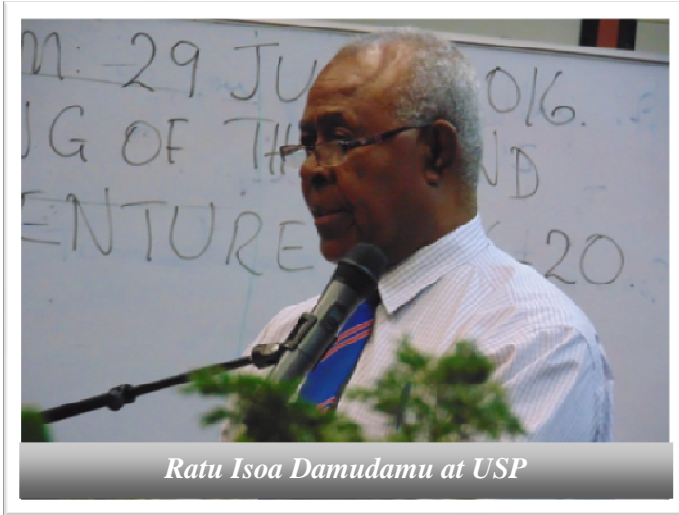


I am a Gone ni Noco

by Sashi Kiran

"You belong to us and we belong to you" has to be the quote of the Century!

These were the words of the Turaga na Tui Noco, Ratu Isoa Damudamu when we presented our matanigasau and sevusevu earlier this year.



He shared a warmth as if he knew us intimately and welcomed us as if we had come home. Our small group that had taken the tentative step was shaken with these words, loving words that our people have been longing to hear... 'we belong'. There was an emotional silence amongst us all. As we met people of Naivilaca village when we walked to the shore looking out at the sea where Syria wreck would be, the same sentiments were repeated by all we met!

"Our ancestors buried those who met their fate on that day in Noco soil. By giving dignity to the dead and the decision to keep them on Noco soil our ancestors have ascertained their place with the people of Noco. No one can take that relationship away. You belong to Noco and that means you belong to Rewa and that you belong to Fiji. The 75 year old Chief of Noco district said that the people of Noco have kept this story alive through generations because they value the relationship created through the sacredness of the burial custom."

He said that seeds that go into the ground, grow and flourish and through our ancestors we were linked. He said he was happy to see that we were now ready to re-establish links with our relatives in Noco. He then invited all those of Indian origin to join his Noco district at the Rewa Day celebrations (July 8th/9th) to become part of greater Rewa family as Kai Noco.

"We want to celebrate with you the 100 years of end of Indentured labor - and the Noco shed will be extended to accommodate you."

During subsequent visits to various villages in the district, to see the wreck of Syria and burial places we met young and old, women and men to hear the stories of the past. Each story ended with same sentiments, their elders had always told them that if they see Indians, they should know that they belong to Noco and to Rewa.

How then did my people not know this narrative?

The indigenous people do not speak about the good they do. Elders in Naivilaca village said they feel very blessed with prosperity which they believe are the blessings of those who are resting on their land. They said they are humbled by the actions of their ancestors and it's a story of their people, they have never felt the need to talk about it.

Those who had survived the ordeal of the wreck of Syria, traumatized and in shock were looked after by the villagers with food, warm water and comfort. Language, dressing and the people were different but they were recipient of human love that villagers extended. Some of were rescued on Monday, others by Tuesday evening as the boat was reportedly broken in 3 and waves kept crashing on the wreck.

On Wednesday the rescued were whisked off to Nukulau and those who did not have space in boats walked receiving further warmth, food and water along the way by people of Rewa. Large number of survivors had died by the turn of century. In foreign land it was highly likely they did not know the location of their arrival, language barriers and their constant shifting and their conditions did not help pass on the stories of their survival. Shame associated with slavery and ill treatment also helped bury much of our oral history.

For years I was looking for stories of connections, where we came together as people without any barriers and while there are many such stories where chiefs assisted indentured labourers escape some of their ordeals, stories that Syria survivors were rescued by people of the land had always given me hope.



Archive searches had left me confused. Dr William McGregor was the Colonial Secretary, Medical Superintendent and the man in charge of the rescue operations. According to his report he was informed by Dr Shaw the ship surgeon about the Syria wreck at 9pm on 12th May, 25 hours after the ship wrecked. The rough seas had broken the boat into two before Dr Shaw left the boat and 5 out of 6 lifeboats were smashed as soon as they were lowered can tell us how rough the oceans were. The McGregor rescue team arrived at the wreck on 13th May and got close enough to the wreck after midday. He states that danger from injury was very high with broken debris from the boat. Dr McGregor suggests that while some places around the wreck water was one to 4 feet, surrounding waters were deep and one needed to be transported to the shore in boats.

Dr McGregor wrote that he saw 3 boats coming from the direction of the town of Nasilai which he believed were from Chief of Town of Nasilai. Dr McGregor filed an official complaint that some canoes that had come refused to assist and were only focused on stealing floating ship items. He believed these “wretched creatures” were from Noco. There were inconsistencies in his reports.

P. S. Friend filed a report on 23th May 1884 after visiting Nasilai to investigate the report of why certain villagers had refused to assist Dr McGregor in saving Indians from the immigrant ship Syria.



The remains of wrecked Syria on Nasilai Reef

P.S. Friend noted that Chief of the ‘town’ of Nasilai was in Suva and he could not be interviewed. The man named Emosi who had refused to help was also away.

According to P.S. Friend, Ratu Luke, the Buli of Nakelo said he was away at Bau when the vessel was wrecked. A man named Dau Nakelo said he was unaware of the wreck until Monday morning but they were afraid to go to the wreck on the account of what transpired when the ‘conflict’ came to the reef some years earlier. His people were threatened by crew with axes at this earlier incident.

One Josua who is noted as ‘town’ officer said he was afraid of last incident and did not send a message to Buli of Nakelo in Bau until four Indians were washed to shore. He said that later that day he with other went out to rescue around 30 Indians.

The captain of the boat stated in Marine Board enquiry that around 70 people were rescued on Monday. There were total of 437 people in the boat to be rescued.

The Town officer also relayed that a Mosese (the man being investigated) said he did not respond to the call of Dr McGregor as he was helping exhausted Indians.

According to P. S. Friend’s report Turaga ni Koro of Nakelo did not hear of the wreck until Tuesday.

Anyone who understands the Fijian structure would be very confused by the above accounts. Nakelo is a district so it would not have a Turaga Ni Koro position (which is a village headman). Nasilai is a village (not a town) and the Chief of Nasilai’s title is the ‘Dau Nakelo’. In the investigative accounts a statement was made by Dau Nakelo that he did not know about the wreck until Monday morning and he did not want to send villagers to help because of a “conflict” that happened earlier where the crew of a ship that got stuck on the reef were very hostile towards villagers who came in canoes to help. This was the statement of the Chief

of Nasilai (Dau Nakelo) who in the same investigative report was stated as a person whose statement could not be taken as he had gone to Suva. Buli of Nakelo was an administrative position of the Tikina of Nakelo to which the Nasilai village belonged. In any Fijian system, before mobilizing resources, the head of the village and Tikina would have been informed.

It is evident from the accounts that colonial administrators intentionally paid little attention to accurately naming people and places and did not understand the Fijian structure, titles or logistics giving very confusing reports on which we have been heavily relying on.

Dr McGregor’s accounts shows that he intended on (1) claiming the heroic rescue operations to himself and his European team (2) Ensure that the local Fijian people are not able to nullify his claims (3) protect the interests of the European Captain, Chief mate and Officers of the Syria ship by diverting the investigative attention away from their mistake (shipwreck) to the claimed “non- participation” of locals in the rescue efforts and their focus on theft.

Dr McGregor’s accounts is typical of most Colonial administrators’ reports in our archives and those shared by researchers of Indentured labor. These accounts were usually written to show the superiority of the Colonial powers and simultaneously condescending to the local indigenous population and their traditions and cultures.

It is possible that items brought on the ship as well as bodies, floated to the shores in various directions as currents took them and were laid to rest by different villages surrounding the bay. We will never know the details of that fateful night but as a descendant of Girmitiya I would like to express heartfelt gratitude to those ancestors of the land who helped in anyway. One can only imagine how it might have been to spend Sunday night trapped on the reef, in rough seas, on a boat that was breaking into pieces, with some dying around them, with women and children struggling to make sense of the accident in the dark. To all those who reached out to our ancestors in the spirit of humanity we will be indebted for generations.

With the feeling of gratitude, we started asking the Vanua and had discussions with a few high chiefs in Tailevu and Bau. We were referred to the Vanua of Rewa and then eventually to the Tui Noco who showed us the older map that included the whole Nasilai reef in the Noco water boundaries. He also pointed to the fact that the villages along the bay which naturally receive the full brunt of the swirling wind and current direction belong to the Tikina or district of Noco.

We were told of many stories of how early Indians were known as Rewans. Our ancestors had arrived on Rewa soil, served on Rewa soil where the sugar farms were, they were quarantined on Nukulau Island which is in Rewa territory and most of all they were saved and buried by the people of Noco and on Noco soil in Rewa.

Finally we have come back home to Rewa. The Ratu, na Turaga Tui Noco has embraced all the children of Noco and we will be expressing our gratitude to the Vanua of Rewa and we invite all the children of Noco to join us.