

Idealism and Pragmatism in Colonial Fiji: Sir Arthur Gordon's native rule policy and the introduction of Indian contract labor

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INTRODUCTION

Historians have become increasingly aware of the difficulty and inaccuracy of assigning the economic and social structures of modern societies to specific categories. In fact, at any given point a single group may incorporate economic arrangements ranging from the relative simplicity of barter to the complexities of international trade and finance. The village may well remain the primary social and political focus of most of the population in a society which, on another level, has all the trappings of a modern nation-state.

The colonial society which developed in Fiji after 1880 appears, on first perusal, to provide a classic example of this phenomenon in that it incorporated a tribal, village people engaged in subsistence agriculture, a wage-earning agricultural proletariat, a modern government bureaucracy, and a capitalist class with large-scale enterprises tied to the world economy. But in actuality the Fijian case is unique. This multi-faceted society came about as the calculated creation of Fiji's British rulers and was sustained by British law. As such, it reflected that peculiar blend of idealism and pragmatism which characterized British imperialism in general and the administration of Fiji's first British governor, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, in particular.

I. THE BRITISH ACQUISITION OF FIJI

The interplay of these attitudes actually characterized the British presence in the area long before the acquisition of the islands and

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Gordon's arrival on the scene. Due to a boom in cotton planting, Fiji's resident European population had been increasing from the 1860's on. With this new resident population, composed for the most part of British subjects, came increasing disorder and disputes with the native population over questions of land titles and labor demands. The obvious insecurities of the situation led, as early as 1860, to requests for British acquisition of the islands. At this point, however, British colonial policy was not yet affected by that feverish sense of urgency and competition which led European powers in the last quarter of the 19th Century to acquire practically every unclaimed square foot of the earth's surface.

The British Colonial Office proceeded with extreme caution. Inquiries were made of one Colonel Smythe, an observer on the scene, as to the feasibility of acquisition. Would Fiji be a useful station for mail steamers between Panama and Sydney? Could it provide a dependable supply of cotton for British mills? Would the British presence be able to suppress cannibalism and other "social evils" without incurring prohibitive costs? Smythe reported negatively in each case, and the Colonial Office stood firm in its opposition to such an unpromising enterprise.¹

Yet by 1874, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Carnarvon, was informing the House of Lords that ". . . it would not be safe to fold our arms and say we would not have anything to do with the Islands."² And on October 10, 1874, Britain formally accepted the outright cession of Fiji proffered by its make-shift native government. In strategic and economic terms, however, little had changed. If anything, a drop in cotton prices and the subsequent failure of many Fijian plantations should have made acquisition even less attractive than it had been in the preceding decade. Pragmatic considerations cannot explain this policy reversal. The new factors at work in determining Fijian policy were those of idealism.

To define these factors as idealistic is, however, not to diminish their power in the politics of Victorian England. For if 19th-Century Britain was the stronghold of industry and empire, it was also a society characterized by a revitalized evangelical Christianity, liberal reform, and Victorian morality. When British public opinion could be brought to focus on the moral or humanitarian aspects of a given issue, politicians ignored it at their own peril. It was indeed "not safe" in terms of domestic politics. Thus while British policy-makers responded to the fairly standard considerations of 19th-Century European imperialism (i.e. profit, prestige, military strategy), they also had to

respond to Victorian England's peculiar vision of its mission to civilize and protect.

By the 1870s, the moral and humanitarian aspects of the Fijian question were increasingly being brought to the attention of the British public, largely by those working in the missionary effort in the Pacific. There was a new awareness of the threat to the very survival of indigenous peoples posed by the European presence. In the period between 1860 and 1873, the Fijian population had declined from 200,000 to 170,000. By 1881, after a disastrous measles epidemic, the native population had dropped to 114,748.³ Moreover, the settlers' demands for land and labor were incomprehensible to traditional Fijian society and threatened to overwhelm it. Although the concept of permanent alienation of land hardly existed among the Fijians, for example, by the time of the Cession of 1874, the settlers were claiming title to more land than actually existed in Fiji.

By the 1870s, the missionaries had, in addition to general problems of cultural disruption, a specific issue which was all but guaranteed to arouse public interest in the plight of Fiji. This was the Pacific Islands labor trade. The labor trade to Fiji arose in response to the labor requirements of the cotton planters in the 1860s. They found the local Fijian population unwilling to undertake disagreeable labor from which they derived nothing of traditional value. So between 1864 and 1869, over a thousand laborers from the New Hebrides, and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were recruited as indentured laborers for the plantations of Fiji. In the boom atmosphere of the early cotton-planting years, no one, least of all the planters, was overly scrupulous about the nature of this recruitment.⁴ By 1869 even the British Foreign Secretary was warning that Britain risked "the mortification of seeing a systematic Slave Trade breaking out in a new Quarter."⁵ Nothing could have been better calculated to send a chill up the collective spine of Victorian England. Only thirty years previously the abolition of the slave trade in all British possessions had been one of the focal points of English reform movements, and memories of that struggle were still vivid.

In 1871, as if to vindicate the missionary-reformer position, Bishop Patteson, the Anglican missionary bishop of the Pacific, was murdered in the Solomon Islands by islanders who apparently had mistaken his group for the despised labor recruiters. Partly as a consequence of this unfortunate incident, Parliament enacted the Pacific Islander Protection Act which required all vessels engaged in the labor trade to have a license from either a British consul or an Australian

governor. But the prevailing view among reform groups in England was that this measure was both inadequate and unenforceable. As long as Fiji, the center of this iniquitous trade, remained unstable and unregulated, abuses would continue. Not surprisingly, both the Aborigines Protection Society and the Anti-Slavery Society campaigned vigorously in Parliament for the acceptance of the Cession of Fiji in 1874.⁶

However, even the staunchest advocates of humane and protective measures did not envision a very innovative role for the new government of Fiji. If the government corrected the worst abuses of the labor trade, checked the most exploitive planters and provided law and order, it would have done its duty. If it could also encourage industrious habits and Christian virtues and otherwise help the indigenous population along the road to civilization, so much the better.⁷ To these criteria, the Colonial Office would certainly have added that the new colony must absolutely not become an economic burden for the British taxpayer. In short, the scheme of government for Fiji envisioned by most of the interested parties in 1874 was rather simple and undemanding. Contrary to these expectations, British government in Fiji extended its law and order function to become the preserver and protector of an entire indigenous culture. This remarkable development was almost exclusively the work of Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, the first British Governor of Fiji.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF GORDON'S NATIVE POLICY

No one could have disputed Gordon's qualifications for the new post. Although only 45, he had 15 years experience as a colonial governor, serving first in New Brunswick, and then in Trinidad and the Mauritius Islands. The two latter posts gave him, in the Colonial Office's view, invaluable experience in dealing with "native peoples." His family background was impeccable, a matter of no small consequence in a Britain where politics remained a largely aristocratic preserve. His father, Lord Aberdeen, had been Prime Minister. Gladstone was a family friend who had once employed Gordon as his secretary.

What was less obvious but far more critical for the development of Fiji were Gordon's singular ambition and his own peculiar vision of the British mission. "I feel," he confessed, "an excessive desire to be eminent . . . and though I feel that it can never make me happy, I still most earnestly desire greatness and power."⁸ It is safe to assume

that he defined greatness and power in terms of bettering the human lot and establishing his own place in history rather than as material gain. He was always well-to-do despite his later complaints concerning the strain on his resources incurred by his colonial posts. More importantly, he had from childhood been surrounded by the major British political figures of the day, almost all of whom were fierce advocates of the Victorian virtues of progress and reform. As a student, he also absorbed, through the so-called Oxford Movement which emphasized intensified religious feeling, a religious sensibility which remained with him throughout his life. Finally, Gordon had a born aristocrat's sense of *noblesse oblige* which, combined with a proper dose of Victorian self-confidence, convinced him that, left alone, he could achieve something worthwhile.

Gordon's colonial record, prior to 1874, provides ample evidence of these humanitarian, reformist predilections. His efforts to improve the lot of Trinidad's Indian indentured laborers, for example, resulted in a drop in the mortality rate for workers in their first year's residence from 12% in 1865 to 4% by 1869.⁹ Still, Fiji presented Gordon with a new and unique opportunity to fulfill his ambitions. To begin with, it had the inestimable advantage, in Gordon's view, of being a simple Crown Colony where policy would be largely a matter of the governor's initiative. Aside from the lack of troublesome parliamentary, consultative bodies of the sort which had driven him to distraction in New Brunswick, Fiji's lack of strategic or economic importance meant that the Colonial Office might leave him alone (a hope not fully realized). The planters, too, appeared to have insufficient numbers and wealth to be a major obstacle to the governor's will. And most enticing of all, Fiji offered the prospect of devising a system of rule for a still viable native culture. A Victorian idealist with aristocratic leanings could hardly have asked for more. Thus, when he queried Carnarvon as to whether the intention was that "Fiji be regarded as a position to be held or as a colony to be developed," the question seems rather rhetorical.¹⁰ And in Carnarvon, he found the support necessary for the pursuit of his vision of Fiji.

What exactly was this vision? It might be just as well to establish what it was not. However advanced his thinking, Gordon was still a 19th-Century man, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that his Fijian policy was entirely outside that context. It is unlikely that he was ever absolutely opposed to the economic development of the islands or even to the planters *per se*. In an 1875 speech to the assembled planters, he declared "my sympathy for the colored races

is strong, but my sympathy for my own race is stronger."¹¹ Nor is there any indication that he ever envisioned Fiji as some sort of anthropological preserve where the indigenous population would remain frozen in time.

What was distinctive in Gordon's outlook was the realization that native society was an integrated, complex system which required an integrated approach if it was to be governed effectively. "The moral sense of a semi-civilized race," he wrote to Carnarvon, "is often very unlike our own, but is not on that account the less real; and it would be a great mistake to suppose that it does not exercise a most powerful influence upon thought and action. It is therefore of the utmost importance to seize, if possible, the spirit in which native institutions have been framed and endeavor to work them as to develop to the utmost possible extent the latent capacities of the people for the management of their own affairs, without exciting their suspicion or destroying their self-respect."¹²

The Fijians, as Gordon encountered them in 1875, seemed to vindicate all his views. Within weeks of his arrival, he was writing to Gladstone praising their high regard for women, their level of education, their industriousness, and even their language which he found remarkably similar to Greek. Their state of civilization resembled, he thought, that of the Highland Scots some 400 years earlier.¹³ This is a most instructive comparison, for it implies that Gordon saw Fijian culture as part and parcel of the human process of civilization and not as something unchanging and apart. It had in it the same possibilities, the same potential as other civilizations, if it could be given some protection from the European presence which threatened to overwhelm it.

The key elements in the development of Gordon's native policy were, then, his conviction that native society was a complex affair presently capable of managing many of its own affairs and potentially capable of evolving a full-fledged civilization, and the absolute necessity of protecting this society from the certain ruin too rapid change would bring. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that an understanding of all Gordon's actions in Fiji depends on an appreciation of these points. It could be argued that given Fiji's remoteness, the lack of administrative personnel, and the need to pacify a suspicious population, a native rule policy was the only practical alternative available to Gordon. But was it? Certainly these same limitations occurred elsewhere in the Pacific without producing the elaborate, highly integrated system of native involvement that Gordon and his

aides devised. Moreover, one is struck by Gordon's sense of beleaguering in trying to preserve his policies in the face of opposition from planters, missionaries, and elements in the Colonial Office. It hardly seems likely that so much ire would have been generated by a more conventional administrator less intent on innovation. Rather, it seems more logical to assume that the implementation and protection of the ideals embodied in his native policy became the first priorities of Gordon's regime. Convenience and thrift mattered much less than what he saw as the obligation of Western Civilization to native peoples.

Gordon's scheme for the protection of the delicate organism of Fijian society involved a three-part program of non-alienation of native land, native control of native affairs exercised through a permanent Council of Chiefs, and a taxation system based on payment in produce rather than cash. Land reform, which culminated in the Land Ordinance of 1881, stemmed partly from the chaos over land titles which was the legacy of the early years of European settlement and partly from the government's realization that Fijian society had to have this base if it was to survive. A land commission was appointed which, after having conferred a fairly generous settlement on the planters, established the principle that land had traditionally been held by the entire community or *mataqali* and that there had been no permanent alienation of these holdings. Whether such a principle actually had governed land tenure is questionable, since by the mid-1870s traditional practice had been corrupted to such an extent that not even the Fijian chiefs were really clear on the matter. But Gordon, perhaps taking his clue from the speculations of the missionary-anthropologist, Lorimer Fison, thought it might well have been so. In any case, the Land Ordinance of 1880 solved the critical problem of unlimited European land claims which, had they gone unchecked, would have destroyed the Fijians' economic independence.¹⁴

This land policy dovetailed neatly with the second aspect of Gordon's program, native administration of native affairs. The key element here was the authority of the traditional chiefs, which Gordon saw as the best bet for holding Fijian society together. He therefore enhanced that authority by making them responsible for land distribution within the Fijian community and the administration of a new law code based on Fijian customary law. Moreover, with the formation of a permanent Council of Chiefs, they had an important advisory role in the government itself.¹⁵ Gordon further

enhanced their prestige by carefully grafting British authority onto the traditional system. The governor became, in Gordon's presentation, the high chief. To make this point, he even went so far as to hold daily *yagona* drinking ceremonials at Government House.¹⁶

But the real work horse of the native policy was Gordon's taxation scheme. Using a system based on E.B. Money's *How to Govern a Colony*, an account of Dutch administration in Java, Gordon proposed replacing the head tax payable in cash or labor with a tax payable in cash crops raised in the village which would then be sold by government agents. The benefits of such a system were legion in terms of preserving Fijian society. The authority of the chiefs would be strengthened since they were charged with assessment, supervision, and labor distribution. Agriculture and industrious habits would be encouraged. The Fijians would gain experience in the production of cash crops, thus gaining knowledge of the western economic system which would better equip them to deal with European traders. Most important of all, the system would put an end to the depopulation and cultural erosion of the village which had been a very serious consequence of the need to earn cash to pay taxes.¹⁷ In other words, taxation in kind meant that the Fijian could stay in the village and continue to be a Fijian.

This scheme, so ideal in terms of Gordon's vision, was the source of all manner of difficulty between Gordon and his two other constituencies, the planters and the Colonial Office. For it must be remembered that Gordon had to discharge his responsibilities to them as well as to the Fijians. The planters, to reiterate, were British subjects who fully expected government co-operation in their quest for economic stability. Unfortunately, their hopes of economic success were geared to plantation agriculture which required a dependable supply of labor. Pacific Island labor, for reasons which will be explored, was a fading hope, and now Gordon's taxation scheme deprived them of the readily available alternative, the Fijians. The outcry was tremendous. "My greatest difficulty," Gordon wrote to Gladstone, "will be in resistance of the unreasonable demands of the planters for slave labor."¹⁸

While Carnarvon remained steadfast in his support, Gordon was fully aware that other elements in the Colonial Office gave ear to the planters' complaints and favored unrestrained development. For if the liberalism which dominated the British politics of the day was reformist and moralistic, it was equally devoted to *laissez-faire* economics. There were those, said Gordon, who held that "natives

have no rights, and that though their interests should be regarded, if any—even the most important interest of the native is opposed to any—even the slightest interest of the settlers, it must of necessity be set aside.”¹⁹

Moreover, the guiding principle of the Colonial Office throughout the period continued to be economic self-sufficiency. Britain had at the time of the cession assumed the financial obligations of the short-lived native government and had made an outright grant to cover the costs of establishing the colonial administration. But now the time had come for the colony to generate its own income. While Gordon’s taxation scheme brought in more income than the head tax, it was not enough to fund administration, much less cover the costs of his ambitious plans for the Fijians, which included schools, medical care, and agricultural development. The Colonial Office was emphatic in its refusal to keep providing funds. “Sir Arthur Gordon,” said one highly placed official, “must be told in official language that he must cut his coat according to his cloth.”²⁰

Now the tortuous process of accommodating pragmatic considerations without jeopardizing native policy began in earnest. For Gordon must have known that unless he could put Fiji on a sound financial footing and placate both the settlers and the Colonial Office, his native policy would not survive his own tenure in office. Since Fiji’s major asset was its agricultural potential, the obvious answer was to encourage a cash crop which would rescue the planters and, above all, provide income for the colony. If the Fijians could participate as *producers*, so much the better. Indeed, one scholar of colonial Fiji maintains that, far from being anti-development, Gordon’s major objective next to the establishment of his native policy, was the attraction of new capital to Fiji. Such capital would have to come from sources outside Fiji, for the planters themselves were almost totally without assets. The solution to Gordon’s economic woes was, therefore, to be found in large-scale investment.²¹

The problem of dependable labor, however, continued to be a stumbling block. Gordon aside, the Fijian chiefs, who were responsible for the tax system, adamantly opposed the use of their village labor on the plantations and finally forbade the practice outright. At the same time, the other source of labor, islanders recruited from elsewhere in the Pacific, ceased to be a viable alternative. The islander labor trade had continued under government supervision and figured in Fijian labor until 1879. But it could not begin to meet the demand from the planters, much less accommodate the large-scale enterprises

Gordon wanted to attract. Of the 1000 laborers immediately needed in 1877, for example, recruiters were able to supply only 110. With declining island populations and competition from Queensland where wages were twice those offered in Fiji, the situation was unlikely to improve.²²

Gordon, perhaps drawing upon his previous experience in Mauritius and Trinidad, sought a solution in a new (for Fiji) practically limitless source of supply: India. As early as 1875, he was urging the planters to supplement island labor with that of Indian indentured laborers, and in 1877 he proposed active recruitment of Indian laborers who would be offered five-year contracts at one shilling a day for males and nine pence for women. At the end of the contract period, they would have the option to renew for another five years and have free passage home at the end of ten years, or else they could remain in Fiji. By these means, Gordon hoped to guarantee a steady labor supply and thus justify the higher cost of transporting Indians (£14 a head versus £7 for Islanders).²³ Planters resistance to this expensive proposition notwithstanding, the government proceeded with its plans for Indian recruitment and financed the passage of the first group of Indian laborers who arrived in Fiji in 1879.

Thus recruitment of Indian labor came about by government initiative and was not a direct response to the planters who, despite their pressing needs, resisted the idea. Why was Gordon so intent on developing this new labor source? And why was plantation labor, which he so vehemently opposed for Fijians, permissible for Islanders and Indians? Gordon's position suggests hypocrisy. But again, this labor policy reflects the balancing act by which he hoped to preserve his native policy. Labor was the *sine qua non* for economic development. Fijian labor was unacceptable. To resist successfully the planters demands for Fijian labor and at the same time encourage investment, an alternative labor force had to be found quickly. While either Islander or Indian would have been acceptable, Islander labor could not supply the demand, whereas India could export thousands of workers without even denting her vast population. Moreover, the effect of plantation labor on this group would not, in Gordon's view, be particularly detrimental. While plantation labor threatened Fijian communal life, the more individualistic Indians had little to lose on this score.²⁴ In economic terms, their lot in Fiji would surely be an improvement over their life in India. In this Gordon shared the position of the home government which, in the 1870s, was urging a rather reluctant British administration in India to encourage

emigration.²⁵ Finally, given his previous experience with Indian labor, Gordon must have felt that abuses could be controlled and that the whole system could be administered humanely.

Indian labor can, therefore, be seen as the best solution for Gordon's immediate problems. The planters would have labor (albeit not of the type they preferred) and a chance for economic recovery. Economic development and, hence, economic stability would become more feasible. Indian laborers stood to better their lot. And above all, Fijian society could proceed along its evolutionary course free from the damaging effects of plantation labor. The question to be examined is whether or not this "best of all possible worlds" materialized.

III. THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF GORDON'S POLICY

Certainly the promise of a readily available labor force *did* clear the way for economic development in that it removed one of the major obstacles to the production of what soon became Fiji's primary cash crop. Even before Gordon's arrival on the scene, Fiji's European population had shown an interest in sugar as a possible replacement for cotton. It was well-established that sugar would grow there, and its market possibilities were most attractive. Consumption of sugar had been increasing throughout the 19th Century. In Britain, by 1860, yearly consumption *per capita* had reached 34.5 lbs. Growing market demand in Australia and New Zealand promised to outstrip domestic production in Queensland, and Fiji was strategically located to take advantage of these markets.

As early as 1874, John Bates Thurston, who was to be one of Gordon's most valuable aides and later governor of Fiji, actively sought large-scale investment in Fiji by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia. In 1877, he proposed that the Fijian government raise a substantial loan which would be used to guarantee a 3% return on private investment in sugar mills. The plan was vetoed by the ever-parsimonious Colonial Office. Throughout the 1870s, a number of investors, the CSR among them, continued to show some interest in investment in Fiji. The concessions they demanded, however, included control of a labor force the government would supply (and which they assumed would be Fijian), government guarantees of a steady supply of cane, and government assistance in acquiring land and mill sites. All of this was too much for Gordon's government.

But by 1880, the government's attitude had become more flexible. This may have been due to Gordon's sense of urgency as his term of office drew to a close. Moreover, an outbreak of the same coffee leaf disease which had destroyed coffee production in Ceylon effectively eliminated coffee as an alternative cash crop and source of investment. Labor, of course, no longer posed a major problem. In fact, the government had found it difficult to employ all the Indian laborers it had imported in 1879 and was most anxious to be relieved of the cost of maintaining them. Hence, an agreement was reached with the CSR in which the government promised to sell the company 1000 acres. The company was not obliged to take a quota of Fijian-produced cane which had been one of Gordon's earlier stipulations, reflecting his hope of integrating Fijians into the larger economy. The CSR was most amenable to taking on the 200 Indian laborers still on the government's hands and was soon requesting more.²⁶

If, however, sugar was an economic boon, its introduction had serious long-range consequences for practically every element of Fijian colonial society and cast a long shadow over Gordon's vision. A key factor in understanding these consequences is the matter of scale. CSR and the other companies which invested in Fiji were large scale and thus able to utilize capital and other resources not available to smaller enterprises. In very short order the smaller planters found themselves unable to compete, particularly in securing labor. When long-term government assistance was not forthcoming to help defray the cost of expensive Indian labor, they found themselves priced out of the labor market by the large sugar companies. Of the 500 laborers introduced in Fiji in 1884, for example, only 20 or 30 went to small planters. Many of these planters eventually became company employees themselves. Thus, the independent European planter never became a factor in Fijian sugar production. It has been suggested that this outcome was not welcomed by Gordon's successors or the Colonial Office. For despite their opposition to the native policy, it had been hoped that the planters would provide a counter-balance to the impersonal, absentee interests of the sugar companies. But "in a field bounded by Treasury's caution and Gordon's Fijian policy, the victory went to those who provided the most and asked the least."²⁷

Clearly the sugar companies did just that. Increasingly, they provided most of the government's revenue. Thus, the solvency of the Fijian government became linked to sugar profits. Gordon's precedents on land alienation and Fijian labor held, but in countless other ways the sugar companies' interests had to be accommodated.

In these circumstances, whatever humane intentions Gordon and his successors may have had towards Fiji's Indian laborers were swept aside. The circumstances in which they were recruited were dubious, and the conditions in which they lived and worked were harsh indeed.

Indian labor was recruited, for the most part, from the most depressed areas of India among people left landless by population pressure and indebtedness. It is arguable in strictly economic terms that Fiji was indeed the land of opportunity the recruiters promise. In human terms, the indenture system is much less defensible. Family life in the early years was virtually impossible given the small number of women recruited and the lack of accommodations for those families who did emigrate together. Living conditions were generally deplorable. And worst of all, the nature and amount of work to be done was solely determined by the companies. Despite the efforts of a few conscientious immigration officials, little was done to correct abuses. The government's sympathies lay with the companies. In May 1886, for example, 130 immigrants from the Rewa Sugar Company marched to Suva carrying knives and hoes to protest an increase in the despised "task" system in which workers were paid only if they completed a set task in a set time. The government response was to pass an ordinance penalizing laborers for insufficient labor and forbidding groups of more than five laborers to stage a protest or to carry tools when doing so.²⁸

Conditions became so bad that even the Colonial Office stirred itself to protest that unless conditions among Fiji's immigrants improved, it was likely that the government of India would forbid recruitment. But Calcutta took no such action. Nor did the Colonial Office ever back its protest with funds for the better regulation of indentured labor.²⁹

Until 1916, this "human subsidy" on which Gordon's native policy depended remained largely forgotten. Aside from the odd government official, the Indian laborers had no advocates. When the indenture system was abolished in 1916, it was largely in response to growing Indian nationalism and not out of British concern for the plight of Fiji's Indian laborers. Perhaps there can be no more stinging indictment of the system's failings than that the suicide statistics for Indians in the indenture period; the rate was nine times that of Madras. It was not without reason that the immigrants themselves referred to life in the labor lines as "narak" (Hell).³⁰

The indenture system had an impact on the social structure of Fiji as well as on the laborers themselves. Here again scale is an important

factor to consider. Of all the products of tropical agriculture which had become important for Europeans, sugar lent itself best to the plantation unit staffed by a large organized work force. Sugar involved a number of repetitious tasks requiring considerable labor. And in "crop time" it was necessary to work non-stop in order to process the cut cane before its quality declined.

When large-scale sugar production first developed in the West Indies, that work force was supplied by slave labor. Indeed, the indentured labor system itself developed in the 19th Century as a response to the void left by the abolition of slavery.³¹ The significance of this for Fiji is that labor had to be imported in large numbers to meet the demands of sugar production. Between 1879 and 1916, 60,000 Indians entered Fiji. Of these only a small percentage returned to India.

It is unlikely that this is what Gordon envisioned. The exact status of these laborers in Fiji was not worked out when he embarked on his program. The question of whether emigration was to be temporary or permanent colonization was never settled and consequently neither was the question of Indian rights in the colony.³² In other British colonies, Indian workers had received grants of Crown land in lieu of passage home at the end of their contract period and were, to some degree, absorbed into the local scene. Fiji's Indians were cut off from this possibility by Gordon's non-alienation of land policy. So Fijian society now included a new, growing, culturally distinct element which was cut off from both traditional Fijian society and the British power structure. This volatile situation continues to be an important part of Fiji's colonial legacy.

When Gordon left Fiji in 1880, Gladstone wrote, "I think your spirit and feeling toward the natives is an honour to the Empire, so sadly disgraced in other quarters."³³ But Gordon himself was far less sure of his achievement. "The poor people whose rights I have striven to maintain and whose existence I have tried to preserve are not the less surely stripped of those rights and this is failure."³⁴

These "honor and failure" designations still characterize appraisals of Gordon's administration. There are those who maintain that Gordon understood very little of the true nature of Fijian culture and that by imposing on it his artificial, overly protective system he weakened its ability to adapt to a changing world.³⁵ Even Gordon's contemporaries questioned the value of the native policy for its intended beneficiaries. The report of the Commission of Fiji in 1896 stated that for a generation the Fijians had been "progressing on the

stumps of their own customs assisted by fragments of European innovations.”³⁶ Others, however, point out that Gordon’s primary goal, the survival of the Fijian people in their own land, was attained. If his system was make-shift in terms of Fijian tradition, they argue, it must be remembered that Gordon had only a few years in which to create a buffer for a threatened people. His goal was not to recreate traditional society but to stabilize a situation that was out of hand.³⁷

It would seem, however, that the exact nature and function of the native policy was far less critical for Fiji in the long run than Gordon’s decision to introduce both Indian labor and large-scale agriculture. They were perfectly logical choices at the time, and to question Gordon’s good intentions would be petty. But in doing so he laid the groundwork for a system where the identity of interests between the chiefs, the government, and the sugar companies made change difficult. Both Fijian commoners and Indian laborers tended to get left out. But the latter, once the miserable early years passed, became a dynamic force in Fiji in both economic and numerical terms. Yet they remained outside this coalition of interests. It is not a problem that has yet resolved itself, and there are those who see in it a 20th-Century threat to Fijian culture. At the very least, Gordon’s solutions to the immediate problems of his own day entailed new difficulties for Fiji.

NOTES

¹ William P. Morrell, *Britain in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 137.

² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³ John D. Legge, *British in Fiji, 1858-1880* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1958), p. 3.

⁴ Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, pp. 23-56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶ Paul Knaplund, “Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji: Some Gordon-Gladstone Letters,” *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, VIII, no. 31 (1958), 282-83.

⁷ Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, p. 144.

⁸ J.K. Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, First Lord Stanmore, 1889-1912* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur H. Gordon*, p. 14.

¹¹ Knaplund, “Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji,” p. 287.

¹² Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur H. Gordon*, p. 192.

- ¹³ Knaplund, "Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji," p. 293.
- ¹⁴ Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, p. 203. Gordon appears to have independently developed most of his views on land tenure. He did, however, rely on Fison for the concept of inalienability of Fijian land. In Fison's view, the traditional land tenure system was based on tribal or, more specifically, *mataquli* rights, which could not be transferred, even by conquest. Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, p. 190-191.
- ¹⁵ Peter France, *The Charter of the Land: Custom and Colonization in Fiji* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 120-122.
- ¹⁶ Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur H. Gordon*, pp. 193-194.
- ¹⁷ Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, p. 207.
- ¹⁸ Knaplund, "Sir Arthur Gordon and Fiji," p. 294.
- ¹⁹ Morrell, *Britain in the Pacific*, p. 382.
- ²⁰ Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, p. 272.
- ²¹ Michael Moynagh, *Brown or White? A History of the Fiji Sugar Industry, 1873-1973* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1981), pp. 13-18.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ²³ Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur H. Gordon*, p. 208.
- ²⁴ K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 26.
- ²⁵ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London: Oxford University Press), p. 28.
- ²⁶ Technically, the land ordinance forbidding alienation of land was not yet in effect. Gillion maintains that this land concession was the bare minimum needed to get sugar established and that it represented no real break in Gordon's protective policies. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 70; Moynagh, *Brown or White?* pp. 21-24.
- ²⁷ Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 75.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ³¹ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, p. 27.
- ³² Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 27.
- ³³ Knaplund, "Sir Arthur Gordon in Fiji", p. 296.
- ³⁴ Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur H. Gordon*, p. 347.
- ³⁵ France, *The Charter of the Land*.
- ³⁶ R.F. Watters, *Koro: Economic Development and Social Change in Fiji* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) p. 33.
- ³⁷ Ian Heath, "Toward a Reassessment of Gordon in Fiji", *Journal of Pacific History*, IX (1974), 91-92.