partisan. Fiji paid no heed to this advice after the 2014 elections, where a Member of Parliament was appointed as the Speaker, who has remained subservient to the politicians who gave her political life.

In 1987, Ratu Mara decided to call a General Election 8 months before its term was due, probably because he thought the new Fiji Labour Party in coalition with the NFP was gaining political ground quickly, especially in the urban areas. With the results, Vakatora found a lot of 'aage-piche'; 'liumuri', or back-stabbing - Alliance Party election sheds

were packed, in contrast to the Labour-NFP sheds, especially in the Suva urban constituencies, but in most of these the Alliance candidates were defeated. Vakatora recognised that a lot of working and middle class people were attracted by the Labour NFP social reforms programme.

The Alliance loss and brought to an end two decades of Ratu Mara's leadership. For Vakatora, the Alliance had been a great party and Government that had brought a lot of developments in education, housing, health, roads, communication and rural facilities.

Post-1987 Elections

Vakatora's account of the seizure of the Timoci Bavadra led coalition government on May 14, 1987 is interesting as he was taken completely by surprise: He had rung the Alliance Leader, Ratu Mara, who was then attending a Conference at the Fijian Hotel in Yanuca and he said: 'I could tell that Ratu Sir Kamisese was stunned to hear the news'. A few minutes elapsed before he could speak to me again and he said we ought to wait until Col Rabuka returned to tell us what to do! In later years Rabuka claimed that Ratu Mara had known about these events before it happened. The next day Vakatora was invited to be a Member of Rabuka's Council of Ministers; he agreed. This lasted only a week as the Governor General; Ratu Penaia Ganilau had other plans. Vakatora believed fear of losing 'their rights and interests' motivated overwhelming support for the Coup.

In 1987, a committee to review the 1970 Constitution was formed. Surprisingly some of the members of the deposed government agreed to be members: Jai Ram Reddy, Tupeni Baba, Ratu Mosese Varasikete and Krishna Dutt. It held meetings around the country and received oral and written submissions. The Committee produced majority and minority Reports. The Majority Report supported changes to the Constitution while the Minority Report was for no change. The same year, a Council for National Reconciliation was formed in which the deposed government, led by the Party leader Dr Timoci Bavadra, was also represented. On 22 September, 1987, there was agreement at Deuba on principles and guidelines to form a Caretaker Government and another Committee to review the Constitution (the Deuba Accord). The guiding principles of the Deuba Accord are fully quoted in Vakatora's book.

Unfortunately, Col Sitiveni Rabuka staged another coup. For Rabuka, the Accords did not adequately meet the objectives of his earlier coup and the wishes of the Council of Chiefs. He wanted a Parliament dominated by iTaukei.

Vakatora believed that the Labour-NFP Coalition's refusal to be part of the post-September 1987 interim government imposed by Rabuka was unrealistic; so was their demand to be returned to power to complete their term. At the time, with the Deuba Accords rejected, the deposed Government realistically would not have changed the implacable mentality of the coup supporters.

It was tragic that this agreement was aborted in this way because it was a good model for resolving this kind of event. But Vakatora does not give us his view on this. The *National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCCBF)* formed in 2007 with the approval and support of coup leader, Voreqe Bainimarama, also tried to achieve reconciliation through a similar process. It was also aborted because of the desire of the coup leader and his interim government to remain in power and impose their own Constitution. In 1987 Rabuka imposed an ethno-nationalist Constitution. Fortunately in this, there was provision for its own review after 6 years, which ultimately resulted with overwhelming public support and unanimous agreement in Parliament, on its amendment leading to the 1997 Constitution. In 2013 Bainimarama also imposed his version of a 'non-racial Constitution'. This time, however, the progressive and visionary draft constitution that had been the outcome of public consultation was rejected. There is no provision for review of the new constitution; provision for amendments makes it effectively very hard to change it.

The Future

The last chapter of Vakatora's biography discusses the underlying cultural view of the i'Taukei on the ideal political future of Fiji as opposed to the secular democratic and individualistic view that Vakatora believed is represented by the Indo-Fijian dominated Labour and NFP. He quoted an extract from the late Professor Asesela Ravuvua's book '*Fijian Ethos*' to make this point: That if the non-i'Taukei citizens do not try to understand the i'Taukei cultural world view, which is reflected in their view of national politics, there will be further conflicts in the future.

Vakatora's biography was published in 1988. His conclusion can be seen to be relevant. The George Speight led coup of 2000, which overthrew another Labour Party led Coalition Government, may be testimony to this.

The late Tomasi Vakatora and Professor Asesela Ravuvu were idealist conservative Fijians who wanted to conserve traditional Fijian ethos of *veivakaturagataki* in the modern political system. This worked when Ratu Mara, the Cakobau's, and Ganilau led the Alliance Party in the

1960s and 70s. But in these time of uncertainty and instabilities, meritocracy rather than traditional i'Taukei cultural leadership needs to be prioritised.

In Vakatora's days merit seemed to have been combined with chiefly leadership of the Alliance Party. That does not seem to be the case now. For a start, one notices the current division and lack of leadership in the country. Even the opposition Party, SODELPA, shows vividly the problems of trying to let traditional chiefs lead politically when their vision, political leadership abilities, acumen and practical policies forming minds are challenged rather publicly by party Members of Parliament. The rivalries of the Vanua and Provinces have now emerged to rend opposition with paralysis and division. The i'Taukei in SODELPA, absorbed in their frustrating divisions consequently are unable to have serious dialogue with the Labour and National Federation parties who want unity in the SODELPA so serious dialogue towards coalition can happen.

It is an irony of history that the Fiji Labour Party's and National Federation Party's social democratic beliefs and programmes, based on co-operation, democracy and social justice, is the path that most i'Taukei should naturally support, given their position of weakness and perceived insecurity in Fiji. But at times of economic and political crisis, the social democratic parties that offer the better solution are distrusted and overthrown.

The lesson from Vakatora's fine little biography perhaps is the following: the need for real dialogue and reconciliation towards a better path forward for Fiji is forever current. If we are to learn from history, then Fiji urgently needs to move beyond the current situation of blocked dialogue based on fears and insecurity, towards genuine multi party co-operation and governance.

Author

Jone Dakuvula is the Chairperson of the NGO, Dialogue Pacific Ltd. He is the former (Foundation) Registrar of the Fiji National University.
email: jonedakuvula66@yahoo.com