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UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC  
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COURSE 223.

SOCIOLOGY ASSIGNMENT  
TRADITIONAL FIJIAN RELIGION

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Vagueness and perplexity characterise the traditional Fijian religion prior to their conversion to Christianity so that any examination of it is considerably difficult. Moreover the validity of the present available information on the subject is still debatable as some people claim that it is all a work of the fictitious mind of an early anthropologist who preceived and disintergrated an article on Fijian religion to a New Zealand Anthropologist Society - However I have here attempted to mould bits of information gathered from elderly relatives and friends and supplemented by material from the Archives into what I hope will be a presentable whole.

Perplexity is attributed to the polytheistic nature of traditional Fijian Religion, a general characteristic of simple societal religions. Each island has its own God, each locality its own superstitions and almost each individual its own modification of both. Yet in spite of all this confusion one will be able to detect certain basic trends common to each. An attempt at classifying the religion in accordance with definitions put forward by Tylor, Malinowski or any of the lot will be hard to determine. The Fijian was familiar with the idea of a deity, the immortality of the soul, the control of all human and earthly things by a superhuman power and the belief in a life after death. Their religion, like any other religion, is coloured by magic, divination, witchcraft myths, rituals, symbolism and totemism.

Before expanding on each of the above aspect it is feasible at the juncture to detect the type of worship. Traditional Fijian Religion may be narrowed down to two main types which are practised side by side rather than separately: spirit worship, the lesser important of the two and ancestor-worship. It may be worthwhile to note the absence of solar cult. Neither the sun nor the moon or the stars fascinates the Fijian to the point of reverence. The same cannot be said of spirit-worship. Fiji literally swarms with miscellaneous spirits. The tops of hills, the gloom of the forests, the running streams and waterfalls stones capes, bays and the oceans are crowded with them. The Fijian has a perfect belief in spirit land and he's more or less in constant rapport with it. Superstitions surrounds the belief in these spirits or (yalo) so that when one walks through their dwellings one should adhere to a strict code of behaviour. However, it is most important to note that in a few cases has the spirit cult developed into anything like affixed ritual and seldom has there arisen a priest who should regularly meditate between spirit and people. The cult is consequently intermittant and is suggested to the individual by danger or some other special circumstances. A group of spirits widely known are the "Luvu-ni-Vai" or (Water Kelpies). They are supposed to be good dancers, which belief is probably a poetic reference to the long line of breakers that move forward and recede as Fijian men do in a native dance. They are consulted by a "Daunivucu" or Fijian poet. When a new "meke" (dance) is composed, for the words and actions of the dance. I have watched such an occasion when the "Daunivucu" of Taveuni (just recently) went into a trance (being ceremoniously painted all in black soot) and utter out words and actions of the new dance which the Vanua Levu and Taveuni ladies put on for the Independence Celebrations. In the olden days these spirits were believed to have the special property of making a man invincible in battle - besides various other advantages so they were consulted on the eve of battles.



The worship of these tiny spirits in the olden days developed into a distinct cult by which members gained wealth and prestige bestowed upon them by the spirits. In Macuata a province in Vanua Levu where the cult was strongest a priest or 'Vutu' would gather people on the night of the battle if invincibility in it is desired, and after the ceremonial offering of yaqona to the Vutu, the group sit in complete darkness and silence while the Vutu calls for the Spirit. Having called them by a chant the group make their request and the spirits answer them. Often a person becomes possessed with the spirit and it is said that at this stage he can be struck by an axe and yet remain invulnerable - an interesting parallel with the Hindu Puja. /Of course if it worked totally, none would even be injured or killed in battle, but the second shows that large numbers were/.

These spirits are often consulted also for divination. A notable one is Dakuwaga - whose adopted shrine is a shark and lives in an island off Vanua Levu - Benau. Today Dakuwaga is extensively worshipped by diviners, which not only includes Fijian but also Indians. The idea of a Deity was and still is implanted in Degei, the leader of the first wave of migration and a great personality whom mythology has transformed into the Supreme Fijian idol for ancestor worship. Before the onset of Christian teachings the worship of the ancestors or "Veli" was practically the way of life of the Fijians. It provided social coherence for it stated codes of behaviour and systems of taboo between individuals but more so between tribes, it came in useful for witchcraft and divination and it was consulted for victory in battle. Unlike the other principal religions the Gods were not consulted often for agricultural crops except may be in a few cases for yam growing. Victory in battle was the prime request made to the Gods.

Degei's origin is vague but some sources assert that he was born of two Great Stones and some even add that they have seen it with their eyes. He is believed to have no emotion or sensation nor of any appetite except hunger and is mostly seen in the form of a serpent on whose head glitters a large diamond. He is often seen bathing in the Yasawa Group and his permanent abode is in the hills at Nakauvadra - the original settlement of the ancestors. Degei has now become the acknowledged father of all Gods next in rank to himself and through those of other ranks. Britton in his book "Loloma" writes. "He was likewise the creator of man". This I do not agree with for from my personal experience the Fijian never had such a creation myth. I feel that Britton 'thruout his article on Degei has produced a stereotyped Jehovah figure. The missionaries and early anthropologist in producing their work have mistorted and misconstrued information by bringing their western concepts of religion and tried to fit native religion to accord with these concepts rather than viewing the religion only in the light of their concepts. Besides Degei, Lutunasobasoba was another renowned leader of migration. Lutunasobasoba had eight children who because the 'vus' the major tribes of Fiji. The story goes that their father challenged them to a race and promised the winner superiority over the others, and it so happened that the youngest Vueti won and he being the Vu of Bau, Bau retain the superiority to this day. Other sons were posted to Verata, Batiki, Kadavu and other parts of Fiji to be their Vu. To this day "tauvu" relationship depicts the relationship of these tribes. A system of food taboo, for instance a certain tribe cannot eat pork in front of a particular, one is a living example of these ancient relationship between the 'vus'.



The Gods were worshipped in a 'bure kalou' or temple and each had its own priest. The burekalou was the shrine of the Fijian Ancestral spirits or Gods and was also the house occupied by the priest. It was a lofty building, and set in a high terraced platform faced with stone and it dominated the village. Important villages had more than one temple. When consulting the oracle the "bete" or priest sat on a stone and communicated with the God through a length of taba which hung from the roof.

In common with other South Pacific Islanders the Fijian have some points on earth where their souls take departure to another world. But he shuts out from the belief the idea of any punishment or reward: the concept of a hell of fire or a heaven of paradise. The Fijian 'Bulu' or future world was much the same as the present hence the funereal custom of burying a dead with all his possessions and his love-wives, to continue life in the new world. Bulu was the abode of departed spirits of both good and bad character but the road to which was most perilous and to arrive at its termination was regarded as a precarious contingency. The souls of common people all over Fiji are said to take their departure at Naicobocobo the northern-most point of Vanua Levu. Tradition holds that on their way to Naicobocobo the soul has to carry a whale's tooth with it with which to throw at a particular pandanal plant in the middle of Vanua Levu. To this day is seen a permanent track on the grass where the ghosts walk and their footsteps as they make their journey are constantly heard by the living. The souls of the high chiefs and the 'vus' are said to make their permanent abode in Daveta Levu a point in the Koro Sea beside Moturiki Island. When boats and ships sail over this point noise-making or spotting or throwing rubbish into the sea is forbidden. Many boats have sunk at this point and people have attributed the disasters to the misbehaviour at this point of people in the boat. It is believed that the 'vus' live in a village under the sea at this point.

The notion concerning deaths was that of a simple rest as is contained in the chant below.

"A mate na ka rawarawa  
(Death is easy)  
A bula na ka ni cava  
(Of what use is life)  
A mate na cegu  
(To die is rest)

This probably explains the indifference people entertain about living. They generally consider the passage from life to death as one from pain to happiness and many looked forward to it with anxiety as an escape from infirmity and disease.

Magic and divination is hard to distinguish from one another but as mentioned above spirits are consulted in this aspect of religion the notable one being Dakuwaqa. Certain incurable diseases are known to have been healed only by such diviners, who also recovered lost money, restore good relationship between lovers and even help some to win lottery tickets. A diviner worshipping Dakuwaqa told me that she once found a peculiar coin and instinct told her to keep it. Later as she had a dream in which she was given the power to be a diviner. Now people of all races flock into her house to be healed by her. People have to take a florin and a ten cents worth of yaqona to her and after the offering of yaqona she smokes a cigarette and is soon transformed into a trance when she is possessed with Dakuwaqa, speaking the Vanua-Levuan dialect and begins dealing with cards, from which she reads the solution to people's problems. She also give people ointments and native medicines.



Symbolism is highly developed amongst the Fijians. A rock or a particular stone would be said to be standing for something else. To recall a peculiar example I saw in the Ono Island of Kadavu. Myth has it that the 'Vu' of Ono-i-Kadavu stole some land from the main island of Kadavu. To this day his footprints could be seen and on one of the hills could be seen a row of rocks with the general shape of man. These are said to be his soldiers. Two large stones in the shape of ovens are said to be the ovens he left half-cooked. Beside these, is a plant the leaves of which he used to cover the 'lovo' or oven. This plant cannot be seen anywhere else in Fiji. Everywhere in Fiji a rock is said to be a mother of such and such a 'vu' or the origin of certain people.

Totenism is likewise extensive. They include both plants and animal species. Each clan or family has its own totem which he is forbidden to eat. Other clans tease a particular clan by its totem. However nowadays totemic rules are not strictly adhered to.

With the conversion to Christianity traditional religions practises were regarded as inhuman and unethical and the missionaries attempted to wipe them out. Personally I think they would have done better to new it and try to incorporate some of its good aspect into the new religion. To the modern characterised Fijian the early missionaries were justified but one has to bear in mind that in olden days Fijian religion was less of a belief it was more of a way of life: it provided coherence and a set of clues for the Fijian society. As such, traditional Fijian religion is something to be admired rather than looked down upon, primitive though it may be.

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