Review in *Pacific Affairs* Winter 2002-2003: 75(4): 654-5

REPRESENTED COMMUNITIES: FIJI AND WORLD DECOLONIZATION

by **John D. Kelly** and **Martha Kaplan**.

Chicago (Illinois) and London (UK): The University of Chicago Press. 2001. xiv, 243 pp. US$40.00, cloth, ISBN 0-226-429881. US$18.00, paper, ISBN 0-226-429903.

Fiji's dramatic history since indigenous Fijians started looking to the gun for political solutions in 1987 has resulted in much commentary and many books. The authors here have revisited six of their papers published in whole or in part since 1991 that have sought to contextualize the 1987 Coup(s) and the May 2000 failed putsch within the theoretical debates about community, decolonization, and the nation-state.

The need for analysis is clear and pressing. The Coups highlighted the already obvious fact that despite initial appearances of orderly political process and economic progress since Independence in 1970, Fiji has failed to forge a national identity. This book sets out to identify the colonial and postcolonial reasons for this 'continuing failure to self-constitute' (p.5), and Fiji society's propensity to fracture along ethnic and historical fault-lines.

The book's difficult task is of theoretical generalization in the context of historical account. The analysis is complex and subtle, the argumentation dense and sophisticated (and argumentation it is, rejecting several tenets widely accepted in sociological discourse over the past two or three decades). It is impossible in the space of a short review to even touch on the multiplicity of important issues that are teased out painstakingly. The following few comments are therefore in no sense an overview.

The cover note announces that the authors 'offer an extensive and devastating critique of [Benedict] Anderson's approach' (in his classic work *Imagined Communities*). The most substantive revisionism, perhaps, lies in the proposal that 'we banish the very concept of identity from its current fetishized place in our scholarly vocabulary' (p.74), feeling that it may be 'so flawed that it makes for sloppy synthesis of disparate projects of finding, using, making, preserving, or imposing orders of difference located quite variously in minds, bodies, and relations between and among them' (p.71).

They also stress that the issue of community was not newly-born in emergent nation-states at the time of decolonization, since it was a common colonial strategy to represent the communities in terms of the colonizers', not the communities', choosing. Glosses of 'race' were common (in the case of Fiji, defining both 'Fijians' and later 'Indians' for the first time in the consciousness of either). As others have noted, these represented communities were then wedged apart throughout the colonial period, nipping in the bud any notion of communal self-government (as the authors point out, a dangerous concept to colonizers).

The question is how a single national consciousness could ever emerge when these now-antagonistic communities were thrust together into the 'wnew world order' as nominal nation-states. For both Fijians and Indians, representation has been a problematic colonial legacy in two senses, as the authors neatly point out: representation of who and what they are, and political representation in the weighted constitutional system of government the departing British bequeathed them.

Whether the authors succeed in detaching Fiji's postcolonial power struggles from issues of tradition and social identity, must be judged by each reader. What *can* be asserted is that they are to be commended for requiring us to think afresh about the issues and re-evaluate accepted wisdoms.There is much here for both social theorists interested in the wider postcolonial debate, and academics interested in Fiji's social and political history.

Regrettably, this book is unlikely to be read by many of the people who might directly influence events within Fiji. Even if it could be made affordably and widely available in Fiji, its arcane academic language would make the discussions opaque to most non-academics. Those are two persistent dilemmas for both publishers and authors in academia, but we really do need to address both if our work is to have influence, even relevance, beyond the citadel.

University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia *RODERICK EWINS*

BACK TO INDEX
HOME