

CAKOBAN'S SISTERS: STATUS, GENDER AND POLITICS IN FIJI

Viviane Cretton

Gender Relations Centre, RSPAS, The Australian National University/
University of Lausanne, Switzerland

© 2004 Viviane Cretton

Working Paper No. 11

ISSN: 1447-5952 (pbk); 1835-6133 (online)

This work is copyright. Apart from those uses which may be permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 as amended, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Permission should be sought from the author: E-mail <viviane.cretton@ias.unil.ch>

Following the 2000 coup d'état in Fiji, more than thirty parliament members were taken hostage for nearly two months. At the end of the hostage crisis, Adi¹ Litia Cakobau called for a meeting of all the chiefs of Fiji, the *Bose ni Turaga*. Adi Litia Cakobau was the deputy chairperson for the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) at that time.² At the end of the hostage crisis, the chiefs met in Suva on the 12th of July. A special guest chaired the *Bose ni Turaga*: Adi Samanunu Cakobau, who is Adi Litia's eldest sister. Being High Commissioner for Fiji in Malaysia, Adi Samanunu came especially from Kuala Lumpur to attend the meeting. At the end of the meeting people from Naitasiri—a province involved with supporting the coup and which also traditionally engaged in warfare for the Cakobau—presented her with a ceremony of apology, a *matanigasau*, on behalf of all the people behind George Speight, the visible leader of the coup. Offering her a *tabua*—that is, the tooth of a whale—they asked all the chiefs in Fiji to forgive the violence, troubles and the civil conflict engendered by the coup. The following day the remaining hostages were released.

Tabua to be reserved for men

First, I should note here that Fijian tradition includes a range of ceremonies of reconciliation (*i soro*) with rituals performed according to the type of offense

committed. *Matanigasau* was in earlier times the ritual employed to seek forgiveness in cases of negligence in carrying out official duties, which today involves the presentation of a *tabua* (Capell 1991:202). According to current usage, the *matanigasau* is a ceremony, which aims to restore peace and harmony to the heart of the *vanua* (land and its inhabitants, understood here as the most extended family group). Other ceremonies of pardon also exist, such as the *bulu bulu*, in cases of injury, particularly in cases of rape or domestic violence.

Often held to be of sacred origin, the *tabua* has a strong symbolic significance in Fiji. Considered to be “the highest form of Fijian wealth offered to the most powerful being” (Ravuvu 2000:1), *tabua* is mostly exchanged between men. Sahlins (1962:137) earlier divided domestic wealth into two categories, male goods and female goods, with *tabua* belonging to the first category. This gender distinction was confirmed from various interviews I conducted in 2000 and 2002. A close Fijian female friend working for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) told me:

It’s usually the men who are doing the presentation who hold the *tabua*. It’s hardly a woman. But in such cases where there is a province, or *tikina*, where the woman is a chief, she will have a sort of spokesman, and that spokesman will act on her behalf. Like she’ll receive it and she’ll give it to the spokesman, and the spokesman will do the presentation. He will speak on her behalf. (Interview with Mere, secretary, UNDP, Suva, 15 August 2002)

According to my male and female interlocutors, it might be exchanged between women, *if* no men take part in the assembly. But such exchanges seem to be the privilege of chiefly women, as one of my colleagues at the Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS) in Suva told me:

I guess only women from chiefly rank can receive a *tabua*. Otherwise, if a woman has to be involved in any presentation, she will ask a man—a relative—to do the presentation for her. ... because within the traditional way women are not involved with those ceremonies. (Interview with Georgi and Miri, IPS, Suva, 30 July 2002)

From these perspectives, how should we understand the *tabua* that was presented to Adi Samanunu, one of the highest chiefly women in Fiji, by a group of men—as a sign of apology for the troubles caused during the coup? I suggest that part of the answer to this question lies in the role of the Cakobau sisters during the coup and their distinctive position.³

In order to analyze the complexities of gender issues in Fiji, I propose to borrow an analytical tool from Leckie, who derives the notion of “série” or “seriality” from Sartre (Leckie 2002). Following Leckie’s idea of “degrees of adherence to a series,” such as gender, ethnicity and class, Fijian women would identify themselves with the common category of “woman,” but they would also define themselves according to a diverse series, such as ethnic, traditional or religious identities (ibid.). Here, I suggest that the identification of “tradition” appears to be particularly relevant to gender in Fiji. More specifically, I hope to show how, sometimes, the seriality of rank hierarchy or ethnicity can be a crucial dividing line between women in Fiji.

The privileges of high ranked women

The Cakobau sisters descended from Ratu Seru Cakobau, a high chief from Bau, who was called Tui Viti, the “King of Fiji.” He lived from 1815 to 1883 and ceded Fiji to Great Britain in 1874. As such, the two sisters descend from one of the highest chiefly titles in Fiji, the Tui Kuba, a title that is at present vacant. They both benefit from a prestige and social standing that ordinary women do not possess. The privileges of high ranked women are historically linked to the *vanua* (land) in Fiji. According to Tuivaga (1988:4), only high ranked women were treated differently from other women in the Fijian society. Bolabola (1986:13) suggests that in the past, chiefly women benefited from more rights and access to the land than commoner women. For instance, unlike other women, they were allowed to cross tracts of “sacred” land under *tabu*, without being questioned or stopped. These kinds of privileges belonging to high-ranking women are recognized across the Pacific (cf. Linnekin 1990).

When rank takes over gender

In my thesis I demonstrate how patrilineality and rank hierarchy was reinforced during the British colonization in Fiji (see also Leckie 2002), especially through the ownership of land and through titles, given by birth. Bolabola (1986:4) pointed out that customs and traditions, in general, have been broadly redefined by men in Fiji. For the lawyer Jalal (1997), women’s lack of power in pre-colonial time has been perpetuated in “modern” society, through legitimation of customary law. In the everyday practices of Hawai’i, Linnekin (1990:230) suggested that social differentiation between chiefs and

commoners was more relevant than gender. Ancient rank in Hawai'i was more important than gender (1990:231). That was also and is the case for Fiji.

Taking into consideration the status of the women, usually, entails considering a comparison to men's status (Linnekin 1990:231). Thus, in talking about the Cakobau sisters in Fiji, we must understand their role, politically and ritually, vis-à-vis the role of their brothers, or half-brothers, and other chiefs. This entails a consideration of relations of conflict, inside and outside kinship relations, and the personal ambitions of individuals, with their ability to activate ancient networks or create new ones. Being the eldest of the Mataiwelagi lineage—one of the two lineages in Bau—Adi Samanunu Cakobau is potentially the heiress of Tui Kuba, the highest title in Bau and in the confederacy or *matanitu* of Kubuna. Here, ancestry takes precedence over sex to define the succession.

During the coup, as supporter of the SVT (*Soqosoqo ni Vakavatuwa ni Taukei*) party, the Cakobau sisters publicly legitimated George Speight. I understand their socio-cultural status to be a mix of cultural inheritance, political affiliation and personal involvement. This mix is central to their role in contemporary politics, an arena heavily dominated by men (Jalal 1997; Bolabola 1986:4–6). To put it briefly, among the 19 ministers elected in August 2001, all indigenous Fijians or native from Rotuma, only two women hold seats in Parliament of Fiji.⁴ Amongst the seven ministerial assistants, only two are women.⁵

The lawyer Jalal (1997:85) showed that Fijian women access politics more easily than Indo-Fijians, because they can activate kinship and exchange networks and their ties with chiefly power. Regarding the Great Council of Chiefs, for another example, amongst 43 representatives from the 14 provinces, 3 of them were women in 2001, all with chiefly titles. That was not automatically the case of the male representatives, who did not all possess a chiefly title. Of course, the under-representation of women in politics is not specific to Fiji.⁶ Yet, Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase's policy, after his election in 2001, illustrates one of the possible uses of the idea of "indigeneity," through legitimating a government dominated both by men and Fijians said to be "indigenous." Ethnicity and gender can entail similar processes of discrimination (Galissot 2000), especially when it comes to the issue of political power or social position.

Resorting to tradition to be distinguishable from the global

When I met Adi Litia Cakobau before the coup d'état in her office of the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* (Great Council of Chiefs) in Suva, she assured me with great conviction, that women in the village, in general, have more rights than we thought:

It is wrong to believe that women cannot express themselves in the village. It does exist—meetings and specific occasions where they can express their wishes and express their rights. Maybe too often those women do not use properly those opportunities because they are afraid but those opportunities do exist and I am telling it. (Interview with Adi Litia Cakobau, vice-president of the Great Council of Chiefs, Suva, 21 March 2000)

Whereas Adi Litia Cakobau stresses that “the Human Rights are a western ideology ... that does not accord with our (Fijian) traditional rights” (*Daily Post* 08/09/03), other women in Fiji—who fight for promoting women’s rights and sexual inequalities—told me that traditional rights are nowadays abused by some individuals, especially in rape cases. The Fiji Women Crisis Centre in Suva (FWCC), for instance, deals with some situations where rapists try to avoid any legal punishment by using the traditional form of asking for forgiveness, through *bulu bulu*. For Edwina Kotoisuva from the FWCC that is clearly a manipulation of culture:

... historically it was never used in that way. ... If we will look at what traditionally was done, it was never used to free the offender off his crime ... this is just an abuse of culture. ... Yes, yes, definitely, abuse of culture if it is used to free the perpetrator of his crime and to try make it like a sort of they drop the case in the legal proceeding and everything else, you know, this is definitively an abuse of culture. (Interview with Edwina Kotoisuva, FWCC, Suva, 12 August 2002)

A priori, the respective positions of somebody like Adi Litia Cakobau and the female activists of the Fiji Women’s Rights Centre seem separate and opposed. On the one side, we would find the indigenous traditionalists and, on the other side, the feminist modernists who would be more or less “westernized.” Nevertheless, both these visions mutually construct each other. Both visions are interconnected and imbricated. They highlight the multiple and divergent female modernities, at the heart of a globalized and globalizing world (Hilsdon et al. 2000:24). In relation to the production of locality (Appadurai 1996:178–199), Human Rights, for instance, cannot be simply perceived to be a set of western, liberal, universal and modernist imports. Recent campaigns were produced and reinvented locally in dialogue with a long history of ideas about human rights, such as equality, justice and democracy (Hilsdon et al. 2000:24). In other words,

reducing the claims of the South Pacific feminists to a one-way process of “westernization” would under-estimate local specificities and indigenous idioms. Simultaneously, to identify the claims of indigenous women of the South Pacific to a process of general “opposition” to democracy would be also simplistic. From my view, the nationalist ideas of a person like Adi Litia Cakobau can be seen from a perspective, which does not automatically conflict with the Western conception of democracy. As she told me,

most decisions are taken in the village. We, in the Great Council of Chiefs, are not doing anything but facilitating the process. All our discussions are taken by consensus, that is our traditional way to proceed. What you call democracy is not something new for us. That is our way of life in the village. According to our customs, we follow the consensual way. When there is no consensus, then we report the debate. Nobody will ever stand up to talk. Everybody sits and talks according to our custom.⁷ (Interview with Adi Litia Cakobau, vice-president of the Great Council of Chiefs, Suva, 21 March 2000)

Jolly (2000) has suggested that some feminists in the Pacific have embraced the position of the “mother,” to better distinguish themselves from what is perceived to be an “anti-family” tendency within western feminist or anti-colonialist movement. Kilani (1994) had also observed a similar process apropos the wearing of the veil, in France, with some young Islamic women wearing the veil not because they are positioning themselves as extremist followers but because they want to differentiate themselves, culturally and intellectually at least, from a certain western religious melting-pot. From this perspective, “traditional” values or “customary” rights appear to be specific tools in contemporary space, for claiming identities.

Conclusions

In Sahlins’ sense, as potential successor for the Tui Kuba’s title, Adi Samanunu embodies a historic cultural category. Her participation in the *Bose ni Turaga*, as a special guest, contributed to the happening of the event and notably to the release of the hostages. As a woman, Adi Samanunu personifies a non-ordinary “traditional” authority, with the potential to strengthen her political and symbolic power through her high chiefly rank and through her political and familial networks. While embodying a potent and elevated Fijian *mana* (divine power, efficacy) Adi Samanunu also embodies

different identities, derived not just from traditional rank but also from ethnicity and gender—and this aids her role in politics.

Thus, local strategies allow a distinction of the Fijian self from the global mass associated with the Western world, especially Europe and the United States but also Australia and New Zealand. Yet such strategies stress the similarities or the differences within the groups *and* between some generic notions, such as tradition *versus* democracy. I suggest in conclusion that we should consider local female identities in politics as sets of strategies being constructed sometimes *with* and sometimes *against* the global flux. That is a process that creates diverse compositions of identity within the locality itself.

Notes

¹ Chiefly title for women.

² To put it briefly, the GCC was a colonial creation in about 1875. It is today commonly acknowledged, by Fijian leaders and villagers alike, to be “the most important traditional body” whose role “is to protect Fijian customs and to defend [them from] any bastardization of the culture” (interview with Ratu Epeli Ganilau, chairman of the GCC, 8 August 2002). The *Bose ni Turaga* or Council of Chiefs is different, as it is not institutionalized. But it can gather the chiefs of Fiji for extraordinary events. The last time that such a Council met was following the 1987 coups.

³ Another important one lies in the kinship relationships closely tied with the political involvement of individuals.

⁴ Ro Temumu Kepa, Minister for Education, and Asenaca Caucau, Minister for Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation.

⁵ Marieta Rigamoto, Assistant Minister, Prime Minister’s Office, and Losena T. Salabula, Assistant Minister for Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation.

⁶ I am talking about a country said to be one of the most democratic across the world, i.e. my own country, Switzerland, where women were given the right to vote in 1971 (Appenzell’s canton in 1990!).

⁷ Here I do not take for granted the idea of “consensus”—that has to be questioned, of course. Rather, this quotation shows how in politics individuals can use rhetorical tools to legitimate different values.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bolabola, Cema. 1986. "Fiji: Customary constraints and legal progress." In *Land Rights of Pacific Women*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1–67.
- Capell, A. 1991. *The Fijian Dictionary*. Suva, Fiji: Government Printer.
- Daily Post*. 2003. "Human rights are a western ideology." Suva, Fiji, 8/9.
- Galissot, R., M. Kilani, and A. Rivera. 2000. *L'imbroglia ethnique en quatorze mots clés*. Lausanne: Payot.
- Hilsdon, Anne-Marie, Martha Macintyre, Vera Mackie, and Maila Stivens (eds). 2000. *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jalal, Imrana P. 1997. "The status of Fiji women and the constitution." In Brij Lal and Tomasi Rayalu Vakatora (eds) *Fiji in Transition*, vol. 1. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 80–104.
- Jolly, Margaret. 2000. "Woman ikat raet long human raet o no ? Women's rights, human rights and domestic violence in Vanuatu." In A.-M. Hilsdon, M. Macintyre, V. Mackie and M. Stivens (eds) *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge, 124–146.
- Kilani, Mondher. 1994. *L'invention de l'autre*. Lausanne: Payot.
- Leckie, Jacqueline. 2002. "The complexities of women's agency in Fiji." In Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang (eds) *Gender Politics in the Asia-Pacific Region*. London and New York: Routledge, 156–180.
- Linnekin, Jocelyn. 1990. *Sacred Queens and Women of Consequences: Rank, Gender, and Colonialism in the Hawaiian Islands*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ravuvu, Asesela. 2000. "Fijian chiefly ceremonies." Teaching seminar paper. Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1962. *Moala: Culture and Nature on a Fijian Island*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Tuivaga, Jessie. 1988. "Fiji." In Tongamoa Taiamoni (ed.) *Pacific Women: Roles and Status of Women in Pacific Societies*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1–21.