



# Missed opportunities or limits to work on land issues on Lakeba, Fiji? Facts, examples and reasons

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Missed opportunities or limits to work on land issues on Lakeba, Fiji?

Facts, examples and reasons.

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A lot of Lakeba's written « history » is taken for granted. But when you know that, for example, Hocart (1929 :43) claims that only the nobles of Tubou can give him information, that Reid considers that the oral tradition, as it is transcribed in the Tukutuku Raraba ko Yavusa Lakeba under the control of the NLC, that is to say in 1938/9 under the control of Ratu Sukuna, is unproblematic and uses it as if it is telling only real facts, that Scarr (1983 :257) published Ratu Sukuna's journal without any critical annotations, then you realise that to take it for granted would show a lack of critical faculty. In Lakeba, it is clear that the words of some people have more value than other's according to their place in history and not to their real knowledge. But then the question is: Where does Lakeban history starts? Does it start with the emergence of the actual chiefly line ? How do we access previous knowledge, and how do we analyse it ? Relations between the vanua, the turaga and the land change through time and they are inscribed in the landscape, in the rituals, etc. But the ethnography is seldom pushed as far as possible. Why ?

Let me make a broad outline:

- The first basic item to know is that the chiefdom of the Vuanirewa officially started around the end-1700s. The official second chief

has seen life the arrival of the missionaries, the arrival of Ma'afu and the Cession of Fiji.

- Second: Ma'afu, in order to collect taxes, divided the land of Lakeba according to status whether the person was Fijian or Tongan. And of course to the detriment of the former landowners
- Third: The NLC of 1903 decreased the landrights of the Tongans who at Ma'afu's time received nearly half of the land. The land taken from the Tongans went to Vatuwaqa and Korocumu, two mataqali or tokatoka of the chiefly yavusa.
- Forth: in 1913, Maxwell, the Native Lands Commissioner, admits that Ma'afu trampled on native customs by allotting use of land to persons who were not members of the *bati ni lovo*. He recommends that the land divided by Ma'afu becomes land in hereditary usufruct and not land « owned » by those who received it from Ma'afu.
- Fifth: Even if Ratu Sukuna's father was from Bau, he registered himself in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* as a member of the mataqali Matalakeba, the High Chief's mataqali of Lau, which he could do because his mother was the Tui Nayau's sister,

In 1938/39, Ratu Sukuna came to Lau as the Native Lands Commissioner. The Tukutuku Raraba ko Yavusa Lakeba was written down under his influence while swearing on oath was carried out, so that whatever had been decided was binding. And it is clear that the NLC's decisions going together with this version of the so called Lakeban history continue to bear relevance in the actions and discussions of Lakebans today.

In fact, before Ratu Sukuna's work in the NLC, there was not such a thing as a yavusa Lakeba, but there were 9 different yavusa on the Island. Some had a common history for some decades or centuries, others not. Ratu Sukuna did 3 very important things. The first is obvious when you read his Journal; he decided that the mataqali will be the proprietary unit, which Maxwell (1913), the former Native Lands Commissioner claimed for the *bati ni lovo* or *tokatoka*. Then he decided to move some *tokatoka* from one *mataqali* to another, but leaving the land in the first *mataqali*. And finally he managed to rename the Yavusa Vuanirewa into Yavusa Lakeba and to include into this yavusa, the mataqali of all the villages of the Island.

And I cannot resist to give you the icing on the cake : Sukuna decided in 1938 that : « the reversionary rights to land given by Ma'afu would go to the mataqali whose land was originally divided by Ma'afu ». So far so good ! But he added : « However, rights to land held by Ma'afu's followers would revert to the Tui Lau, « they are not the subject of mataqali ownership ». Ratu Sukuna became Tui Lau the very same year !

How did he succeed in doing all this ? By choosing as his first assistant a Vuanirewa man who, for example, the day before Ratu Sukuna's visit to the village of Waciwaci, went himself to the village to ask the people to make statements in favor of the Vuanirewa so to strengthen them.

And in 1939 Ratu Sukuna appointed the Tui Nayau himself as Assessor to the NLC. Nobody will be amazed when I say that the people were impressed and embarrassed by his presence and that they started to

raise a *kudru ni vanua*, a grumbling (bougonnement) of the land among the people.

But the villages of the island, except Tubou where the vanua people could never do, had to wait till 1968 to give their own version of their own *Tukutuku Raraba*. Their history before the arrival of the Vuanirewa is now written down and in that way, recognized at least by the Authorities but certainly not in practice by the Vuanirewa people and the late High Chief. For a very good reason, as these stories give a completely other view of the history. The *Tukutuku Raraba ko Yavusa Lakeba*, under Sukuna's impulse, appears as the history of people of 3 different origins, who lived at two different places, Ulunikoro and/or Kedekede. They got into trouble when a cannibal invader arrived and they then asked for help from the Vuanirewa who stayed in Nayau Island and who, as Stranger Kings came to fight the cannibal and saved them. Kedekede explodes and people spread over the Island or even other islands. This is a complete fabrication. The villagers of Vakano, for example, remember very well how the Vuanirewa man, commissioner of the NLC, made them declare that they separated from Kedekede, he wanted that all the yavusa should have dispersed from Kedekede. Villagers of Waciwaci remember how the Tui Nayau himself came to the village the evening before the visit of the NLC to ask to one of the two yavusa « not to forget his people, the Vuanirewa people ». Here again the former NLC (1903) had given to the Vuanirewa the land of one of the two yavusa of Waciwaci, declaring that they were only one. In 1938, the second yavusa was trying very hard to get back its land.

In reality villages as Nasaqalau or Waciwaci were important enough for Tongan princesses to become the wife of their chief's son and give birth to the well-known Fale Fisi in the 17th century.

When one reads the different *Tukutuku* it appears that many other villages or settlements existed before the arrival of the Vuanirewa and that some recognized the Sau of Kedekede as their Sau, but not all. It appears also that the Vuanirewa were already in relationship with some mataqali in Lakeba, marriages between the senior line of the Vuanirewa and the Lakeba Sau had already taken place. The Vuanirewa were not « Stranger Kings » but vasu's, who with the help of one of them, Ratu Sukuna, rewrote the history so as to appear as the uniting power, of the Island of Lakeba first, and then of the Lau chiefdom. The *Tukutuku* Raraba completely denies the assistance of villages as Waciwaci and Nukunuku in the many wars waged to achieve this.

But what's really interesting to me is to see that when people are asked their mataqali name they are very often confused and give their yavusa name, tokatoka name and answer that they don't know. **But**, when people have to *qaravi turaga*, where groups work together to prepare for a ceremonial event, there is little doubt as to where people « should go », what their obligations and responsibilities are. In other words, there is no confusion as to the pathways they follow.

So, why do anthropologists miss opportunities or rather have limits when working on land issues ? My first answer is : It is impossible to ask questions when the High Chief is alive. The role of the Vuanirewa (through Ratu Sukuna, the Naivi man and the then Tui Nayau) was too manipulative to be questioned.

The proof is that only two months ago one of the *vanua mataqali* finally dared to call the NLTB to come to the village in order to rule on a dispute with Vuanirewa mataqali which has existed for over 100 years.. They had tried to resolve the conflict twice by presenting a *tabua* to start the

discussion but took a refusal. They explained to me that nearly ten years after Ratu Mara's death and his son's escape to Tonga, they felt free to call the NLTB. The *mana* of the chief could not hit them. They were proved right and the very next day started enclosing the land.

Lauan conceptions of the past are very much informed by concerns to elucidate the « truth », for the past is inscribed on the land, and in their relations with it, the people. Vuanirewa is still a yavusa (and Lakeba is not) and the dissatisfaction arises from the *vanua* itself. But an anthropologist can only work on it when the *vanua* itself is ready to take action, that is, when the chiefs *mana* is questioned. This is not new ! Hocart (1929 :96) : « ... the method of public inquiry so well adapted to the outspoken British temperament, is quite unsuited to a people who will on no account contradict a chief or a person of quality, and whose weakness, as they themselves acknowledge, is « Fijian shame » (*madua vakaviti*), an unconquerable aversion to haggling, disputing or of saying no to a kinsman ».

Ratu Sukuna put it slightly differently writing in his Journal on Lakeba (1939) : « we can not erase all that was confirmed in 1903, for they are regarded as the bible. **Only God can correct it** ».

So the good reasons not to question landrights in Lakeba evolve and add up. One Lakaben told me that the team of the NLTB that came in 1968 declared that « all the soap of the world would not be enough to wash away what was done ».

Till today there is no « register of Native Lands », only a register of Native Land Owners » or *Vola ni Kawa Bula* for Lakeba and other parts of Lau as surveying has not yet been completed and for a good reason.

Movements of groups in the past are central to the legitimacy of claims to land, status and titles and it's precisely this which is denied in the

growing hegemony of the Vuanirewa version of the history and the growing ignorance and discouragement of the *vanua*.