

Exodus or Exile

Hermeneutic Shifts in a Shifting Fijian Methodist Church¹

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Abstract

*Over the past 30 years, the effects of globalization, climate change and multiple military coups have reshaped the Fijian landscape. The “lines in the sand” around issues of land ownership, rising tides and Fijian identity have complicated the relationship between the Fijian Methodist Church and the land which grounds its culture. The historical fissures between the majority Methodist indigenous church and Fiji’s large Hindu population continue to place the rights of first peoples in tension with rights of ethnic and religious minorities, even as the country’s secular government stresses the possibility of harmony. In recent years, the church’s primary responses to these demographic, political and environmental changes have been homiletic and hermeneutic. In spite of declining membership and reduced political influence, the church’s present experience has been re-read as a “New Exodus” journey toward a promised land. This theme of “New Exodus” has become a dominant trope in sermons, church education events and Fijian Methodist self-understanding. A more complicated hermeneutic, however, mines the biblical theme of exile to describe the current situation. In *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijian) understanding, the ‘vanua,’ or land, connotes the traditional culture of those who live on that land. As change impacts the culture of indigenous village life, the land itself is understood to change. Though 80% of Fijian land is tribally held, many Fijian Methodists experience the land on which they have lived for generations as suddenly unfamiliar. My paper will explore these disparate biblical readings of the Fijian Methodist experience through a homiletic analysis of four Fijian sermons, pointing to the importance of pulpit rhetoric in creating new conceptions of place and direction in a world where familiar markers are washing away.*

1. Vanua and Fijian *iTaukei* Identity

In his seminal work, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place*, Ilaitia Tuwere describes the connection between space, time and human community in a Fijian understanding of land. For indigenous Fijians, the “land” (*vanua*) does not simply refer to the soil which makes up the 300-plus islands of the South Pacific archipelago. It includes all that grows in that soil and all who are sustained by it. The word “land,” in other words, includes animals, people – and significantly, human culture and

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history. It is a word that knits together space, event and time to create a nuanced understanding of context. Tuwere suggests the word “place” as the start of an appropriate English translation.² This relational understanding of *vanua* has far-reaching repercussions for *iTaukei* identity. The word *iTaukei* can be defined as “those who own” the Fijian *vanua*, but this ownership does not connote detached objectification. In the theological college where I teach, coconut trees are planted with the placenta of a newborn child, tying together person and place. Funerals and celebrations recognize students’ long-standing historical confederacies, determined by the location of their familial village. In a Christmas sermon, an *iTaukei* preacher notes Mary and Joseph’s need to journey to Bethlehem to “confirm themselves again in their land” prior to Jesus’ birth, mirroring the regular Christmas homecomings that keep *iTaukei* Fijians tied to their traditional villages.³ Tuwere explains that from an indigenous person’s perspective, “One does not own the land; the land owns him [sic].”⁴

Such an understanding can lead to deeply conservative social structures. Under normal circumstances, land does not undergo rapid change, so *vanua* can come to represent “a way of life from time immemorial.”⁵ As a theologian, Tuwere connects this understanding of *vanua* with the Hebrew scriptures. Embracing Walter Brueggemann’s classic treatment of the subject, Tuwere argues for a Christianity that emphasizes the land-aware values of continuity, community and belonging.⁶ Matt Tomlinson notes the negative way in which “newness” is viewed, particularly in the context of the heavily-*iTaukei* Fijian Methodist church. In the Methodist Church in Fiji (MCIF), “oldness is a source of legitimacy.”⁷ A careful reading of *vanua*, however, complicates this conservatism. As my students’ explain in our discussion of the relationality (*veivakani*) at the heart of the *iTaukei* worldview, it is not just that humans do not have meaning without the coconut tree. The coconut tree does not have meaning without the human. Human culture, history and action necessarily impact the land, changing it in physical and symbolic ways. Under normal circumstances, continuity and change are tied together in relational balance.

² *Ilaitia S. Tuwere*, *Vanua. Towards a Fijian Theology of Place*, Suva 2002, 33.

³ *Matt Tomlinson* translates the sermon of *Ratu Josaia Veibataki*, *In God’s Image. The Metaculture of Fijian Christianity*, Berkeley 2009, 100.

⁴ *Tuwere* (note 2), 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. *Walter Brueggemann*, *The Land. Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Minneapolis 2002, 199–201.

⁷ *Matt Tomlinson*, *The Generation of the Now. Denominational Politics in Fijian Christianity*, in: *Matt Tomlinson/Debra McDougall* (eds.), *Christian Politics in Oceania*, New York 2013, 93.

2. The Shifting of the *Vanua*

The last 30 years, however, have been anything but normal. In 1987 and 2000, a series of political coups challenged democratically-elected governments as indigenous Fijians feared the growing influence of religious and ethnic minorities in the country.⁸ The issue of land ownership was particularly volatile. Though there was little evidence to support the claim, political rhetoric of the time emphasized the danger of losing legal protections reinforcing exclusive *iTaukei* ownership of tribally-held lands – an area that exceeds 80% of Fiji’s land mass.⁹ Fiji’s diverse population can be traced to British colonial policies that brought Indian indentured laborers to Fiji in the late nineteenth century to work in sugarcane plantations. Today, over 45% of the population is of Indian descent, the majority of that population being Hindu or Muslim. In this multi-religious context, indigenous concerns over traditional land holdings coincided with religious calls for a Christian state. The close relationship between the *vanua* (indigenous culture/land), *lotu* (church) and *matanitu* (government) has been part of indigenous Fijian self-understanding “since the advent of Christianity in the first half of the 1800’s.”¹⁰ When democracy threatened this braided cord, military leaders like Sitiveni Rabuka – a lay Methodist preacher – “justified the coups in overtly religious terms.”¹¹ The Methodist Church in Fiji explicitly or tacitly supported these military interventions.

In 2006, the church found itself in different circumstances. When military leader Voreqe Bainamarama seized power from an elected prime minister that the church supported, the Methodist Church became an awkward defender of democracy and experienced governmental restrictions on religious freedoms first-hand. From 2009-2013, Bainamarama’s government banned the Methodist Annual Conference and Choir Festival, obstructed church operations and monitored free speech. The loss of political influence, monetary support and membership during these years is a crisis to which the MCIF is still responding.

The political shifts severing the *matanitu* from *lotu* and *vanua*, however, are only part of the picture. In the midst of this political upheaval, the culture of Fijian society was also undergoing rapid transformation. Manfred Ernst’s *Globalization and the Re-shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands* makes the strong case for the imperialistic dangers of globalization in the Pacific. Whether through economic policy, the embrace of technology or well-funded denominations from the West, Ernst argues that “cultural values not compatible with the Western world are disappearing” at an alarming

⁸ Ibid., 80–84.

⁹ *Tuvere* (note 2), 174.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹¹ *Tomlinson* (note 7), 80.

rate.¹² Esala Nasaroa agrees that a colonial domination is being replaced by a “cultural domination [...] through the over-influence of trans-media and new communication networks.”¹³ While the changing culture of a new generation is a perennial challenge for churches around the world, it is exponentially more difficult in a context where *vanua* and *lotu* are so closely identified.

Finally, the physical land itself was changing. Michael Green notes that, “over 60 [Fijian] villages have been identified for relocation” for causes related to climate change.¹⁴ Given the connection between *vanua* and identity, the movement of a village is no small thing. The land itself – and the stories it tells - become unfamiliar. Cliff Bird notes the importance of the “readability” of nature in Oceanic understandings of home.¹⁵ In Fiji, for example, the yearly calendar is determined by the growing seasons for particular plants and the breeding of certain kinds of fish. As coral reefs grow sick and precipitation and temperatures change, the traditional legibility of the world is obscured.

These fissures that have developed between the *vanua*, *lotu*, and *matanitu* have created a profound sense of loss for many indigenous Fijians. Familiar “lines in the sand” are fading. In his study of Fijian Christianity, Tomlinson notes this quality of “loss” as a heuristic in interpreting Methodist Fijian practice. “The image that many indigenous Fijians have of present-day society,” he states, “is one in which properly unified relationships are breaking down [...] and as a result, the people’s *mana* (spiritual power) is diminished or lost.”¹⁶ This sense of diminishment plays out in practices of faith and biblical interpretation, as preachers exhort their congregations to return to a golden age that has slipped away.

It is in this context that the MCIF introduced a new logo and a new motto in its 2014 celebration of fifty years of church autonomy. In this Jubilee year, the church leadership claimed the theme of “New Exodus” as a guiding vision for the church’s next fifty years. The metaphor has quickly become a powerful trope. It is invoked regularly in sermons and denominational literature and education events, though it is not always clear how the metaphor is being used. Often, different ministers have different visions of what bondage the church is leaving and in what promised land it should settle. The church’s embrace of the word “new,” however, is significant.

¹² *Manfred Ernst*, *Globalization and the Reshaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Manfred Ernst Suva 2006, 4.

¹³ *Esala Nasaroa*, *Vakatagi: A Hermeneutical Redefinition of Fijian Music from a Fijian Perspective*, in: Na Uli, *The Davuilevu Journal of Theology and Practice*, Issue 2, August 2016, 32f.

¹⁴ *Michael Green*, *Contested Territory*, in *Nature: Climate Change* 6, 817–820 (2016).

¹⁵ *Cliff Bird*, *Hermeneutics of Ecology and Its Relationship to the Identity of the Oikeos in Oceania*, in: *Pacific Journal of Theology (Series II)* No. 46, 2011, 32.

¹⁶ *Tomlinson* (note 3), 65.

The “New Exodus” is a metaphor grounded in movement and change. How does this metaphor intersect the theology of continuity that Tuwere describes in his analysis of *vanua*?

3. The *Drua* of the “New Exodus”

In his discussion of the 2016 WCC theme of “Pilgrimage,” Tongan theologian Jione Havea questioned the theme’s relevance for the Oceanic context. “Pilgrimage,” he claims, “is not part of some of our cultures. It is not part of our daily routine.”¹⁷ In some sense, this is true. Christianity in the Pacific is less about traveling to someplace unfamiliar and more about honoring one’s home. Again, Tuwere is instructive, describing the importance of “home-grown knowledge” in a Fijian epistemology.¹⁸ This, however, is only one part of the Fijian story. At the same time that the MCIF embraced the language of “New Exodus,” it embraced a new logo: a large, ocean-faring *drua*, designed to carry whole villages to new islands. In contrast to the church’s old logo of a fishing boat, this new image communicated the danger of the church’s current situation, a reclaiming of change and movement as a strength within Fijian history, and a recasting of the church’s vision to be inclusive of the community and the world. The image of the *drua*, blown by the wings of a dove toward unknown lands, interpreted the language of the “New Exodus.”

In the Fijian context, it is a term that continues to need interpreting. Even within biblical studies, the term “New Exodus” has a multitude of connotations, prompting scholars like Daniel L. Smith to worry that its “free-wheeling usage has diluted the value of the phrase, and a descriptive term runs the risk of becoming a simple buzzword.”¹⁹ In the highly charged Fijian socio-political context, fears about loss of land ownership can make New Exodus language ring with triumphalistic overtones. Preachers have used the phrase to call for spiritual revival, political protest, ethical reformation and cultural reassertion. On occasion, the term serves as shorthand for modernization and keeping up with the times. One speaker at the 2015 MCIF Annual Conference connected the language of the New Exodus with the goal of having a working fax machine in every district office. While the image rings with the promise of the future, the content of that promise remains unspecified. *What is the promised land to which the church is traveling? And more pointedly, what is the relationship between that promised land and the vanua?*

¹⁷ Jione Havea, We’re moving from missionary thinking into a pilgrimage culture, World Council of Churches interview, June 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdbJIPHykak>.

¹⁸ Ilaitia S. Tuwere, At Home. A *Were-Kalou* Response to Epistemology, paper presented at USP.

¹⁹ Smith traces the term from its use in the 19th century in relation Israel’s exile to its more recent uses in New Testament studies, “The Uses of ‘New Exodus’ in New Testament Scholarship”, CBR 14.2 (2016), 207–243. For examples of New Testament uses, see Rikki Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*, Grand Rapids 2001, or more recently, David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, Eugene 2016.

The most common homiletic responses to this question define the relationship as one of a.) reformation or b.) reclamation. The promised land of the New Exodus will be a purified *vanua* of the future or it will be the powerful *vanua* of the past. An example of the former goal can be seen in a sermon preached during the 2014 MCIF Conference's Jubilee celebration. Taking "Jubilee in the New Exodus" as her theme and Isaiah 44:1–8 as her text, the preacher stresses the reformation of the thirsty land brought about by the "pouring out of the Spirit" from above. She calls the congregation to "agonize" for this act of God and prepare with anticipation. The New Exodus, in her view, is a revived land, marked by godly living, prayer, scripture reading, fasting, and unity. She quotes John Wesley as saying, "My ground is the bible," using the Fijian *vanua* in her translation to make the point clear. For this preacher, the New Exodus is a journey to a future land made holy by the external intervention of God and the spiritual discipline of God's people.²⁰

In contrast to this goal of a reformed *vanua*, the goal of a reclaimed *vanua* is seen in a sermon preached to the MCIF Annual Conference two years later. Stressing the dangers of gnostic spiritualism, this second preacher discusses Jesus' "coming toward" the disciples in the gospel of John (1:29, 1:38) and the disciples' decision to follow. The preacher is specific in describing Jesus' destination in the passage: Jesus leads the disciples to the home in which he is staying. "Jesus has a house," the preacher insists. "And Jesus's house is the Methodist Church in Fiji." He then references the fears of the past decade: Bainamarama's secular government, the push for "human rights" – understood by many in the MCIF as a euphemism for gay rights, and climate change. In this case, the New Exodus is a confrontation of these current realities with the proclamation that "Jesus is the Son of God," reasserting the church's authoritative place in society.²¹ The "promised land" is a reclaimed alignment between *matinitu*, *lotu* and *vanua* – a following of Christ away from the homelessness of the present.

Neither of these preachers attempts a systematic treatment of the questions surrounding the New Exodus. They preach with diverse texts, agendas and communities in mind. But in their referencing of the New Exodus, they provide a representative snapshot of the current conversation in Fijian pulpits. There are diverse visions of this New Exodus promise and even more maps for the journey. *What the sermons share, however, is a call to movement.* Both sermons posit hope that the church can leave behind the loss of a broken present. They challenge the status quo with a call to active engagement and change. In this sense, even the reclamation of the past represents a desire

²⁰ Paulini Naimani, Golden Jubilee in this New Exodus, sermon presented at MCIF Annual Conference, Centenary Church, Suva, August 22, 2014.

²¹ Tomasi Tarabe, Jesus is the Son of God, sermon presented at MCIF Annual Conference, Centenary Church, Suva, August 26, 2016.

for something “new.” Concrete, material transformation lies at the core of the New Exodus imagery.

This call for movement and change within the MCIF brings helpful complexity to caricatures of Pacific theology that over-emphasize stasis and tradition. To connect the powerful Fijian *drua* with such a call reminds the church that when crises come, the Pacific community has the capacity and will to move. All the same, there is a tension between this linear image of leaving and Tuwere’s stress on the continuity and rootedness of place. Perhaps the concern is best expressed in Havea’s observation that those who go on pilgrimage too often travel *through* a place rather than noticing the people already living *in* a place.²² The “promised land” can become an idealization or objectification that neglects the land currently under the church’s feet. What of the *vanua* that is currently shifting with insecurity and struggle – a *vanua* that is now multi-ethnic and multi-religious? In trying to reclaim the past or purify the future, does the “New Exodus” of the MCIF abandon the living *vanua* of the present?

4. The “New Exodus” in the Sermons of Rev. Dr. Tuikilakila Waqairatu

Given the significance of these questions, it is worth tracing the origins of the MCIF’s “New Exodus” imagery. The themes of reformation and reclamation are certainly not new in the Fijian pulpit. They are especially apparent in the sermons of the church leader most influential in the adoption of the “New Exodus” theme. The late Rev. Dr. Tuikilakila Waqairatu frequently referenced the topics of nation-building and spiritual cleansing in his sermon notes, and it is following his 2013 election as president of the church that the new logo and Jubilee theme make their debut. In the years leading up to his election as president, the theme of the “New Exodus” slowly emerges in Waqairatu’s thinking as a way to make sense of the conflict with the government and cast a positive vision of the future. In 2011, he uses the term “our New Exodus” to describe the process of Fiji’s “liberation” in comments to church leaders from the United States,²³ and he frequently uses Exodus imagery to discuss the necessary cleansing of the people prior to entering the promised land (Josh 3:1–17).²⁴

His most developed application of the Exodus narrative to the life of the church, however, occurs in a 2012 sermon emphasizing four themes: liberation, covenant, wilderness journey, and

²² Havea (note 17).

²³ *Tuikilakila Waqairatu*, Farewell to Bishop Warner Brown, unpublished notes, December 9, 2011. The implicit critique of the government in this New Exodus language is never explicitly developed in *Rev. Waqairatu’s* sermon notes. Given the fact that *Waqairatu* was placed in jail for his public opposition of *Bainamara*, such subtlety may have been politically necessary.

²⁴ See, for example, *Tuikilakila Waqairatu*, Na Lotu Ni Mataka, unpublished sermon notes, November 14, 2010, and The Needs of a New Exodus. The Installation of Rev. Iliapi Tuiwai, unpublished sermon notes, 2013.

destiny. The goals of reclaiming the *vanua's* political authority and reforming the *vanua* through spiritual cleansing are touchstones in Waqairatu's assertive, holistic theology, and these themes are present in his discussion of liberation and covenant. But in its final point, Waqairatu's sermon adds a third perspective on what the "promised land" might mean in the Fijian context. When he speaks of the church's "destiny," he does not just argue for the reformation of the land or the reclaiming of the land. Instead, he recasts the *vanua* itself – in its current state – in the light of God's mission and presence. Strikingly, Waqairatu describes the promise of the Exodus as the practice of the Lord's Supper. Taking Mark 14:22–25 and 1 Cor 11:23–26 as his texts, Waqairatu translates the "promised land" of God's people into the shared proclamation of Christ's death and a new covenant in Christ's blood.²⁵

The *drua*, in this case, leads the people on a journey of rediscovery, rather than reclamation or reformation. Finally, for Waqairatu, the "New Exodus" is less about moving away from the *vanua* or towards it. Rather, it is a hermeneutical movement which transforms how *vanua* is understood in light of the gospel. It is, in certain ways, an *iTaukei* response to Havea's concern about "pilgrimage," and dislocation in Pacific theology. In Waqairatu's sermon, the broken *vanua* of the present is not abandoned in the Exodus journey. It is made new in the familiar celebration of a sacramental meal.

5. Exodus as Exile?

This new reading of the promised land may sound hopeful, but there are costs to this hermeneutical shift. Fears of movement and newness notwithstanding, it is easier to talk of change in hopes that, by moving, the church will reclaim a *vanua* of the past or purify a *vanua* of the future. To re-envision the current *vanua* as a promised land, in the midst of its weakness and struggle, means settling in exile. The Hebrew exile may seem an unlikely metaphor for the experience of *iTaukei* whose very name denotes ownership of the land. But the *vanua* has shifted, and today, many find themselves in unfamiliar territory. What would it mean to find God's promise in this place?

It is a question raised in the sermon, "The New Exodus: The Land of Promise in our Exile"²⁶ by yet another contemporary Fijian preacher – a student in the theological college where I teach. Taking Jer 29:4–14 as his text, this preacher posits that, just as God was present with the Israelites in Babylon, God's New Exodus promise for Fijians "is now. It is in our very current conditions of a secular state, without a Great Council of Chiefs." The preacher notes that Jeremiah turns away

²⁵ *Tuikilakila Waqairatu*, Na Lako Yani (The Exodus), unpublished sermon notes, November 4, 2012.

²⁶ *Tui Nuki Smith*, The New Exodus. God's Promise in our Exile, unpublished sermon notes, September 6, 2016.

from false hopes of a quick return to the land of Israel and instead stresses going about life as normal: “Build a house and settle down, plant a garden and eat, find wives and seek the peace and prosperity of the city.” In engaging the exilic land, Israel rediscovers that its “true promised land is its coventantal relationship with God.” The preacher argues that Fiji’s New Exodus journey has a similar vertical, rather than horizontal, character.

The sermon’s argument (and Jeremiah’s) has its dangers. There is a risk of embracing political passivity or adopting a spiritual vision disconnected from material transformation. And yet, in this call to “settle” and “seek the peace” of the land of exile, there is also a commitment to place and genuine engagement with the present. There is an attention paid to the ground on which one is currently standing. There is respect for the *iTaukei* insight that we do not have complete control over the land – or over the people who live on it. We impact it, but we do not make it in our image. It forms us, even as it shifts.

Of course, the promise of a return from the land of exile never disappears in Jeremiah. Instead Brueggemann argues, there is a complex dialectic between “grasping [the promise] with courage” and “waiting in confidence for the gift.”²⁷ Such a dialectic is currently happening in sermons across Fiji as preachers map the promised land of the New Exodus onto the *vanua*. I would argue that both sides of the dialectic are significant. The active energy required to reform and reclaim the land complements the interpretive energy of recasting it. The recasting, however, ensures that the MCIF’s Exodus journey does not disconnect people from place. Waqairatu’s image of promised land as communion feast is particularly adept in holding these threads together. His image of the church’s destiny as a table spread in hope grasps the gift of the present Body, remembers the past and tastes the future, daring to believe that the Exodus of an exiled church is “now.” As Brueggemann observes, it is “precisely in the context of landlessness [that] the promises loom large.”²⁸

Conclusion

Cliff Bird has argued that land is read like a manuscript by Oceanic people. Tomlinson notes that manuscripts like the Bible can also be read “like a topographical map.”²⁹ My paper has outlined the ways in which preachers are reading both, redrawing the borders of text and *vanua* through pulpit rhetoric. Whether using the New Exodus to call for a reforming, a reclaiming or a recasting of the

²⁷ Ibid., 157.

²⁸ Brueggemann (note 6), 8.

²⁹ Matt Tomlinson, Anthropological Perspectives on Oceanic Biblical Interpretation, in: Pacific Journal of Theology, Series II, Issue 50, 2013, 104.

vanna, preachers are reshaping the hermeneutic Fijians use to read their world. In this way, they reshape the world itself. This homiletic approach has been a significant strategy in the MCIF's response of the difficult shifts in the Fijian context. It is a response that breaks down the dichotomy between movement and rootedness, continuity and change and even land and landlessness. Instead, it relies on a promise that demonstrates the *veivakani* (relationality) between each. Fijian preachers understand the critical connection between place and text. As they reinterpret the ground on which they stand and the land they have been promised, they are redrawing their own lines in the sand.

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