

We all are Fiji - Fiji Times Online

James Bhagwan

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LAST Saturday I sat next to the Tui Noco on a large mat in Syria Park, under the hot midday sun. In front of me Govind Singh received a kamunaga (whale's tooth) offered on behalf of the paramount chief and the vanua of Rewa to the Tui Noco and his adopted people the descendants of indentured labourers.

Once known as "coolies" by colonial authorities, European settlers and missionaries; "jahaji bhai", among fellow passengers on the ships which brought them as human cargo; "giritiya", the name they gave themselves; and "kai Idia", the term used to describe their status as foreigners by the people to whose land they had been brought; on Saturday they sat with their chief as "kai Noco". By the end of this touching traditional ceremony, their place in the vanua would be confirmed by the Marama Bale Roko Tui Dreketi, Ro Teimumu Kepa, as "kai Rewa", "kai Viti".

Behind me sat Sashi Kiran, known to many as director of the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND), silently witnessing the culmination of her process of research and soul searching. In a presentation at the recent Symposium on Indenture, she shared that for years she had been "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".

She explained the process which had led her to Noco.

"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 sugarcane farms were, they were quarantined on Nukulau Island which is in Rewa territory and most of all they (those on the Syria) 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."

And so I sat, watching the exchange of sacred gifts, listening to words which were providing an anchor, a grounding to people, in the words of Govind Singh, "who felt like driftwood in the sea", for generations belonging neither to the motherland of India nor the vanua of Fiji.

I looked down at the mat on which I sat, trying to contain my emotions, for I felt as if my heart was being overfilled with love. Although I was sitting still, my heart was dancing with joy. As I looked down at the mat I

realised the mat of the vanua of Rewa was being metaphysically being rewoven right where we sat, surrounded by the different tikina or districts.

For a few weeks, I had been reflecting on what the significance of this event would be. Some I spoke to thought it was a waste of effort, another gimmick. Some couldn't see the point. Some wondered what it meant for them who had made their own connections with the vanua.

As I shared in my column last week, I have inherited my own understanding links to the vanua of Rewa from my father, my connection as vasu to Macuata. My children also have their own. I had come to Syria Park in solidarity with both those who were being received and in appreciation of those who had opened their hearts to receive.

Yet to be present sitting as part of this delegation from Noco that included the descendants of indentured labourers who had settled in different parts of Viti Levu, I realised there was a much deeper significance to be understood.

My personal reflection was interrupted by the quiet-spoken Tui Noco, whose faith and deep sense of responsibility had led this process to its only natural conclusion.

"Talatala, when the next kamunaga is presented, you will receive it on our behalf."

Not only were we being accepted and made part of the family, we were being given roles and responsibilities, a confirmation that what was taking place was real, was permanent, was communal and personal at the same time.

About four years ago, I wrote the following words in this column: "The issue of common national identity may have different meanings and concerns for Fiji citizens — indigenous, native (Fiji-born) and naturalised — based on their own personal history and experiences and that of their communities.

"While we focus on the common term of Fijian, it is important for us to look beyond the surface of identity and belonging — beyond the national level to the provincial level, the community level.

"We need to acknowledge and name the sense of belonging that many non-iTaukei have to the land of their birth or that they now call home. How do we identify and acknowledge the connection — emotional, or even perhaps spiritual that many of us non- iTaukei have with the vanua? How do we bridge the gap between the national and the communal?

"There is a desire to belong — to not just our country but our city, town, district or village. There is a desire to belong to our province that continues to lie buried, unspoken, unnamed. There is a desire to be a part of a community to which we can contribute, share our skills and resources; a community whose traditional values and culture many wish to embrace; whose traditional leadership we wish to acknowledge, respect and seek.

"In the final analysis the journey we as a nation are undertaking is not merely a journey for our generations. It is a quest we are undertaking for the future generations who will call these islands home. It is an exodus that leads us from bondage to the politics of separation and culture of suspicion and silence to the freedom to bind ourselves voluntarily to each other in a covenant of trust, community and mutual respect.

"It is a journey in which we seek merely to find our way home; where we all truly belong, together."

On Sunday afternoon I found myself asked to preach at the thanksgiving service for Rewa Day, at the Nausori Methodist Church. The assigned text for that Sunday in both Roman Catholic and Protestant church lectionaries was Luke 10: 25 to 37 — the parable of the good Samaritan!

What took place on Saturday was more than a cultural or traditional event. It was a spiritual event also. It marked the beginning of the healing of the soul of our nation, wounded for so long in so many ways.

Our citizenship may be legislative issue, but our heart and soul are areas which legislation holds no sway. The soul of the nation resides in each person who calls Fiji home, in each community. That is why the lotu, the vanua and the matanitu may be three pillars which need to stand separately, but they are all equal parts of the equation, connected by a spiritual heart. That heart of the spirit, the uto ni yalo of the nation is greater than the sum of the parts.

"Simplicity, serenity, spontaneity."

* Reverend James Bhagwan is an ordained Methodist minister and a citizen journalist. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Methodist Church in Fiji or this newspaper.