NEITHER CARGO NOR CULT

RITUAL POLITICS AND THE COLONIAL IMAGINATION IN FIJI

MARTHA KAPLAN

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Ritual Politics and the Colonial Imagination in Fiji

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To my parents,

Lucille and Lawrence Kaplan

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PREFACE

Neither Cargo nor Cult

It would be a classic anthropological story if I told you that I went to Fiji expecting to study a cargo cult or millenarian movement, and while there discovered that cults do not exist. My story is perhaps less classic. Studying the anthropology and history of the early 1980s, including Marshall Sahlins's work on indigenous history-making and Bernard Cohn's insights on colonial societies, I began my research in Drauniivi village in 1984. I began this research in the home of the descendants of a man called Navosavakadua of "Tuka Movement" fame (see Worsley 1968, Burridge 1969), already skeptical about the general category of cargo cult. Do cults exist? Over the course of my research I have come to understand how they both do and do not.

Colonial officials and missionaries in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Pacific observed movements that came to be called "cargo cults." They wrote of Pacific people with millenarian (and sometimes anti-colonial) expectations who used magical means to get western things (hence the term "cargo" cult). Later, theorists of the cargo cult such as Peter Worsley and Kenelm Burridge were among the first anthropologists to grapple with issues of social change in a complex, connected decolonizing world. In defining or at least reinforcing the term as scholarly touchstone it is their contribution to have replaced earlier colonial and scholarly diagnoses of "native madness" with an

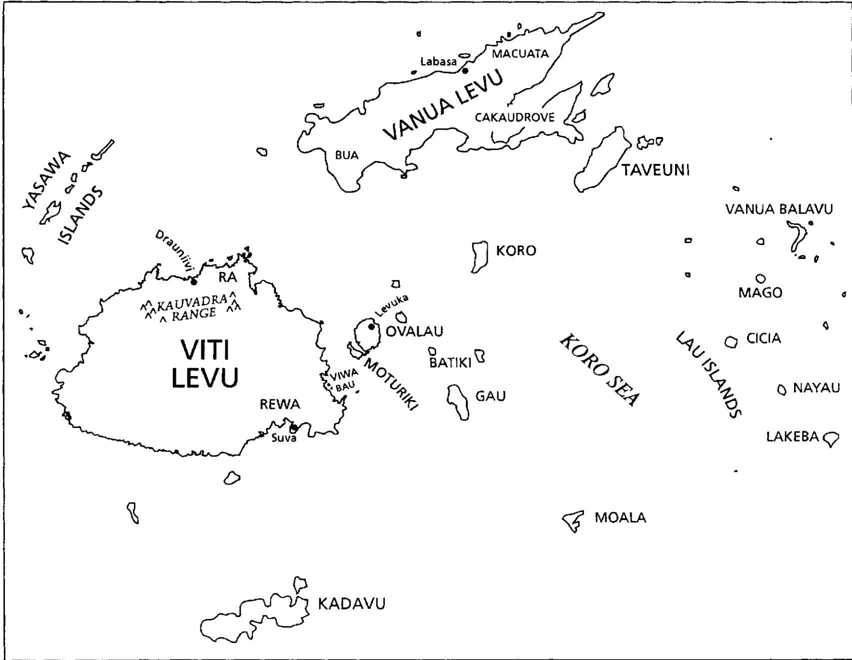

Figure 1. The Fiji Islands.

affirmative reading of the struggle of colonized people to make their histories. For Worsley the context of cults was political-economic, for Burridge a matter of access to moral redemption. Yet both theorists, and the cult literature more generally, accept unquestioned the notion that there *are* "cargo cults," or "millenarian movements," separate distinct phenomena, differing from mainstream social change. In the literature, the so-called cargo cults are often conceived to be moments of transition from one situation or stage to another (indigenous to western, magical to scientific, religious to political). Yet, before I went to Fiji I was skeptical, wondering why this should be so. Why was the political-religious history of Navosavakadua of Drauniivi marked as a "cargo cult" while the political-religious history of Fijian Christian conversion considered unremarkable? Why was Navosavakadua scrutinized as a political-religious "cargo cult" leader, while the ritual-political practice of Fiji's divine kings was taken for granted, even in their present-day transformations as parliamentary politicians? It seemed clear that the concept of cult itself, the bounded unnatural phenomenon, had its roots in colonial perceptions of the unexpected or unwelcome response to a trajectory of Christianization, "civil-

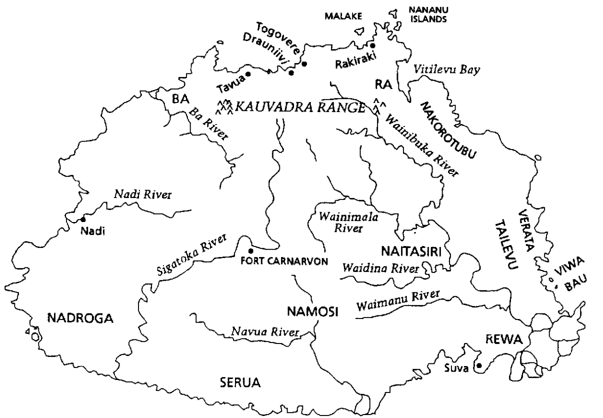

Figure 2. Viti Levu Island.

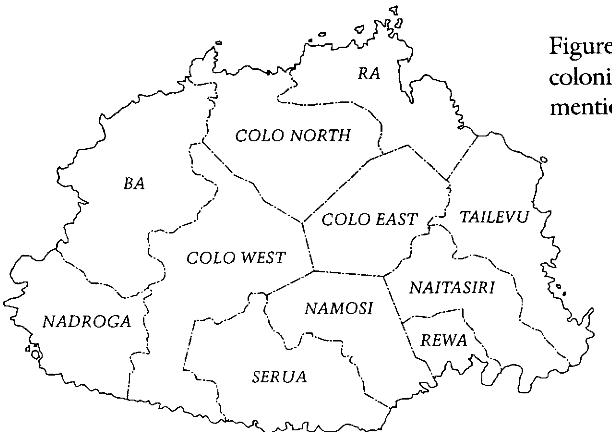

Figure 3. Viti Levu Island: colonial boundaries mentioned in text.

ization," or "westernization" that the colonizers conceived as natural and inevitable.

Other scholars have queried the concept of cargo cult in various ways. Most elegantly Nancy McDowell has suggested (paralleling Lévi-Strauss on totemism) that "cargo cults do not exist, or at least their symptoms vanish when we start to doubt that we can arbitrarily abstract a few features from context and label them an institution," and further that "as totemism did not exist, being merely an example of how people classify the world around them, cargo cults too do not exist, being merely an example of how people conceptualize and

experience change in the world" (1988:121–22) (see also Counts and Counts 1976, Fabian 1979, Fields 1985).

But if, from the beginning, I intended to avoid the colonial reification, to dissolve the concept of cult, to reconsider Navosavakadua and Tuka within the fabric of ongoing Fijian history-making, then my research "epiphany" was also to learn the importance of the one sense in which cults do exist. They exist not necessarily as Pacific or nonwestern phenomena but instead as a category in western culture and colonial practice. In Fiji I found "cults" to be real—and feared—in the official correspondence in the colonial archives, and even in the language of present-day official power. Cults and movements were "things" to colonial officers and have come down to us as such in their records and in administrative practice. On the one hand, as I had expected, the reified colonial category has shaped the scholarly literature, even, paradoxically, in the work of those scholars who contradicted the colonial vision of the activities as sinister or irrational. (One result of the scholarly generalizing and typifying, incidentally, was the overestimation of "cargo," the focus on goods prominent in some New Guinea cases. The desire for "cargo" through ritual means may have struck a special cord in the imagination of capitalist, and even self-consciously anti-capitalist, European observers, both colonial and scholarly. In Fiji, however, Tuka was never primarily about goods; Navosavakadua's project focused on issues of leadership, authority, and autonomy.) On the other hand, I came to find that in Fiji "cults," first imagined and then made real in British colonial practice, have sometimes, though not always, become real in indigenous practice and self-definition, through the influence of powerful colonial projects of inquiry and regulation (see also Foucault 1977, Ginzburg 1983). This is our topic: the dialogical making of a cult and its consequences, out of what began as neither cargo nor cult.

Research Settings

This study was intended specifically as both a historical and an ethnographic project. In consequence, in research in Fiji (six weeks preliminary travel in 1982, a year and a half in 1984–1985, six weeks in 1986, and two months in 1991) I have moved between Drauniivi village in hinterland Ra province and Suva the colonial and post-colonial capital city, and between events in the present and accounts (oral, archival, inscribed on the landscape) of and from the past.

Writing of Drauniivi, I have made no attempt to disguise the name of the

village, as it is situated already in a historical and scholarly record. (However, I have not used people's names except where they have specifically asked to be cited, or where they have made themselves publicly known, for example, in newspaper letters to the editor.) And this is no study of Fijian culture based on a village microcosm. Fijian villages themselves are highly heterogeneous—and Fijians themselves are currently at least 33 percent urban (1986 Fiji Census). But whether or not there is such a thing as a typical Fijian village, Drauniivi is certainly not one. Instead it is Drauniivi's unusual characteristics that should interest us. I believe much can be said about Fijian culture and history more generally, when approached from the hinterland perspective of "people of the land."

In the 1880s the name "Drauniivi" became notorious in the colonial record, associated with Navosavakadua and the Tuka movement. In the 1980s I learned to shift the analytic focus of my work from the colonially designated "Drauniivi people" to the history of the Vatukaloko people, the name by which the people currently resident in Drauniivi (and some nearby villages) call themselves. It is a *yavusa* name, a name that signifies common descent, ritual relationship, and a shared political history. It was the name that Navosavakadua and his kin used in the nineteenth century.

In 1984–1985 I lived in Drauniivi among the Vatukaloko people, for seven months spread out over a period of thirteen months. When I was not in the village, I was mainly in the capital city of Suva, sometimes with Vatukaloko relatives who were staying in the city, most often reading at the archives. In the village I lived with a family and participated in ongoing village activities: household tasks, village work, church services, a wide range of rituals, village meetings, preparations to receive visits to the village of local and national dignitaries. I accompanied members of my Fijian family on visits to relatives in other parts of Viti Levu island, to the annual Methodist Conference, to the Ra provincial fundraising festival, etc. I made special trips to meet and talk to knowledgeable custodians of local history in Ra. Throughout my time in Fiji I talked about Navosavakadua with his descendants and with others. In Drauniivi and environs, among the Vatukaloko people, I heard of and observed the ways in which Navosavakadua manifests himself in the lives of his Vatukaloko descendants today. I tape-recorded lengthy accounts of his genealogy, life, and miracles, told by generally acknowledged specialists in local history. I have learned much as well from a lively newspaper debate about Navosavakadua which appeared in 1984–1985 in the Fijian-language newspapers *Nailalakai* and *Siga Rarama*. The articles and letters, claims and rejoinders in this exchange were written by Fijians in debate with one another over their history

and their present. In 1986 I visited several nineteenth-century village sites, one of which, Vale Lebo, was built by Navosavakadua. With Vatukaloko sponsors and an archaeologist colleague, I learned more about Navosavakadua's project in the course of surveying and mapping and long conversations about the cosmological landscape where Vale Lebo is situated. In 1991 I returned to Fiji — my first visit after the military coups of 1987 — to learn more about ritual and politics on the national political scene, and to learn more about how the Vatukaloko people continue to view their past and make their history in the hinterlands.

Equally important in the research is the work in Suva. There, in the capital, I attempted to see archives and the documents they house not simply as sources, but as sites and vehicles of the establishment and practice of official power. Of course when I read colonial minute papers about Navosavakadua and "the Tuka" I learned much about Fijian projects and categories. But I learned even more about colonial concepts of order and disorder, and the making of the Tuka cult in British colonial imagination. I also learned much about Fiji's colonial and post-colonial history by considering the archives as a field site, by considering the way the papers and artifacts were housed and organized in the National Archives of Fiji, at the archives of the Native Lands Trust Board, and at the archives of religious organizations, by charting the processes through which I and others were allowed or denied access to documents and following the current use of records in political practice in the post-colonial nation.

Finally, outside of Drauniivi and outside of the archives I learned of others in 1980s Fiji who sought to mobilize Navosavakadua's name and *mana*. In my research I also inquired into contesting narratives of Navosavakadua, interviewing and observing other Fiji citizens, including an Indo-Fijian visionary with his own version of Navosavakadua's significance in Fiji's past and present. There has been no single dominant truth about Navosavakadua and Tuka. Neither his descendants among the Vatukaloko people, nor colonial officials, nor scholars, have completely controlled the story of his life, though some among them have tried to do so. Thus I have come to think of this research and this book, at least in part, as a history of struggles to make and remake a sign.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Above all I thank the people of *yavusa* Vatukaloko of Drauniivi village and their relatives in Ra and elsewhere in the islands for their *loloma* and for the opportunity to begin to learn from them about their remarkable ancestor and their special history. Most specially I warmly thank Epeli and Mere Nauwa and all the family at Kabukilagi for their kindly love. I warmly thank Jone Tuiwai, Turaga ni Koro retired, for sharing with me his extensive knowledge of history. I thank his family for their patience and kindness. I offer my gratitude to the Tui Vatu and the people of *mataqali* Nasi, Wakalou, Nakubuti, and Nasaro for all their hospitality and for teaching me so much. My warm thanks also to former Head Teacher at the Drauniivi Public School Aseri Waqa and the late Nani Waqa for introducing me into the village, and also to former manager at Yaqara John Fatiaki and Fane Fatiaki for guidance and hospitality. My thanks go as well to Vika Kidi Tagivuni for assistance in translation and especially to Vasiti Ritova for assistance in translation and for sharing her knowledge in so many other aspects of the research.

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To my teachers, relatives, friends and colleagues—and especially to the Vatukaloko people—I offer thanks for what I have learned, and I acknowledge my responsibility for misunderstandings, errors, and things I have yet to learn.

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1

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, HISTORY, AND COLONIALISM

Agency and Meaning in Colonial History

What shapes the lives of colonized people? Is their agency a product of indigenous cultural systematics, rejecting, encompassing, transforming external change? Or is colonial power the prevailing force in their lives; do they respond to, react to, resist incursion, in an agency already therefore shaped by colonial hegemonic structures? How are anthropologists to understand encounters, conjunctures, domination, asymmetries of power, beyond first contact moments into the complex societies of a connected colonial and postcolonial world? How, in particular, can we rethink a part of Fijian colonial history previously called a cargo cult?[1]

In establishing our rapprochement with history, it seems to me that anthropologists have used three analytic strategies to write about agency, meaning,

1. For readers unfamiliar with the very term "cargo cult," consider these quotations from a famous essay by F. E. Williams, an administrator-anthropologist in New Guinea in the 1920s and 30s.

> During the latter months of the year 1919 there began in the Gulf Division that singular and really important movement known as the Vailala Madness.
>
> Originating in the neighbourhood of Vailala, whence it spread rapidly through the coastal and certain of the inland villages, this movement involved, on the one hand, a set of preposterous beliefs among its victims — in particular the expectation of an early visit from their deceased relatives — and, on the other hand, collective nervous symptoms of a sometimes grotesque and idiotic nature. . . .

and colonial history. One strategy insists on the priority of cultural difference. Here the concept of culture and cultural difference, the preeminent contribution of anthropology to the social sciences, is invoked to shape accounts both of indigenous change and of indigenous apprehension of external incursion. One leading example is Marshall Sahlins's "structure and history" including his recent work on the multiple cosmologies driving the capitalist world system (1981, 1985, 1988, 1992). Another example is David Lan's (1985) account of the agency of spirit mediums in the guerilla war to liberate Zimbabwe. This approach produces narratives which insist upon local categories of meaning and local agency for an understanding of encounters with the world system or colonizing peoples.

In contrast, a second analytic strategy sees colonial power as the overwhelming tension-charged historical watershed forever changing the world of the colonized. Here colonial societies are understood to be products of the agency of external transformative dominators, and colonized people can emerge again as agents in their own right only as colonized, local, already transformed, resisters. Instances of this approach include world system scholars such as Eric Wolf (1982) who find transforming agency in capitalist penetration, and also studies which, influenced by Foucault or Gramsci, focus on discourse and particular (here colonial) systems of meaning and practice beyond the realm of political economy narrowly defined — law, literature, sexuality — that dominate and transform (see, e.g., Cohn 1987, Said 1978, Stoler 1989). For many such scholars the emphasis is on colonial constructions of others, especially those accounts which find any scholarship concerning "others" so intricately implicated in western categories or in the mechanisms of colonial domination that concepts of "culture" and "cultural difference" themselves become artifacts of colonial categorizing (Said 1978, and see, e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986).

A third strategy finds a space in between insistence on cultural continuity and insistence on colonial transformation. As figured in Michael Taussig's (1987) recent work on terror, that space is chaotic: neither indigenous nor

---

> Perhaps one of the most fundamental ideas was that the ancestors, or more usually the deceased relatives, of the people were shortly to return to visit them. They were expected in a large steamer, which was to be loaded with cases of gifts — tobacco, calico, knives, axes, food-stuffs, and the like. (Williams 1977:331–41)

From such depictions came the general term "cargo cult." In this book it is my intention to challenge the very idea that this is a general phenomenon or a useful analytic concept (see preface, this volume).

colonial but an "epistemic murk" in between. The epistemic murk extends from participants to chroniclers. In Taussig's view such spaces almost defy portrayal, since even counterrepresentations and counterdiscourses risk replicating colonizer's discourses; montage and incompleteness are the techniques he uses to represent the chaotics he finds.

Establishing a strategy for writing a colonial history—as an anthropologist—is not a hypothetical question here. I want to begin with four narratives out of Fiji's past and present: a colonial official's essay, a present-day Fijian's recollection of an ancestor, a brief reconstruction of what I think Navosavakadua might have intended, and a cosmological history by an Indo-Fijian[2] visionary mystic. In their disjunctures and interrelations lie the problems I want to address.

Intersecting Narratives: Navosavakadua or the Tuka?

A Colonial Officer's Narrative of Tuka

In 1891 John Bates Thurston, British colonial governor of Fiji from 1888 to 1897, asked A. B. Joske,[3] irrepressible memoirist and commissioner and magistrate in the hill districts and Ra province, to summarize "the movement" in an article for *The Australasian,* a Sydney-based newspaper. I excerpt from this article:

Superstition in Fiji

> In the country round about Kauvadra, the Mount Olympus of Fiji, there seems to have been always prevalent a superstition called by the natives the "Tuka," the priests of which professed to possess an elixir of life. . . .
>
> The first historical knowledge of it was about 30 years ago, when, owing to the spread of Christianity, the natives of different districts became able to have freer intercourse with one another [due to the cessation of warfare]. About then Saro Saro, a high priest of the "Tuka," gave a good deal of trouble to the late King Cakobau . . . [and was eventually] put to death by his tribal chief.

2. In different historical periods the people of Fiji descended from South Asian indentured laborers have been known as "Indians," "Fiji Indians," and "Indo-Fijians." I follow historian Brij Lal (e.g., 1992) in using "Indo-Fijian."

3. Adolph Brewster Joske later changed his name to A. B. Brewster, and as Brewster published *The Hill Tribes of Fiji* (1922) and other works on Fiji.

However, Saro Saro left a descendant, said to be his son — one Dugamoi — who, engrafting his native legends and superstitions on the Biblical narratives compounded a new Tuka. . . . [Dugamoi] established a great reputation among the followers of the "Tuka" as a high priest and prophet who gave him the title of "Na Vosa va Ka dua" [sic] literally, the man who speaks only once and must be obeyed. The Chief Justice of the colony . . . holds this title of honor amongst Fijians.

Dugamoi first came prominently into notice about the end of the year 1877. He then made a tour through the least civilized portions of Viti Levu [the main island of the Fiji group], predicting a millennium when all who died as faithful votaries of the faith would rise again, and aided by divine powers sweep all unbelievers from the face of the earth. . . .

The people of the eastern highlands of Fiji, partially conquered under King Cakobau's reign, closely related to those of the eastern highlands, who in 1876 had been in revolt against British authority, and who during that trying period had been with great difficulty kept steady, became very uneasy and excited, and to secure absolute peace Na Vosa va Ka dua had to be . . . deported to one of the eastern islands of the group, but after a short period of detention he was allowed to return to his home.

Again he started to preach his new and improved version of the "Tuka" supplementing native legends with what he found in the Bible. These doctrines have gradually spread over the northern coasts and eastern highlands of Fiji. . . . In the year 1885 Na Vosa va Ka dua began to have men drilled. Although the new reign of the "Tuka" was to be ushered in by the miraculous assistance of the gods, probably soldiers were thought to be a useful, if not necessary adjunct. No doubt Na Vosa va Ka dua aimed at the overthrow of the British Government in the group and the extinction of the Christian religion and of the white settlers. The drilling of troops speedily came under the notice of the authorities and warrants under the English statute prohibiting illegal drilling were issued. At first, these warrants were resisted, but after a brief period of anxiety to the authorities the ringleaders were secured without bloodshed. The chief prophet, Na Vosa va Ka dua, was exiled to Rotumah [a small island outside the Fiji group, which the British colonized and administered from Fiji] and others were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.

With the removal of the leader and prime spirit of this movement it was thought that the fanaticism would die out a natural death, but there remained many priests of the "Tuka" who found that the steady spread of Christianity and progress of settled government interfered materially with the revenue they formerly derived from the simple credulity of their fellow countrymen. These men during the present year stirred up a vigorous revival of the "Tuka." They predicted the re-appearance of Na Vosa va Ka dua exalting him into a divine personage whom the foreign Government had in vain endeavored to kill. . . .