Fisherman Without a Boat: Observations on the Contemporary Clans' System In Fiji

R. Christopher Morgan
Department of Pacific and Asian Studies
University of Victoria

Occasional Paper #28
October 2003

Box 1700, STN CSC
Victoria, BC
Canada V8W 2Y2

Tel.: (250) 721-7020
Fax: (250) 721-3107
E-mail: capi@uvic.ca

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Morgan, R. Christopher, 1952-
Fisherman without a boat : observations on the contemporary clans' system in Fiji / R. Christopher Morgan.

(Occasional paper)
ISBN 1-55058-281-X

1. Clans--Fiji. I. UVic Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives. II. Title.
III. Series: Occasional papers (UVic Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives)

GN671.F5M67 2003 306.83'099611 C2003-906144-2

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Introduction

The title of my talk today comes from a statement by one of my sources in the field, a son of a hereditary chief in a sea clan on the Wainikeli Coast of Taveuni in the Fiji Islands. During an interview on how the clan system is operating today, this source made a parallel between the clan system and a boat that could not be put to sea – his own boat, in fact, that was hauled up on the black sand beach by their village. The planks of the vessel were stove in, the deck uncertain, the superstructure was in tangles, and there was no rudder. A nautical metaphor: ship of state, boat of clan. The keel of this boat was sound, made of ironwood, almost indestructible, except by fire. My source extended his metaphor to the keel to say that the only hope for his district, and for Fiji as a whole, was to rebuild on that firm keel and establish a course of direction again.

In this talk, at one level I want to substantiate this metaphor and give voice to the issues and problems it represents. At another level, I seek to analyze the situation and to put up a specific (anthropological-type) argument about trend in the clan system during the contemporary period. The specific argument about clan dynamics applies to the case under study, but no doubt many of you may think of other cases – in Canada, across the Pacific, or internationally, that have resemblances to this one that could show potential to generalise or make further abstraction on aspects of this model.

A method of approach must be developed in reference to particular questions. This requirement is especially important for field work projects because by nature they involve periods of data collection that are rare and are not easily replicable. In fact I have taken a long-term return field trip approach in this study in large part to carefully, and on the basis of observation, develop data requirements and methods for the analysis. The approach combines elements from social and economic anthropology and world history, as I will outline, but breaks with some established ideas in those disciplines: such as the assumption of a clan to class transition (in anthropology) and the premise of one shared overarching value system in wealth circulation (world history).

Based in Canada, rather than in the immediate region, the field research approach involved going to the same place three times in a ten year period, a strategy that proved very successful as a way to establish rapport and trust with my sources (both ways) as well as to compile targeted data and to build up arguments based on observation rather than on a priori hypothesis. For students and researchers considering fieldwork, especially those who have families at home, such an approach is a big commitment in terms of time, energy, psychology, emotion and health, but it can yield some understanding of what is going on "out there" in the Asia-Pacific region that possibly goes deeper into the processes and that, at least, is different from other styles of research.

Historical Context

The basic question that framed my focus on Fiji was: How are people living in clan communities getting along in the contemporary world system? I chose Fiji after having previously studied in Tonga (which does not have an intact clan system) as Fiji is an exemplary case where clan organisation has continued into the 20th and now the 21st century. As is well known in the literature, though subject to differing interpretations, after the Deed of Cession to Britain in 1874, the social-engineering policies of the colonial government fixed the clan system (as it was then understood) in law. A few ranking Fijians were sent to grammar and university schools in Britain to train to become a new bureaucratic elite. Indentured labourers and free migrants came from India commencing in 1879, mainly to work cane, and most stayed. Meanwhile most of the indigenous Fijians were left "down on the farm" or "out in their boats", if you prefer, working the clan lands and seas, going to church and honouring their chiefs. A relatively conservative orientation where the principal passions were "Christ, chiefs and coconuts" lasted through independence in 1970 but clearly had ended by the time of the first military coup in 1987, that was carried out by indigenous soldiers against mainly Indian politicians, who had come to power earlier that year. External and internal pressures have continued, leading to the civilian coup attempt under George Speight in May, of the year 2000, of which you no doubt have read or heard in the media.

Many forms of new economic development took place in the 19th and 20th centuries. Along with sugar, there are other cash crops, gold mining, fisheries and sea product exports, manufacturing, tourism in some areas, and government employment. How then had life in the clan changed by association with new developments, particularly since the beginning of the 20th century?

Theory and Method

Research on this question required a historical as well as a critical anthropological approach. In particular, it required pre-test data, that is, good description of the clan system at an earlier point in time. Pre-test or baseline historical data are necessary because no control or other comparison unit can provide an accurate representation of the conditions of the clans as they were at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, the material had to speak on its own behalf; I did not want to presume on a theoretical basis that the trend was one of widespread disintegration of the clan system in Engelian form to a system of rural households and new class communities. That, at the very least, was an empirical question, not because the clans were defined in law - they could collapse at the edges – but because I did not want to transfer a model of development from elsewhere into the Pacific without empirical scrutiny. I was

considering that other kinds of change, building on indigenous foundations, in particular structural changes internal to the clan system itself, might be more important to understand. In effect, this approach re-problematises the concept of "clan", brings it into the present, and requires a search for "clans today": clans operating within the present world economy and society.

Nor did I want to assume that the main trends were new ones which were the result of economic forces emanating from the West. As those who are familiar with world history debates will recognise, the idea that entirely new and special conditions associated with the "rise of the West" are making history today, in a departure from past trends, is being questioned by many world-system analysts who seek to push the framework of world history further back. Several of these theorists have called for a reorientation of thinking about history to look in an extended and wider historical context for continuities, long-term cycles, connections and phases of rise and fall, to name a few.

In a short discussion paper, one can only address the assumptions of this perspective in outline, and I concur with many of them, but for today I should like to draw light on to two basic points derived from a critical reading of some of these works. One is a circumstance surrounding the application of this approach to the Oceania region and the second is a criticism of one of its assumptions.

The Oceania or Pacific Islands' region presents some special challenges to the world-history approach. Not attached to any continental central trade system, island societies were among the last to be connected into the larger world system, even though I would peg the beginning of a literal world system to the passages of the Manila galleons across Oceania from Manila to Mexico and thence to Spain, commencing the first trade and tribute system that was truly global in extent. Oceania featured several sub-world regional systems linking inhabited archipelagos (such as the West Polynesia system that united Fiji, Tonga and Samoa island groups) but not regular external connections. Another challenge, in the form of an assumption, is the problem that models of cycles and system fluctuations often entail an idea that circulation has been based on consistent schemes of economic value – essentially commodity-like value – and that shifts in centres, as well as satellite responses, rise out of system dynamics were associated with one shared overarching type of circulation value.

Other cultural theories of value have provided foundations of power. Such is especially the case for Pacific Island systems where subsistence and prestige-gift circulation were predominant. The people of Fiji have cultural values of a stratified society of chiefs and commoners, confederacies and vassal provinces and taukei (original landholders) and vulagi (guests and incomers) that is maintained by unequal reciprocity-type exchanges between ranked groups.

Changes in the clan system must be examined with reference to such values as well as to the rising importance of market relations and state structures (which most

development studies focus on). The interaction of differing value systems, each of which might be the basis of identity, power and integration, is a key dynamic for understanding many chapters of world history including the Fiji one. The interactions of different orders of subsystems, or levels in the world system, and the links involved in the interaction of the levels, are part of the method for apprehending changes in clan structures.

Let us move on then to sketch some aspects of the clan organisation and the trends in the last 90 years. To make it fit into our time, I will concentrate on leadership within clans, leadership vested in chiefly titles that are the focus of clan identity.

Form of Clan Organisation

There was considerable variation in forms of clan organisation and leadership across Fiji, in large part because the archipelago was experiencing internal expansion by western groups moving eastward, a process that was still occurring when colonial rule was established. Fortunately, we have a superb account of clan and title systems in the north and east of the country in the work of A. M. Hocart who compiled the data in 1912. (This work – The Northern States of Fiji was published posthumously in 1952.) The Wainikeli district of north Taveuni is included in the 1912 material that provides baseline data and became the focus for particular field study.

It is important to give substantive meaning to the concept of clan and other social concept for the case, rather than build on analogy with Western systems, that are separated by several thousand years of history. The institutions of the ancients come closer to the Fijian forms than do our own, and even there, analogies are limited. To grasp the Fijian identity and the passions that occupy the Fijian people, it is of essential importance to try to grasp their conceptualisations. I don't wish to get bogged down with this issue, so let's take some illustration.

A main concept is vanua; often translated as "land", it is more than that. Vanua has physical, social and cultural dimensions that are inter-related. It denotes the land area with which one is associated, the flora and fauna, and other objects on it. It includes social and cultural elements – the people, their traditions and customs, beliefs, values and social institutions – these provide a source of security and confidence. It is the locality in which ancestral spirits reside (represented by their bones and foundation stones) watching over the affairs of living descendants. It has been said that for most Fijians to part with the vanua is tantamount to parting with their lives. One can see that transition to a new class structure, at the very least, is no simple process in the context and such transition may not be primarily economic – perhaps it never was! And the willingness to use violence to protect the vanua is more readily understood when what is being protected is comprehended in these terms.

Below the order of the vanua, that corresponds in good part today with the provinces of the country, are the sub-orders yavusa whose social core is a maximal kin

unit with common descent, the mataqali, which generally is translated as “clan”, and whose members recognise shared descent from a shared ancestor, and the i tokatoka. That as a general translation can be regarded as a local clan segment. The main landholding units are the mataqali and the i tokatoka, but this corporate component is only one dimension of the meaning of these entities for the Fijians.

The term mataqali is flexible with meaning in context. In active life, the mataqali was an assessment unit for feasts, that is to say, contributions in pigs, yams, fish, turtles, prestige gifts, etc., are assessed by mataqali, not merely by their heads who represent them. As Hocart described, the term is composed of mata and qali. Qali means having ties with one another, generally of spiritual vassalage, and so might be translated as vassal, subject. Mata literally translates as eye, face, group. The term group is inadequate to the concept, the collectivity must have a shared lineage. Fijians say the face is a sacred spot, a grave, a temple. The face may be manifest in a sacred stone that contains the essence and identity of the group. These understandings lead to the recognition that a mata is a group of kinsfolk with a common sacred place; a mataqali (vassal face) is such a group that has ties with another such group, which is all groups in real history. The idea of a descent congregation that is associated with a shrine is perhaps the most effective way to convey the sense of meaning.

The structure of clan leadership in the yavusa of Wainikeli featured a system of alternating leadership, still operating in 1912. The principal title, known as the Ratu Tue, alternated between two clan units in the villages of Naselesele and Qeleni. In 1912, the late Roko Tue had been of Naselesele and the living one was of Qeleni. The next one should be of Naselesele. As Hocart reported: ‘If a Roko Tue ‘falls’ (i.e. dies) in Ngeleni, they may not ‘make the nobleman drink’ (i.e. install him) in that village, it should go to Naselesele. When the Tue falls in Naselesele, it should go to Qeleni”. After the Wainikeli chief died, the paramount chief of the vanua, the Tui Cakau did not install a leader but after some time sent emissaries to ask: “Who now is your chief?” Wainikeli has never been conquered, by the Tui Cakau or by the British. They are related to the Tui Cakau by marriage and to the British Crown as vassal under the Deed of Cession.

Today (2001), Naselesele has five clans, Qeleni village has four clans. The clan of the Tuein Naselesel is Kaulau, in Qeleni, it is Naqeru. These two clan units together form the clan of Vuanibokoi, bokoi is a kind of tree, and this name translates as fruit of the bokoi tree. We see then that the clan of Vuanibokoi has two sides. One source illustrated this concept by saying that the vua ni bokoi symbolises the link if the clan sections, the sections entwined together as a rope is coiled out of strands.

In Qeleni village are the strones (yavu) of the chiefs, five of them observed, representing chiefs and their people as described. These stones are arrayed along two margins of the village ceremonial green (the rara) and stood as the material sacred points of the chiefs and their clans. When the Tue was from Qeleni, the feasts and ceremonies

that occupied the clans took place on this ceremonial green. (Most of the people whose account I am reporting here are of the Qeleni side.) The specific stone called sava ni vonu meaning stone where the sea turtles are washed (purified) before being cooked for eating. Their chief, the Tui Matapule, holds title over the clan of Naqeru.

Historical Trend in Clan Dynamics

Part of my method was to take copies of texts that describe their area to sources living there and through discussion and translation ask them to comment on the passages. Hocart's text materials were especially valuable in this regard. The technique is an elicitation device designed to elicit statements, stories, comments and critique from the indigenous sources, and it is a method that I would recommend for many field work projects. Part of the relationship is to give copies of everything to the sources as a matter of empowerment, ownership of cultural property related to their area, as well as in recognition and appreciation of the shared work.

When I first shared the 1912 data with the Tui Matapule during a quick reconnaissance trip in 1991, he responded: "This is the way it should be", but would not elaborate. At least I knew then that there was something to find out. At that time I compiled some basic data and confirmed that the project was merited and practical if could develop trust. He put me through a series of tests. The first time it was to accept and give reciprocity. In the next trip in 1996, he insisted that, rather than talking, to understanding Fiji lifeways I must go out to the reefs and fishing isles, where I compiled information on the sea cucumber industry and other subjects. When asked, I also slept in their houses, shared in food, confidences and experiences. In the third trip (eight weeks in October - November 2001) my persistence and forgiveness of some sins were appreciated and the communications broke through to the deeper realm of the culture of the clans. Through these discussions, the meaning of the initial response: "This is the way it should be", began to come forward.

It was a tale of usurpation. The last Tue from Qeleni was one Ratu Lailai, who then was succeeded by Ratu Palasio, resident of the other village but in lineage originally not from Wainikeli but from Macuata district on the north coast of Vanua Levu Island. After Ratu Palasio, his daughter Adi Ma served as regent, then the title went to Adi Ma's brother's-son Ratu Talemo, a younger son resident in the village while the elder brother was away working with the government. This latter, Ratu Soma, returned to the village and I was received by him and conducted a long night interview with him and 16 leading men of the clans in 1996. This Ratu Soma died in July 2001, and the younger brother, who had himself served as a minister in the

Interim Government following the Speight coup of May 2000, returned to the village just before the August 2001 elections, in which he did not run.

The alternating cycle had ceased. Upon the deaths of chiefs in the last three generations, the Naselesele side held on to the title on their side. The clan organisation had undergone internal structural change, from alternating between the two sides of the Vuanibokoi, to being grasped and held by one side of the dual system. Furthermore, as noted, the line that held on to the clan title was not a true Naselesele line. They were plants from Macuata, brought in by strategy of the paramounts in the larger vanua unit. This was the paramounts' way of extending their control in the contemporary period where internal war was not possible.

This stratagem was only one factor. The Naselesele side, where the title was held, had closer links to other levels in the system. There were connections to the state government. This side was better placed for successful economic development activities (that concentrate on land more than sea) by virtue of its location vis-à-vis transport and other facilities and also by the amount of land available at that location. Also, they were better placed for access to the main schools and churches.

New passions – for education, church, material prosperity and government activities – were rising, as the old ones for feasts and ceremony were waning. The Naselesele side was more favourably situated for participation in these larger circuits. In effect, the links to other levels of the system regional, national and international, provided the basis for one side of the clan to become stronger and more permanently established, while the other side became weaker as their leaders did not have equivalent links.

An indication of the non-legitimate nature of this assumption of power, the Naselesele chief holding the title had not drunk the cup, i.e. been formally installed, in which ceremony the heir takes on the spiritual identity of the ancestor. It was believed customarily that if the wrong chief was installed he soon would become sick and die and there are instances of this happening that could be cited. The questionable claim to leadership made installation dangerous, fatal, due to spiritual sanction (that brought illness). Violent response from the other side was not really an issue because of the law. It was possible to easily keep the clan title, hold it and pass it within the one side and not be publicly installed and so avoid any possible danger from the spirits and shamans of a rightful holder in a lineage on either side of the clan.

The Qeleni side were losing the essence of their side of the clan. Focus on sacred places and stones, the spiritual reference points for the clan, gave way to concern with boundaries and borders. So there is a movement away from a focus on spiritual centres and shrines to a focus on borders and boundaries. Many people moved away. Newcomers from other clans did not know or care. Large areas of land around the village with long term-leases that were up in 2001 were not being regained and this land was the major concern of the moment. Meanwhile, lands around Naselesele were being returned, giving further measure of that side's gaining strength.

We could go on documenting additional issues related to land, to control over

commodity circuits by these clan communities, also to control over prestige-gift circuits, and the ways that these have shifted away from the Qeleni side despite their best efforts and some very good ideas. For example, the importance of their presentation of tributes of sea turtle has weakened, diluting the strength and identity of the marine clan under the Tui Matapule. But I think the point has been demonstrated.

Conclusions

Rather than a general breakup of the clan system, the process observed is one of a perestroika or internal restructuring of the relation between the two sides in the clan organisation, with the weight of the two sides tilted onto one side. The strengthening side itself is made even stronger with new blood of clans vassal to the paramount centre, as strategy to secure control by leaders at the higher vanua level, who were never able to conquer Wainikeli by force.

This trend of one side's weakening is not new or recent, a realization that is significant in support of world-system theory arguments. Some of the immediate forms of link are new: to state, school and market – external, higher-level system linkage. But Hocart noted some cases in which this shift was occurring 90 years and more in conjunction with the internal invasions by western Fijian cultural groups, as a new value complex of allegiance to secular chiefs was replacing an older, more local, shamanistic value complex. Hocart saw the alternating chiefly pattern as the more stable form. The parallel and continuity is that, in both past and present periods, changes in relations with larger outside forces, be they indigenous or global, have led to similar structural results – an interior renovation of the clan entity itself, away from the old dualism of alternating sides to a massing of clan power around one pole in the clan system. In other words, the trend apparent in the clan system under contemporary conditions is an extension of one that was taking place in pre-modern times. The main change, the one that the people themselves identify as taking place in the last few generations, is a continuation of older trends associated with earlier changes in local to external conditions, and is not a wholly new one resulting from modernisation and recent globalisation. Not only should we push history further back into the past but we can pull it right up to the present as well. This observation lends further support to a world history approach and also for the future value of fieldwork with a global perspective.

Changes in values are part of the base of successive cycles, however, and this point upholds our critique of the assumption that there has been a unitary circulation value over the long period. Changes in value form are part of successive cycles. This point is reflected in statements from sources. An example arose in reference to a current dispute over succession to the larger vanua title of the Tui Cakau. When asked what those sides were competing over, the main source from Naselesele, the local clan section on the rise, said it was all about money. In contrast, the main source from Qeleni side, in

subsidence, said it was about i yau, that is, traditional prestige valuables. These opposing statements are not contradictory. Rather, both were situated statements that reflected the values of the speaker and the cycle and the side in which they lived. Some of the immediate values are new, the particular types of connections are new to the recent modern past, but this lean toward new values evidently is not an entirely new process. It rather is a recent version of a longer term process where what are old values today had replaced even older ones.

As a final conclusion, we can add further to the metaphor with which we began as a title. Hocart reported that the chief was considered the vessel of the clan ancestral spirit, who is in the font of power and ability to act in the world. It was a son on the losing side of the clan who put up our metaphor. His clan unit was without the Roko Tue title that possessed the authority over the clan and area. That title was tied to another chiefly vessel from elsewhere, not loaded properly into it but simply attached to it, since the newcomers had not drunk the installation cup. From his perspective, inside the marine clan on the Qeleni side, there was no vessel containing the main ancestral spirit, and the power and essence associated with the leadership title. He was, as a result, able to operate only in a limited space of the nearby land and along the shore. Marooned by the conditions of history, this clansman, both in literal and in deeper metaphorical terms of the clan's chief as vessel, was a fisherman without a boat.