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Community of God's Creation: Toward A Fijian Village Contextual/Practical Theology.

Introduction

Treading On Holy Ground

The sun is setting in the west over the tropical islands of Fiji. Its gold glittering rays shimmer in the blue summer sky, drifting through a variety of clouds round, long, gray and black. Red, orange and gold tint the western sky. Tropical breezes blow from the deep blue horizon between the two southwestern outlying islands across the white surfs of the reefs to the white sandy beaches, through green running creepers, palm trees and other shore bushes, plants and trees. These island breezes along the coral coast where the Queen's Road links the eastern capital city of Suva and the Nadi international airport, help cool a group of sojourners traveling in the 95 plus Fahrenheit tropical heat and humidity. It is the early seventies. These sojourners are the teaching staff of a vocational lay training center traveling in a "written-off" navy blue land rover that the center had just received from the government ministry of youth.¹ It is the only vehicle owned by the newly-organized center at a time when the tide of concern has increased throughout the Pacific region for out-of-school youths, and for relevant development programs and vocational centers in the Pacific region. Because the land rover has just been given to the center at the time of this journey, it is often mistaken for a police vehicle. This provides disguised safety to the sojourners as they travel to the coral coast villages to visit the Christian education course students from the center who are engaged in three months of field work with the parishes in the region. The main road is mostly gravel except for the places where the hotels and motels accommodating international tourists are located.²

Though the journey only takes three hours, it feels like a long half-day. The ex-police van passengers sit holding tightly onto the one-and-half inch pipe frames supporting the tarpaulin

¹The Training Centre for Vocational Training was established with little financial resources available. It therefore depended on the community for resources in terms of people giving their time in kind and money. The first vehicle of the Centre was a "written off" police van land rover that the Centre received from the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

²There are 2 main roads in Vitilevu during colonial occupation: the Queen's Road and the King's Road. Some sections are still unpaved today, although many village sections are tarsealed to help minimise the dusty clouds that sweep the village every time a vehicle goes through on a hot tropical sunny day.

covering the land rover. They literally bounce up and down for most of the dirt and gravel road trip. But the uncomfortableness of the trip is overcome by their anticipation of visiting the villages and resort centers and by being with the students as they live and experience the theories stimulated by their classroom work. Expectations of seeing, experiencing and hearing exciting and challenging things from the village, and tourist communities makes the trip enjoyable.

As the land rover approaches a village on the public road that runs through it, one can sense and feel a celebrative atmosphere in the air. From the southern end, one sees the village's respected inner green oval lawn occupied by a *vakatunuloa*,³ a temporary hall approximately fifty feet by thirty feet, built out of bamboo, coconut palm tree trunks, branches and leaves, on a frame of wooden posts and covered with an iron tin roof for special occasions. Around the base about three feet from the ground are decorations of green and colored leaves, hibiscus, frangipani and other tropical fragrant flowers and plants. *Vakatunuloas* decorated as such are signs of festivities and celebrations. As the land rover approaches, one sees the children running around the lawn and women and men walking to and from the *vakatunuloa*. Some of the children, youth, women and men are wearing traditional costumes for traditional dances. As the land rover pulls into its parking place the passengers are told that the village is about to end the activity of the day. There is a fundraising event for the church similar to a bazaar, where crafts are sold, eating and *kava*⁴ drinking takes place. Traditional dances are performed, and in the midst of singing, games and impromptu dances. Soon, vocational center staff members are being led into the *vakatunuloa* where their students are integrally involved in facilitating, supervising and leading this important community event. As a member of this staff I was filled with joy to see our students engaged in this work. The role plays and stimulating discussions of the classroom had become a reality here.

For this writer this scene and experience was so meaningful that it still flashes like a guiding star in intensity and depth of meaning. That guiding star still inspires this writer in her vocation. The guiding light is the genuine cooperation and oneness of the mainly Fijian and indigenous village community. *Taukeis*⁵ and Indian descendants brought over by the British who live in the neighborhood join village members to celebrate and carry out the village fund raising event. But the function is much more than merely fund raising. To have these two ethnic groups engaged in

³*Vakatunuloa* is an interim structure built for any important occasion: including festivals, birthdays, wedding celebrations and funerals.

⁴*Kava* or *yaqona* is a traditional drink made from grounded roots of a local plant.

⁵*Taukei* means indigenous owners of the land and country, the indigenous Fijian ethnic group. Indians are those of Indian descendents who were brought over to Fiji by the British government to work on the sugar cane plantations in the early nineteenth century.

an activity where the sacredness, serenity and respect of the village is central and where the acceptance of those ethnically different is genuinely carried out fills me with awe and great joy. The inclusivity and involvement of all people in the life of the village and community is a sign of hope that becomes the guiding star for my life's work. The fund raising activity for the church convinces me that the genuine oneness and unity of the people of Fiji are real possibilities. We can make Fiji a place where people live with love, celebration, justice and peace. Village and rural communities are already living them! This enlightening moment expresses my vocational ideal: to try to get two major ethnic groups to live harmoniously with each other while embracing their diversities and similarities. "Village is our Hope for the Future" is a statement that is shared with the center's staff as we evaluate the field trip. It becomes my personal statement, vision and dream. It is what has inspired me to enter this doctoral study programme.

The village is our hope for the future because in the village concept members live in a communal spirit, sharing and caring for each other. Historically and traditionally the village is a community where everyone is related in kin and blood. Today, however, the village is open to anyone who wants to live in the village. Indians, Chinese and other ethnic groups who live next to the village are looked upon as members of the village. Even though they would not participate in the intricate matters of tribe and village leadership they participate in the village communal activities. There are no "homeless" in the village. Cooperative living and sharing of village responsibilities is the way of life. The identity of the individual is defined by the village community. Therefore the welfare of the community becomes the context of concern for the individual. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined relating to membership in the different tribes. Village members relate very closely to their land and the natural environment, and they live more in cyclical time where nature and life repeats herself. Village communal living and relationships are grounded in spirituality and religious observances and are integral in the life of the village. Village members have a "cosmovision"⁶ of their existence. Their land, nature and the whole of their environment is part of their identity and spirituality. They are integral parts of their world view and their ethos.

⁶The first time I encountered the word "cosmovision" was when teaching a course on multicultural communication with a group of 15 who were preparing to go to different parts of the world as missionaries of the United Methodist Church of USA. They were under training in the spring of 1966 at the United Methodist Church Mission Resource centre in Atlanta. There was a couple preparing to go to Ghana, a couple to Russia, a family to Zimbabwe, a family to Harare, a couple to Uruguay, a family to Louthenia, a professor to Japan, a couple to Liberia and one to Chile. In the process of discussing the importance of seeing the explicit as well as the implicit messages in different cultural contexts, one of the participants who served in an ecumenical project for street children and women in Cochabamba, Bolivia was talking about the way in which the indigenous community relate to their land and how they see their oneness with their environment. Their world views and ethos are very similar to Fijian and Pacific villages and rural communities. Ronda Lee was using the word "cosmovision" and I have adopted it because it is a word that describes the wholeness of life and oneness of a community, of a person with the whole of creation. It is encompassing and whole in itself and communicates the oneness of the earth. The cosmovision of the

The most intimate motions within the depths of our souls are not completely our own. For they belong also to our friends, to mankind, to the universe, and to the Ground of all being, the aim of our life. Nothing can be hidden ultimately. It is always reflected in the mirror in which nothing can be concealed.⁷

Is the guiding light from the village experience one of those "most intimate motions within the depth of our souls" that Paul Tillich is twriting about? If so, then what is being reflected in the mirror?

This paper seeks to describe a part of what is being reflected in the mirror. The mirror reflects a situation in the Church in Fiji. Similar experiences are reflected in other parts of the world. It occurs where Christian churches have been successful in bringing the Gospel, Western civilization and their cultures to these places. In Fiji the missionaries were very successful and achieved many good works in spreading the Christian gospel and building the infrastructures of church ministries that have contributed to the modern development of the villages and the country as a whole. When the missionaries arrived the village ethos and ways of life were fertile grounds for planting the Christian Gospel of loving God and loving one's neighbor because this was precisely the Fijian way of life. The only new message they brought was to "love one's enemies." When the paramount chief accepted Christianity the whole country was obliged to accept Christianity as well. This had its advantages and disadvantages. Advantages included people following the chief's words such as stopping the tribal wars and trying to love one's enemies. The disadvantages were that although people follow the chief's command they may not necessarily have personally accepted, internalized and appropriated the Gospel's Good News. The paramount chief's acceptance of Christianity has enabled the Church to have a very important position in the communities.

Still further, the Christian Gospel came into the country as an expression of Western realities and with 18th-century British masks. As more missionaries from other Western countries came they brought their own ways of life and cultures, and their world views and beliefs that influenced how they carried out their tasks. These were of great benefits to Fiji particularly when they helped end tribal wars and cannibalism, built schools and hospitals, and improved the general standard of living. Even though these missionaries were successful and greatly influenced the way the country is today, they also posed enormous challenges to the basic normative lives of the villages and the

world will also help in understanding the "coconut theology" evolving from the Pacific region as we contextualize the Gospel.

⁷Tillich, *The Shaking of The Foundations*, p. 46

country. Therefore, despite the fact that Christian Missionaries were successful in spreading the Gospel in Fiji resulting in the Church as one of the strong pillars of society, and despite the fact that strict observances of Sunday are practiced in the country, and despite the fact that most denominations have programs in their churches throughout the week with numerous church events over the weekends, the faith of the community is not adequate to face the escalating problems of social issues that they are confronted with because of the changes that are happening in the socio-economic religious and political life of the country. There are issues of crime, such as burglaries, rapes and murder; there is a growing poor population in urban areas such as Suva and Lautoka; there is leadership corruption in the government and community, and there is family and societal disintegration. One wonders where the Christian values have gone as they are not in the communities any more. The traditional cultural values are also vanishing. People are yearning for the olden-days values to return as well as the preaching, teaching and the practicing of "love God, love one's neighbor and love your enemies." Why this gap? Why this contradiction?

The contradictions and the gaps according to this writer are partly due to the fact that the way in which the Christian faith is being taught to the believers is not holistically meaningful. It is foreign to their world views and ethos, foreign to how they construct their meanings and knowledge and their ways of worship in the early 19th Century. As life continues today the values and belief systems central to the Western cultures are increasingly encroaching into the country and right into the villages. The missionaries and the leaders did not convey the strong Gospel values and the traditional values. The teaching of the Christian faith is not effective. This has caused traditional values to weaken and Christian values to be lost. As a consequence there is a gap that exists between the function and meaning of life. There is an urgent need to reclaim a new way to wed the Christian and traditional values if we are to salvage the eroding Christian religious way of life that is permeating the country. There is an urgent need to equip and prepare the people to creatively face the wider societal challenges that are facing the country now.

I contend that if the Church is to be an agent of a faithful and moral society, the Church must be contextual. If the Church is to be contextual, particularly for indigenous Fijians, it must draw on village resources and traditions, on village concepts, values, and practices in dialogue with the Church's theological traditions, for theological concepts that can serve as a foundation for Christian religious education.

In 1995 I spent eight months in Fiji particularly in the village of Naivucini carrying out a participant observer ethnographic study with the purpose of gathering information on the present cultural life of the village members: how they carry out their communal and individual activities and how their

lives express their world views, ethos and their faith. Adapting Paulo Freire's educational approach of conscientisation the study was able to identify generative themes that will dialogue with the Church's theological traditions for theological concepts that can serve as a foundation for Christian religious education .

In response to the Oxford 11th Institute on the theme, *Trinity Community and Power*, the rest of this paper will focus on how village members understand and relate to God, how this relationship influences their communal life and how power is exercised in the village.

Naivucini's distinctive ways of understanding and relating with God

With the village people, *an understanding of God's presence permeates the village*; and God is very real and is everywhere. There is no question about their belief and faith in a living God. The village is predominantly Christian and everyone goes to church. In identifying the main concerns of the village and in envisioning its future, from individuals and groups, from children, youth and adults, and from women and men, one hundred percent of the answers given both verbally and in questionnaire believe that God will help them. Their belief and trust in God is real and profound. They relate to God both in a very personal and communal way. When asked when and where they feel closest to God in their experiences, answers given by individuals were predominantly along the following lines:

- * when I pray in anguish
- * when I pray for something I want
- * when I ask for help to guide me in finding a wife
- * when I am deeply in trouble
- * when I have to make some important decisions
- * when I pray to thank and praise God
- * when I am deeply drunk and at my worst, I pray earnestly and feel near to God.
- * when I spend time in prayer and fasting
- * when harvesting my dalo (taro) patch and see the bounteous yield, I kneel in prayer of thanksgiving

Naivucini's people believe that God answers their prayers. They receive what they ask for and when the answers are negative, they feel at peace and accept that what they prayed for is not God's will.

Second, with Naivucini people God is in the *wholeness and unity of life*. God is present in every aspect of the village infrastructures. God is in their tradition, in their economy, in the

administration of the village, in their families, in their cultures and social life and in the life of the church. God is integrated in the way they live and expressed in their world views and ethos. This is what gives them meaning. The deep meaning and wholeness of the village life are what attracts her children to return to Naivucini from time to time. It is where they belong and call home. It is where they will always have a place no matter where they may be in this world. God is the God of their village who cares and holds them together and protects them.

Third, with Naivucini *they also experience God's presence in God's creation in their world and environment*. They have a deep and respected relationship and attachment to nature and to their land. Nature and land are extensions of themselves. God's blessing for their lives is seen in the richness and fertility of their land. There is no separation or compartmentalization as far as their oneness with the land is concerned. **Vanua** is the Fijian word for land. But in Fiji and in almost all the Pacific Islands **vanua** means much more than land. It encompasses the total identity of the village in terms of the people, their traditions, values and cultures their way of life, how they live as community, their world views and their ethos. Those from urban communities refer to those from the village as those from the **vanua**. The term is loaded with meaning. It has its own unity and wholeness as well as integrity and dignity. When it is used there is a sense of peace. It is **Shalom** in my opinion and understanding. In studying Walter Bruggemann's theological commentaries on Psalms, he dwelt on the distinctions between place and space when he referred to the Old Testament and the Israelites understandings of place. His description articulates what I believe to be the Fijian and Pacific Islands understanding of **vanua**. Now, as I look back I can fully understand why the Pacific Conference of Churches and other organizations carried their crosses through engagement beginning in the early 70s, in the struggle for a **Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific**. I believe that the collective unconsciousness and consciousness of the Pacific Islanders in relation to our land, sea and environment was one of the motivating factors that impeded us to take our Christian faith to the socio-economic and political issues of our islands. Standing firm in our faith in a loving and just God, the God of righteousness and equity, we take our crosses to detest the intentional planning of powerful nations to continue polluting and destroying our environment, our seas and corals, fishes and lagoons, **our sacred habitat**. We took and still take our stand as we covenant ourselves to participate and be co-workers with God in the ongoing process of creation. Bruggemann in *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in the Biblical Faith*, had this to say:

Space means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressure and void of authority. Space may be imagined as week-end, holiday, avocation, and is characterized by a kind of neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing. But 'place' is a very different matter. Place as space which has historical meanings, where something have happened which are now

remembered and which provide continuity and identity in generations. Place is space in which vows have exchanged promises have been made and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape and detachment and unrefined freedom....Whereas pursuit of space may be a flight from history, a yearning for space is a decision to enter history with an identifiable people in an identifiable pilgrimage. Humanness, as a biblical faith promises it, will be found in belonging to and referring to that locus in which the peculiar historicity of a community has been expressed and to which recourse is made for purposes of orientation, assurance, and empowerment. The land for which Israel yearns and which it remembers is never unclaimed space but is always *a place with Yahweh*, a place well filled with memories of life with him and vows to him ⁸

Fourth, relating to their relationship with creation and attachment to the land is *their belief in a God who punishes those who do not follow God's will*. Prosperity of the land and the village births of young generations, unity and cooperation of communal life, caring and healthy relationships, success in education and achievement in employment are all related to the blessings of God. It is interesting to note that in almost every Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Fiji a "**vanua**" will come to present its traditional presentation of whales tooth for the **bulubulu** asking for forgiveness, acceptance and blessings. To be forgiven for a past deed that the vanua did to the church for example taking back the piece of land that was given to the church for the catechist to plant his food. They believe that it contradicts the will of God because they are experiencing the negative effects of that action in the problematic life of the vanua. Their blessings seem to have been taken away since the catechist was not allowed to use the same piece of land to plant his food.

With the village people, their personal and communal relationship with God is being observed both individually and communally through prayers, Bible reading, shared reflections and communal worship. When asked whether they had a disciplined way of practicing their religious life, most answered through daily prayers and daily reading of the Bible. However some adults read sparingly and some youths and children do not have a particular discipline. Many of them do read their Bible at one time or another though. Personal prayer is carried out at homes, in their food plantations and where-ever they go. Most of the adults who were interviewed have a special place for prayer in their food plantations. When they reach it before beginning their work, they pray and when before returning home at the end of their work they pray as well. "I feel close to God and I pray for thanksgiving at times particularly when I completed a good days work in my plantation for example weeding so many rows and mounds of dalo, cassava or kava," is a typical expressions being articulated.

⁸Bruggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in the Biblical Faith*, p. 5

God's influence in the communal life.

First a Fijian village's way of life, world views and ethos is one of community. The community comes before individuals. Individual identity is defined and constructed by the community. The formative power of the community is so strong that when one lives in the village one accepts its primacy. This communal life is permeated with God's prevenient grace that serves as the wellsprings of the village well-being. With this deep and profound faith in God, the Church plays an important role in the community. Everyone in the village belongs to the Christian faith and the predominant[†] denomination is Methodist. Sunday is strictly observed as the Lord's sacred day, a day of worship and rest. Everyone in the village is Christian, so most of them attend the two main services on Sunday at 10.30am and 3.30pm. There is a prayer meeting at 6am before breakfast and Sunday School at 9am. Throughout the week, the youth, women and men's fellowship hold their meetings; and there are communal prayer meetings on Wednesday and Saturday nights. Every evening in the village at 7pm a lali⁹ is sounded for family devotions and prayers. Households are expected to be at their respective homes for this and, if not, to join the family that they are visiting. These daily and weekly practices of family and community prayers enable people to know the narratives in the Bible and know and sing most of the hymns without hymn books. Even the children can sing all the verses of some hymns without hymn books as well as the anthem that the church choir sings.

Second, the village communal life is one of caring, sharing and generosity girded with the value of treasuring healthy relationship in the community. There is always food in the village and there is no homeless. All village members are related to each other in blood.

Before the 1930s, because of transportation limitations there was very little marriage outside the village and districts. When the public roads opened to the interior of the main island in the 1930s a good number of women from other islands and parts of Fiji married to Naivucini men. In Fijian society women go to their husband's village and family once they are married. There are exceptional cases where one would see a couple settled for good in the wife's village. When relationships are disturbed and endangered there are traditional customs and observances followed to restore them and bring about reconciliation. When Christianity arrived in Fiji in the 19th Century, the village communities in the most part were already living along Christian principles. They believed in God and in loving one's neighbor. The only new message that Christianity brought was "love your enemy as yourself." This was the Gospel and it explains why Methodism is very strong in Fiji. When the missionaries arrived and converted the paramount chief to

⁹lali is a large wooden drum that has an open hollow sides that help produce a special sound belonging only to the wooden gong.

Christianity his people obeyed him and they all turned to Christianity accepting the Gospel that comes through the Methodist tradition.

Third, village community is held together through strong practices and observances of their traditions and cultures. Traditional activities take place daily. When families, clans, tribes or the whole village meet, traditional acts take place in different forms either as speeches, giving advice, **kava** or whale's tooth ceremonies. They are occasions for village rituals where values and metaphors are appropriated that evoke learning and thinking on holding and uniting the community where one belongs, and therefore find meaning in life. These are the traditional customs where one experiences the values that the village treasures and wishes to have transmitted, encouraged and appropriated. Most of these values boil down to the value of relationship, respecting, revering and honoring a person's dignity and integrity. It is extended to the community, land and the whole environment. It is the I<---->THOU relationship that Martin Buber writes about. In hearing the village stories that were told about parents and grandparents who died, it was obvious that their ancestors were women and men of integrity who were deeply religious and feared God and respected people. This respect for people is extended to guests when they come to the village. No matter which part of Fiji or the world the visitor comes from she or he are not only guests to an individual family, but guests of the entire village. This is practiced by village families bringing fruit, vegetables and food to the host family to help care for the visitors. Members, particularly men, will come after dinner to share bowls of **kava** with the guests. Traditions are important as they hold the community together and ground them in their identity.

Traditional respect for living creatures is not only limited to human beings. Respect for the **vanua**, as elaborated in the first section, extends itself to how one treats, respects and relates to the land and the rest of creation. It explains why Fijians will give their lives and fight to the death if necessary for the sovereignty of their country. Naivucini people believe that God is present in their traditions and in their culture. Therefore they are partners with God in the ongoing process of creation. God's Spirit is living with the spirits of the village ancestors who watches over and protect the village.

Fourth, Naivucini community believes in, and has, many narratives and legends, such as of how they came to settle in their land and how things were created. Being an oral community, members love to tell stories and talk. It is interesting to see that in the faith development interviews, one of the powerful experiences that helped form and shape individuals' lives were the storytimes with their grandparents. "I spent most of my childhood holiday times with my maternal and paternal grand parents because we did many fun activities together like rowing bamboo rafts down the

rivers as well as hearing the '**tukunis**' (traditional narratives). Learnings and teachings through exciting the imagination of listeners is one of the ways in which the older members of the village communicate the values they hold to the young generations. In family, tribe and clan worship and devotions, Biblical stories are narrated as they believe these nurture Christian families and homes.

Fifth, in Naivucini village there are also moments of friction and disturbance when there is disorientation in the families, clans, tribes and communities . The very close knit set up of communal life is also experiencing the disturbing factors of change that modernity is bringing to the country. The power of the cash economy and the value of individualistic development and striving for one's own benefit is encroaching on village life. The disorientation of the national life since the 1987 political coup is affecting the village where the socio-economic and political issues are raising basic religious and theological questions for the community of faith. In urban areas particularly exploitation of people are happening to the point where people are reduced to things. The transnational co-operations who often come with loyalties to profits and material gods reduce people to commodities, to values contradictory to those that are deeply rooted in Fijian communal life. Elders of the village are aware of this, and they see it as one of the basic issues they need to face. Interestingly enough, when being asked how they can work at meeting this problem, they believe having a great faith in God helps. "We believe that if we pray hard and ask God to help us, He will help us. We must encourage our people to believe in the power of prayer and pray hard." They see education and relevant economic and village developmental courses should be encouraged so that the whole community can take part. Further, they see the need for having a full time ordained minister to help them with relevant Bible studies so that they can develop and grow in their faith in order to meet the demand of today's society. With this, one clearly sees the integrated understanding and approach to life that village communities have. Their faith in God and in the Church place them in the community where the Church is one of the three pillars of Fijian society. The other two pillars are the **vanua** and the government. All of them are to be taken into account when dealing with the issues of village communities.

Even though the village community is being changed by modernity , secularism and secularization have not reached the degree where it cannot be salvaged from destroying communal values. The village members' strong belief that God can help solve their problems puts the "ball back into their court" on how they need to re-envision their village community. With this re-envisioning of their faith they will be able to take into account the necessary and needed changes with which the village needs to be engaged. This introduces us to the question of God and the use of power in the community.

God and the use of power in Naivucini village.

There are five major structures of the village community where one sees the exercise of power. *In any Fijian traditional village, the most powerful person is the paramount chief.* It is a hereditary position and the chief's main responsibility is to serve and lead the people. The chief has the village council that he works with for carrying out what he wants to be done; and it is this forum where community and **vanua** issues are discussed. The chief's place expresses itself in the rest of the village structure and systems through the clans, tribes and families. There are five tribes in the village with various clans and families. There is a chiefly tribe, and other tribes also have their roles and places identified. Fijian traditional leadership is patriarchal so the men are the heads of village structures.

The second main source of power next to the chief is the Church representative. He is called the **vakatawa**,¹⁰ or catechist of the village. The church, with its own organization as one of the three pillars of village life carries out responsibilities and ministries where the power is given both to men and women. The catechist works very closely with the chiefs and heads of tribes and clans. Because of the close relationship and complementary role that the church plays with the **vanua** and chief, important positions of leadership in the church are still taken by men such as a chief lay steward. Eventhough there are capable women who can hold this important and honorary post, the village patriarchal structure does not allow it. With these understandings members of the village think and believe of God as male, as a Father and as authoritarian. They also believe that the Fijian chiefly system is a God given privilege just like the British monarchy. One can clearly see the British Methodist tradition in the Fijian set-up. When members of the British monarchy visit Fiji, they feel very much at home as they are accorded the highest chiefly traditional ceremonies and receptions. The whole attitude and spirit of the indigenous Fijian chiefly system causes them to accept and receive them in this way.

¹⁰**Vakatawa:** catechists are the lay leaders of the church who serve full time in each village. The catechist can be responsible for just one village or several. The catechist serves under a minister of the district. For Naivucini the minister at present lives in Narokorokoyawa, a village 50 miles from the village. The minister has villages and congregation. So the spiritual leadership in the village depends very much on the catechists. In rural places catechists have at least a class 8 formal education. Some would have also attended the Lay Training Centre at the main mission Station in Davuilevu, the one mentioned in the introductory story. Most depend on the in-service training at local levels. There is a national exam that they take every year mainly with biblical studies, theology and church history. The catechists in the villages are also assisted by local preachers - **dauvunau** both men and women, adults and youths. The chief steward, **Tuirara**, is an honorary position filled by a church elder who has to be a local preacher is elected at the Division Annual Meetings to be the Lay Leader of the Division, and is the liason officer between the Church and the Vanua.

The third main source of power is the district school. The teachers, school committees and students occupy a good part of the village time and use of resources. "Education of our children" is one of the main issues that stand out in the survey and seminars that were conducted. Although the school is run by a local committee, appointment of teachers and curriculum are the responsibilities of the Education Department of the Fiji Government. In the school, Christian religion is taken seriously. Every morning different elders of the Methodist church take a short devotional period with the whole school. Teachers are free to hold prayers with their classes if they wish. "I begin my days in the class room with the students in prayers as well as ending the day in prayer," said one of the teachers who believes that her profession is her calling. Through the school committees the teachers can influence the village as members participate in the different activities of the school. During my research study time, there was friction in the village regarding the committee and its relationship with the Education Department. It was an issue pertaining to the availability of teachers for the new year. The appointed representatives of the village and I ended up going as a delegation of at least ten persons to the Government Divisional Head Office to share the village concern with the education authorities. The educational officers finally appointed a new teacher for Naivucini District School. Believing that God is also in the ministry of their school the village members accept that one of their major responsibility is to see that all children go to school. They also foresee that the blessings will return to the village as students complete their studies, find employment and hold responsible positions in society. They see the success of their children as God's blessings in their lives.

The fourth main source of power that influences the village is what comes from outside the village. Some of them through the Fijian administration, government or church representatives, and other individuals that members of the village have as guests; and thus as villagers visit cities and other districts they are influenced by those communities, thus returning to Naivucini with other ways of looking at things. Different ways of doing things can also bring friction and tensions into the community. Major tensions are dealt with at the village council level. In most cases individuals or groups are reprimanded for their misbehaving, but no one is ostracized in the village.

The fifth major power group that is very strong and also influences how the village lives and operates are the women. Eventhough the structural leadership of the village is patriarchal, the women have their own organizations that carry out their vision. When they move as a group they are listened to by the community and no one can stop them. For example, during my research in one of its seminars, the group involved wanted to begin an action right away. It was the women's group who discussed that one of the main causes of the divisions in the village and the lack of cooperative spirit that the village is known for, was the establishment of different Christian

denominations in the village. The group then decided to begin an all night prayer vigil every Sunday night from 8pm to 6am in the morning. Because of its ecumenical nature and because it was for the whole night the group decided to have it in a home. The sitting room of the home was prepared with a worship center. Women were divided into groups of twos and threes to take turns every hour. The rest of the women gathered together in the next house catching up with village news, bible discussions and discussion of issues. A mother with a baby brought her child and their mosquito net along. Some preschool children accompanied their mothers and grandmothers and spent the night at the prayer vigil. At five in the morning they held their devotion together before breaking for the week. They shared the inspirations and thoughts that came to them through the night's vigil. Even though the prayer vigil started before the research ended, the women believed that it helped salvage the uncooperative spirit that is increasingly apparent in the village. They believed that this was a spiritual inspiration that they wanted to act on. "**Me ta masulake vua na Kalou me vukei keda me vakabulai na noda koro,**" (Let us commit ourselves to God in prayer for God to help us save our village) said one of the leaders of the group. When the research committee gave its report to the village meeting they explained that an action has already started that they believed was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They could not stop it because it came out of the women's own involvement in sharing their concerns of the village through discussions and Bible study during the seminar. The women also recommended certain actions to the village meeting to help solve some of the problems that the village is facing.

In identifying the issues of concerns that the village has, it is interesting to note that the question of power is paramount. The appointed chief of the **vanua** is not living in the village. He lives and has his farm in the Western side of Vitilevu, the main island where he has his own sugarcane plantation. He is from the chiefly tribe who from his childhood has spent little time actually living in the village. He was appointed by the village chiefly tribe and therefore attends the district and provincial councils representing the people and receiving the benefits that goes with his responsibilities. He visits the village from time to time but has delegated another one from his tribe to be responsible for **vanua** matters when he is not there. With the changes that are coming into Naivucini the spirit of unity and cooperation that the village is known for in the past is fading out. Groups and individuals are beginning to do their own things and life is beginning to be more complicated than before. The thinking and the spirit of the village from those who live permanently in Naivucini is one of blaming the chiefly leadership for not carrying out the task entrusted to him. They want him to come and live in the village so that the community can hear the leadership from one voice and direction instead of the five different ones that are happening at the moment. This issue of power and chiefly system is a theological one that needs to be addressed

accordingly because Naivucini is a Christian village. We will now turn to some of the contextual theologies that are evolving relating to the life of the village as described above.

Community of God's Creation

An evolving Fijian village contextual/practical theology.

As I lived, participated, observed and tried to understand, comprehend and discern how God is incarnating Godself in Naivucini in relation to how village members relate to God individually and cooperately as they live in their community and how the powers have been expressed, it becomes very clear that the main theological well-spring that nourishes and enfolds the village is expressed in the title of this paper: **Community of God's Creation**. If God is a God of history and a personal God, then God is incarnating Godself in the reality of people's contemporary situations. God gives insights, meanings and questions to what concerns the people most at this time and place. From the realities of what the Naivucini community is presently engaged with, here are the evolving contextual theological^{cal} concepts. Different concepts that serve as the fountain of nourishing and quenching springs that spurts from the different bedrocks of the community include the following:

- 1. Vanua in the Womb of God's Prevenient Grace. God's prevenient grace is the life and breath of the village.** Naivucini being predominantly Methodist, one is not surprised that this theological theme is there alive since God's grace was the main motivation of John Wesley's theology. One sees and can talk about its transformative potential for community. Furthermore it is for all practical purposes an eschatological view calling us into a different kind of community.
- 2. A Believing, Liberating and Covenanting Community of Faith. Naivucini believes in the understanding of a "Community of Faith." A community that is experiencing the liberating power of God and thus responding in covenanting itself with God.** In discussing the issue of how the village can re-experience its spirit of unity, hard work and cooperation, they agreed that the village needs to re-envision and reimagine the new community as a community cooperating both in dreaming and planning. Guidelines need to be identified and people to commit and covenant themselves to the transformation of their community. Their faith in a God full of love and mercy inspires and encourages them to hope for a better future. An eschatological vision of a transformative community is calling them into a different kind of community in this time and place.
- 3. I<---->Thou Relationship and partnership with God, humankind, nature and all of creation. Loving, caring, sharing and celebrating community.** Positive and

healthy relationship is the most striking dream, desire and depth of soul yearnings of the village. This relationship is girded with their conviction in the truth of Christ's ethical theological commandment, *"Love God and love your neighbours as yourself."* The unity of the village expresses itself in celebrations of life that brings the family, tribes, clans and the whole village together from time to time.

4. God's leadership is one of Righteousness, Justice and Equity. Transforming Fijian chiefly leadership systems and structures. As expressed earlier the foremost concern and issue that the village has that was expressed in answer to the questionnaire and in the different seminars is one on the traditional chiefly leadership. The issue also touches upon the wider national issues regarding the de-stabilisation and shake-up of the traditional chiefly system. The tension that exists in adhering to traditional structures and freedom in individualistic life and development is real. They believe without doubt that God can help save the village if they continue to pray in faith. "What is the nature of God's leadership with communities who covenant themselves to see God's righteousness and justice in the village?" is the probing question that needs to be addressed if the village believes in God's liberating and transforming life.

5. Growing into Christ maturity and transformative learning for discipleship and citizenship. The main concern of every parent is the education of their children to be successful in life and to grow as responsible citizen. Education for knowledge and understanding is necessary. There is need for transmissive, interpretive and transformative learning, learning that will enable members of the village to be critical and to have the wisdom of the heart whose purpose is to discern the will of God. A liberating, righteous and just God.

The rest of the evolving contextual theological concepts will be only listed because of length.

6. I belong therefore I am and I am therefore I belong. The place and contribution of self in community.

7. Shalom: Creation-Eco spirituality, worship, social justice and equity.

8. Traditions, rituals and narrative community.

9. Freedom and independence with responsibility

10. From disorientation to new orientation.

11. Priesthood of all believers and discipleship of equals.

12. Discipleship and citizenship in a multicultural and multireligious nation.

With the above theological concepts that are evolving from the village we can also see what the Christian faith, through the Methodist tradition, has brought to the village and contributed to the life of the community. We will ever be grateful to Rev. Thomas Baker from this country, United Kingdom, who was killed and eaten in the hinterland of Fiji as a missionary and to other

missionaries of the past and present and to our faithful fore-mothers and fathers who lived and communicated the Christian faith that is real and profound in the lives of the village. They endured, struggled and were successful in the evangelistic transformative message of the Gospel. For these we praise and thank God as we see the Christian Church as one of the Three Pillars of the Fijian society. Yet, one hundred and sixty-two years since the first missionaries landed on the shores of Fiji, we see the realities of the contradictions of the devout observances of the churches' activities, Sunday worship and observances, and the increasing escalation of societal problems (already expressed earlier on) of a pluralistic society. What is the calling today? How can we continue to build on and yet improve what the missionaries and our great, great grand-parents have done? It is my firm and deep conviction, and I clearly see the writing on the walls that: *there is a calling to enable the deepening of the present evangelical faith through a liberating contextual critical praxis correlation's approach of theological learning and education. This leads to transformation of the communities where village members are enabled to "experience life in its' fullness" and where the righteousness and justice of God enlightens and sustains the governance and leadership of the village.* My doctoral study project is one of the contributions towards appropriating this conviction. I am convinced that it is within the deeper cultural and traditional values of the simplicity of life in Naivucini village where commitments are present that can also help nurture the Christian religious faith that would be more relevant to this time and place. A Christian religious faith for discipleship and citizenship.

In relation to this international gathering of Methodist theologians, what can we contribute and where do we go from here?

Where do we go from here?

You will contribute as you reflect on this paper, share in the discussions, give your insights and see the interlinkage of what is happening in Naivucini and in your own communities. Is there any interlinkage? What is the relationship? How can we be in partnership in enabling and bringing about "life in its fullness" to be experienced by village members and to experience God's righteousness and justice?

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August 18, 1997
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