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LIVING ON THE FRINGE: Melanesians in Fiji.

By Winston Halapua

Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies. The University of the South Pacific. 2001. 152 pp. (Maps, B&W photos, tables.) US$20, paper. ISBN 982-02-0315-5.

Based on a Masters (?) thesis, this small book addresses the ongoing marginalization of the descendants of indentured Melanesian plantation laborers who first came to Fiji between 1865 and 1911 from the Solomons and Vanuatu. Their story is traced here, from being an important labor force to becoming ever more invisible to government policy-makers and employers alike. As the author points out, the government did not impose discriminatory restrictions as Australia did on the remnants of its Kanaka sugar-plantation workforce, but indulged in what he calls 'benign neglect.'

Neglect certainly, but benign? Hardly. The author shows that from the beginning, colonial labor laws ensured Melanesians' suppression and exploitation, but neither rights nor social provisions were secured for them during or after the indenture system. Few in number, dispersed and relegated to the poorest sectors of agriculture and labor, they were excluded from even those economic opportunities grasped by Indian descendants of indenturees.

Even the paternalistic efforts of the Anglican Church from the 1930s on to find settlement areas for these landless people are shown to have created ghettos that concentrate social alienation, poverty, unemployment, industrial exploitation and crime. The diversity of clan and regional origins, and the replacement of original languages and customs in favor of Fijian ones, has made it virtually impossible for Melanesians to build a powerful alternative identity such as the disparate groups from India managed to forge for themselves. Today they, their settlements, even their rites of passage, are to outward appearances Fijian, but despite a high level of miscegenation, they lack any entitlements to land and social programs, and are not accepted by Fijians as part of the indigenous community.

This exclusion is not explored here, an important omission. Perhaps the difficulty comes first from Halapua's acceptance of the common fiction that indenture was necessitated by Fijians' unwillingness to undertake sustained plantation labor. Their social and cultural similarity with the Vanuatuans and Solomon islanders makes this implausible, and indeed the first settlers described Fijians as industrious laborers. However, for Fijians, title to land was always contingent; overlordship could change through warfare, but elements of aboriginal (taukei) title were never

extinguished. Thus 'sale' to Western planters transferred right of use, not the alien concept of freehold title. Planters, however, wished to both alienate the land permanently and distance themselves from any obligation to such perpetual stakeholders - difficult while these provided the principal labor force. Early expressions of admiration for Fijian labor transformed into stereotypes of them as lazy, unreliable and unproductive, to justify replacing them with an 'unattached' labor force. By importing Melanesians, planters and government utterly excluded many Fijians from land with which they still had (and have) abiding connections. As instruments of this alienation, the Melanesians could hardly endear themselves to Fijians, any more than Indians could later.

This very readable study makes a valuable contribution by assembling a wealth of data and highlighting hidden problems. However, description is always safer than prescription. The author concludes by proposing assimilation into the Fijian community as the Melanesians' only real option. This would be impossible to impose, and that it has happened only sporadically during over a century seems unpromising, particularly in today's climate of indigenous Fijian partisanship.

The Melanesian ghettos have lacked unifying origins, nurturing traditions, economic viability, community pride or a clear sense of identity, but in the absence of social security or alternative groupings, the mutual support has been critical. Halapua suggests that external forces may spell an end to some settlements even if internal anarchy does not, forcing individuals and family units out into the wider community. It might be argued that some have a better chance of establishing positive independent identities if removed from such dispirited and disadvantaged environments. However, for the many who lack skills or initiative, the resultant isolation may be even more bleak than what they have known.

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