

June 2021

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### Recommended Citation

Mishra, Margaret (2021). 'Emancipated Women': The Adis of Fiji and their 'Native Sisters'. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 161-174.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss5/11>

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## **'Emancipated Women': The Adis of Fiji and their 'Native Sisters'**

By Margaret Mishra<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In a series of columns published in Australian newspapers in the 1920s, Australian journalist Thomas M'Mahon, declared that Indigenous Fijian women in the upper echelons of society were 'emancipated' as a consequence of the good work of the colonial administration and the missions in Fiji (1922a, p. 8). Yet when his rather sensationalized accounts relating to women's education, modernity, marriage, and motherhood are closely scrutinized, it is clear that M'Mahon's perception of 'women's emancipation' is synonymous with the attainment of Western, middle-class ideologies of domesticity and not the quest to obtain equal rights for women by removing gender discrimination. The purpose behind his columns is to applaud the efforts of the British colonizers in Fiji—the projected emancipators of chiefly women. This article makes a contribution to women's history in Fiji by challenging M'Mahon's colonially skewed representation of the concept of 'women's emancipation'. It does this by juxtaposing M'Mahon's happy, 'educated', philanthropic, chiefly housewives against their 'native sisters' striving for economic empowerment, sexual autonomy, and reproductive rights. It will argue that the latter articulations of i-Taukei women, that were curtailed to some extent by the introduction of colonial laws and intervention by male chiefs, were more convincing markers of attempts to secure equal rights for women in Fiji in the early 1920s.

*Keywords:* Women's Emancipation, Economic Empowerment, Sexual Autonomy, Abortion, Marriage, Adis, Fiji

### **Introduction**

On 24 May 1922, the Brisbane newspaper *Daily Standard*, published a column titled 'Emancipated Women: The Nandies [*sic*] of Fiji', written by Australian journalist, Thomas J. M'Mahon (p. 8). The column appears on a page exclusively 'For Women' and is crammed in between advertisements that accentuate stereotypes of femininity and domestic subordination, such as Van Houten's Cocoa for housewives, Rhoades and Company's bedroom furniture in silky oak or maple, and Foster Clark's Custard promising extra purity and extra goodness (M'Mahon, 1922a, p. 8). Other items on the page include: a short-story titled 'Feminine Tangles', an article on basic wage reduction, fashion notes and kitchen hints. The catchphrase 'women's emancipation', a concept broadly signifying efforts to secure equal rights for women, boldly beckons to the contemporary Fijian feminist critic revisiting the column more than a decade later. Despite the lure of the title, the column itself is no more than a celebration of middle-class ideologies of domesticity

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vis-a-vis colonialism. As a text of the past, M'Mahon's column offers an insight via the lens of the coloniser into the lived experiences of Indigenous Fijian women in Fiji. The column is situated in the public arena. Therefore, reservations about its legitimacy, purpose, and content need to be revisited and, to some extent, corrected. This article pivots around a series of questions. How should one respond to the assertion that the Adis of Fiji were truly 'emancipated' as they helped in the emancipation of their 'native sisters' in the 1920s? Would a critique of the concept of 'women's emancipation' suffice? Should the ('white', male) journalist's fixation on Indigenous Fijian women's social and cultural progress be dismissed as nothing more than an endorsement of the colonizer's preoccupation with 'political progress'? Or was he simply rearticulating a patriarchally-saturated definition of women's emancipation that coincided with the changing views of women around the world in the 1920s? Perhaps we should completely disregard this centerpiece curiously positioned on a page teeming with patriarchal stereotypes of femininity and domestic subordination and opt for a counter-narrative on women's emancipation in Fiji instead?

This article sets out to dismantle Western/colonial constructs of women's emancipation in Fiji by critically evaluating how three columns published in various Australian newspapers furthered the correlation between women's emancipation and 'the white man's civilization' (M'Mahon, 1922a, p. 8). In 'Emancipated Women: The Nadies of Fiji', 'An Island Paradise: The Story of Fiji' (*Chronicle*, 1923, p. 52), and 'The Land of No Bachelors' (*The Queenslander*, 1922b, p.11), Thomas M'Mahon is preoccupied with transferring Western, middle-class signifiers of women's social and cultural progress onto the 'native princesses' of Fiji. As he does this, he piggybacks on the agenda of the colonizers to share their declaration of Indigenous Fijian women's 'emancipation'. Yet, on the whole, 'Emancipated Women' exudes 'anti-feminist' sentiments as it discourages feminist efforts for deeper social change for all Fijian women. What is missing from this portrait is a demonstration of how i-Taukei women challenged colonial and patriarchal power structures as they struggled to liberate themselves from men in the 1920s. Framed as a counter-narrative to M'Mahon's work, this article will interweave Western media projections of the Adis in relation to modernity, emancipation, marriage, and motherhood with other historical accounts in the 1920s that describe how their 'native sisters' (M'Mahon, 1922a, p. 8) strove for economic empowerment, sexual autonomy, and reproductive rights.

### **'Man of the Land Reporter'**

Thomas M'Mahon was an Australian journalist, freelance author, photographer, and fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He developed recognition as a travel journalist when he made brief incursions into the Pacific in the early 1900s and drafted travelogues for publication in Australian newspapers. These island forays earned him the Brisbane Courier-Mail's title 'Man of the Land Reporter' (Quanchi, 2004, p. 49). The use of 'man' and 'land' in the title highlights how the press promoted colonial and patriarchal power ideologies. Throughout his career as a journalist, M'Mahon strongly advocated for Australian sub-imperialism in the Pacific and drew on political principles underlying colonialism to reinforce binary oppositions of the Self and Other and the State and Modernity. He articulated the utilitarian logic espoused by the colonizers by stressing that the planter's life was a means to personal and material success and encouraged immigrants to 'try their luck' as planters (Quanchi, 2004, p. 46). M'Mahon's writing and public addresses were received favorably by members of London's Royal Colonial Society and Chambers of Commerce.

In addition to fostering the political agenda of the colonizers, M'Mahon was obsessed with entertaining, amusing, and startling his readers—a characteristic of some journalistic writing

during this period. In *Four Theories of the Press*, Don Seitz describes how the excessive commercialization of the American press in the 1920s led to the ‘mediocrity of a plump press’ between 1923 and 1930 (1926, p. 20). Repetition and regurgitation were common markers of this era of yellow journalism. Not surprisingly, most of the content from the *Daily Standard’s* ‘Emancipated Women’ was replicated in ‘The Land of No Bachelors’ and ‘An Island Paradise’, and these columns were originally sourced from another piece written by M’Mahon in *The Everylady’s Journal*.

In 1921, after spending two months in Fiji, M’Mahon said in an interview for *The Daily Mail*: ‘Might I say that the Government deserves the greatest credit for the interest it is taking in the native, and contrary to what some people think... I am inclined to think that they are bringing about the evolution of the native from his present habits to the active habits already mentioned’ (1921, p. 8). By positioning the enlightened ‘white man’ against the evolving ‘native’, M’Mahon perpetuates Self/Other binary oppositions via the imperial travelling gaze. He also accentuates the benefits of colonialism in Fiji by drawing attention to the prosperous subjects of the British Empire: ‘The Fijians have undoubtedly prospered; and under the new conditions have become quite wealthy, for all the island lands belong to them, and the big annual rentals they draw from various British enterprises, make them quite wealthy’ (M’Mahon, 1923, p. 52). To showcase the success of the colonial enterprise in Fiji, M’Mahon goes a step further to include Indigenous women’s progress, in particular, improvements associated with women of rank. It is within this setting of colonial annexation and expansion that M’Mahon’s written work, described by Max Quanchi as largely ‘pretentious, polemical and expository, and... mostly anecdotal’ (2004, p. 49), is critiqued. Although Quanchi’s comment relates to M’Mahon’s representation of Solomon Islanders in a series of photographs and accompanying captions, a similar critique may be applied to his portrayal of Indigenous Fijian women.

### **Modernity, Education and Colonialism in Fiji**

The relationship between colonialism, modernity, education, and women’s emancipation is highlighted as M’Mahon commends the Indigenous princesses for upgrading their social status through their ‘modern ideas’ and a ‘wonderful spirit of independence’ (1922a, p. 8). At the same time, he is quick to point out that ‘they are not losing their Fijian individuality and retain many charming manners and customs’ (1922a, p. 8). In *Colonialism and Modernity*, Paul Gillien and Develeena Ghosh contend that: ‘Modernity and colonialism are loose, baggy concepts, related to one another in multifaceted and complex ways’ (2007, p. 52). Underlying this relationship is the view of enlightenment philosophy that modern people were ‘civilized’ and had progressed in their thinking. But while the term ‘modernity’ carried with it the implication that ‘the present is discontinuous with the past’ (Gillien and Ghosh, 2007, p. 53), M’Mahon repeatedly insisted that tradition or ‘the sense that the present is continuous with the past, and the present in some ways repeats the forms, behavior and events of the past’ (Gillien and Ghosh, 2007, p. 53), can still exist alongside modernity.

Chiefs in Fiji were ‘modernized’ by the colonial administration and the missionaries through the introduction of the formal education system. Although it is argued that they should have ‘become obsolete in the modern nation-state’ because ‘the forces of modernity were meant to usher him (or sometimes her) from the global stage’ (White and Lindstrom, 1997, p. 17), the reality was the opposite. Carmen White contends that colonial schooling which was expected to advance Western modernity and result in the demise of chiefly status and authority,

‘accommodated and carried along, rather than disengaged, chiefs from their roles and status as “traditional” figures’ (2006, p. 539). The literature on colonial schooling reveals that schools equipped traditional elites with clerical skills and literacy in colonial languages but also inculcated them ‘with the colonial loyalty that would facilitate their cooptation into the lower echelons of a secular colonial bureaucracy’ (White, 2006, p. 533). In line with this objective, the Queen Victoria School was established in 1906 to provide upper primary boarding school for males of chiefly descent. Some thirty-eight years later, the Adi Cakobau School was founded to provide ‘exclusive boarding school education for Fijian girls of rank’ (White, 2006, p. 564). The belated provision of schooling for Fijian girls of chiefly status reflected ‘the generally low priority that colonialists placed on schooling for girls and women as future leaders in the crown colony’ (White, 2006, p. 565). Although arithmetic, reading, writing, religious instruction, and hygiene were taught, the curriculum at the Adi Cakobau School centered on grooming girls of rank in ‘refinement’ with the anticipation that they would become future wives of Fijian leaders (White, 2006, p. 565).

### **The Gentlewoman and Auto-Ethnographic Expression**

The wives of missionaries played an important role in transforming Fijian girls into models of Victorian womanhood as they provided instruction in specialized domestic arts such as needlework and sewing and encouraged i-Taukei women to conform to their ‘sense of modesty’ (White, 2006, p. 565). Through the development of a gendered, elite consciousness, chiefly women became the primary agents for the propagation of ideal, Western, feminine subjectivities. They may have challenged patriarchal constructs within the social spaces of their own class, but they did not make or construct themselves. They continued to be defined by the discourses and circumstances around them, and consequently were portrayed by the Western media as assuming the typology of the ‘gentlewoman’, ‘an ideal, genteel, feminine identity’ (Bannerji, 2001). The Adis of Fiji fostered colonial ideals of the ‘gentlewoman’ through the articulation of auto-ethnographic expression, ‘instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s terms’ (Pratt, 2008, p. 9). These articulations (implied to some extent in M’Mahon’s ‘Emancipated Women’) were constructed ‘in response to or in dialogue with’ colonial representations (Pratt, 2008, p. 9).

The auto-ethnographic responses of the Adis were captured in formal and informal social gatherings between European and chiefly women. Claudia Knapman describes this relationship: ‘Missionary women had enjoyed the company of chiefly Fijian ladies very early in the history of white contact, and Fijian ladies were considerate of the interests of lonely missionary women’ (1986, p. 111). She elaborates: ‘Chiefly ladies were friends of young white settlers like Victoria Joske and of English ladies like Lady Gordon and Constance Gordon Cumming in the 1870s. Social intercourse was relatively straightforward with those considered equals’ (Knapman, 1986, p. 111). During this period, European and chiefly women perceived their elite social standing as the primary signifier of their ‘equal’ status as ‘ladies’. For example, Lady Gordon wrote of Adi Kuila: ‘She is such a lady’ and pointed out to her sister that ‘Nurse can’t understand it at all, she thinks we are all silly about natives, and looks down on them as an inferior race. I don’t like to tell her that these ladies are my equals, which she is not!’ (in Knapman, 1986, p. 111). The assessment was mutual. Adi Kuila felt confident that she could write to Constance Gordon Cumming for some lace: ‘I should not mind asking you, for you are a lady, like me’ (in Knapman, 1986, p. 111). In these exchanges, class and chiefly status is elevated over race and gender although they are

intricately connected. As Lady Gordon categorizes Adi Kuila on a higher standing in this hierarchy than her 'white' nurse, she removes race from the gender equation by prioritizing class.

### **Homemaking and Philanthropic Endeavors**

Formal and informal education can play a critical role in emancipating women by inculcating a change in sexist attitudes and transforming patriarchal societies. M'Mahon tries to develop this line of thought as he establishes a link between education and women's emancipation in Fiji.

The Fijian men are known for their present-day gallantry; but there was a time when women were little better than slaves and the men regarded them as such and kept them in a state of servitude. But those days are gone, and the Nandies [*sic*] or native princesses, by their superior education, their modern ideas and a wonderful sense of independence, are helping the emancipation of their native sisters (M'Mahon, 1922a, p. 8).

Behind this assertion is the suggestion that 'white men were saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1985, p. 120). Indigenous Fijian women were no longer 'chattels to their husbands' because they were redeemed by the white man's civilization and education. M'Mahon goes on to explain how the 'new' Adi is modern in her demands:

She wants fresh air, brightness, space and comfort. She places pictures upon the walls, photographs of her husband, herself, her children and friends; bright mats are upon the floor, the bed has a mosquito net, and she sweeps and washes, and gardens that her neighbors may not find fault with her as a neglected or untidy wife (1922a, p. 8).

Instead of examining patriarchal values and women's domestic subordination, M'Mahon commends these sexist ideologies by stressing the importance of the 'home sciences' taught by the missionaries. Therefore, the 'superior education' that he is referring to is women's practical, domestic, hygiene education. Moreover, i-Taukei women's freedom and independence is contradictorily signified by their participation in patriarchally-sanctioned duties in the home and village such as sweeping, washing, and gardening.

M'Mahon's definition of 'women's emancipation' included cultivating a refined sensibility among i-Taukei women through appearance and grooming. He juxtaposes the Adis against their native sisters as he observes: "'the chiefly mother dresses herself and her children in silk, while the ordinary mother 'attires herself and her children in less costly but bright and useful material'" (1922a, p. 8). Behind this statement is the view that the glamorous, sophisticated, empowered lady adorned in silk is superior to her 'native sister'. Here the 'ordinary' i-Taukei woman is presented as 'Other' to the chiefly woman. The Silk versus Cotton binary opposition constructed by M'Mahon draws attention to the class and economic differences between these categories of i-Taukei women. The 'ordinary' mother can only afford, cheap and practical cotton material. In this sense, textiles are used to convey information about gender and rank. However, the message that 'ordinary', Indigenous Fijian women have covered themselves and their children

is itself a sign of their colonization and progress. Clothing the natives by covering their nakedness was a priority for the missionaries as it was evidence of religious conversion.

As an extension of their roles in the private or domestic sphere, the Adis of Fiji actively participated in furthering volunteerism and philanthropy. The concept of philanthropy was a British one, 'born out of a class-divided society and justified by religious injunctions to care for the less fortunate' (Swain, 1996, p. 249). This tradition was dominated by the European 'ladies' and Aids of Fiji who had political networks in the community and the time to engage in activities that would alleviate immediate need. 'Like Christ, charitable women were "seeking and saving the lost". By couching their activity in religious terms, women extended the boundaries of their accepted sphere without ever publicly challenging their accepted and subordinate role' (Swain, 1996, p. 249). The confinement of the Adis to the private sphere or the perimeters of the home and village meant that they had the luxury of time and the required societal influence to engage in fundraising efforts. M'Mahon notes that: 'During the years of the war the Adis of Fiji asserted their independence, or in other words, proved to their husbands that they were human beings of intelligence and energy just as good as men' (1922a, p. 8). Yet as he illustrates this point, he paradoxically confirms the Adis dependence on their husbands:

The Nandi [Sic] of the Province of Somosomo of the island of Taviuni [Sic] organized native bazaars and festivities that brought in the English Red Cross funds no less a sum than £3000. Her husband was very proud of her for this giant effort, and showered presents upon her all of which she presented to the bazaars and which realized large sums of money. The Nandi [Sic] of Macuata of Vanua-Levu Island, whose husband is by the way a civil engineer by profession, supported him in his generous undertaking to maintain the wives and families during the course of the war of the men of Kalavu Island who had promptly volunteered for service (M'Mahon, 1922a, p. 8).

Through philanthropic endeavors, chiefly women extended their domestic role by confirming their gentility and preserving the distinctions of their class. But the pressing question is how did the philanthropic articulations of women like the Adi of Somosomo and the Adi of Macuata contribute to their alleged 'emancipation' or efforts to secure equal rights for women?

### **The New Woman of the 1920s**

M'Mahon's definition of 'women's emancipation' pivoted around projections of contented, privileged women who were fulfilling Western, patriarchally-determined, gender roles. This notion of women's emancipation converged with ideological changes that were taking place globally during an era marking the end of feminism. As Richard Evans contends: 'In the countries where women possessed the vote, feminist movements continued to decline or were eventually suppressed' (1977, p. 39). The 1920s ushered in the era of the 'new woman' or the professional homemaker. The result was a surge in new technologies that decreased the time spent on household chores and stressed the importance of cleanliness and order in the home. Dwight Dumond elaborates on this position: 'Feminists in the nineteenth century had made only small gains but since then household electrical appliances have done more to emancipate women than all the generations of agitation by militant suffragettes. Consequently, women were living in a new and happier world... The joy of home-making replaced the drudgery of housekeeping' (Dumond,

1937, p. 35). While it is important to stress that definitions of ‘women’s emancipation’ should be situated within the specificities of time, place, and historical circumstance, it is also necessary to consider how other variables like social status play a critical role in this classification of the ‘new woman in the 1920s’. For M’Mahon, the category of the new, emancipated woman in Fiji was exclusive to women of rank. Although he claimed that the Adis were helping in the emancipation of their native sisters, the construct of the ‘new’, modern, Fijian woman was still inaccessible to women of lower socio-economic classes at the time.

If we accept that ‘women’s emancipation’ is: ‘The achievement of complete (a) economic, (b) social, (c) political and (d) religious equality of women with men, an aspiration whose realization in the course of the twentieth century has been gradual, varied and incomplete’ (Oxford Reference Online), then the 1920s may be categorized as a phase where articulations of ‘women’s emancipation’ have been ‘varied’ and inconsistent with the broader agenda of feminism. However, from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the ‘native sisters’ of Fiji who the Adis were allegedly emancipating, played an active role in liberating themselves from the authority and control of the colonizers and male chiefs. These women defied laws and traditional power structures to secure economic and sexual freedom for women in a way that M’Mahon’s Adis did not. They articulated a radical, feminist position on a range of issues until the colonial authorities introduced laws and penalties to restrict their freedom and independence.

### **The ‘Native Sisters’: Economic Empowerment**

When the European explorers, beachcombers, and missionaries arrived in Fiji in the early 1800s, they found ‘chieftaincies dominating the socio-political landscape of the archipelago’ (White, 2006, p. 532). Chiefly titles were transferred using the principle of ‘patrilineal agnatic descent’ (Lal, 1992, p. 4). Following this system of classification, the i-Taukei belonged to a yavusa (clan), comprising of several mataqali or family groups. This tribal hierarchy consisted of chiefs and executives of the mataqali, masters of ceremony, priests, and warriors (Lal, 1992, p. 4). ‘Although there have been rare instances of women holding high chiefly status’ (Asian Development Bank, 2016, p. 7), for example, the daughters of King Cakobau, Adi Litia Kakua and Adi Arieta Kuila, men have dominated the chiefly system through the decisions articulated in the Bose Vakaturaga (Council of Chiefs). Women only had ‘limited inheritance rights and decision-making roles in traditional chiefly forums’ (Asian Development Bank, 2016, p. 7).

Indigenous Fijian women’s responsibilities in pre-contact societies included tasks like collecting wild fruit, plants, and medicinal herbs, fishing, minding children and the elderly, and creating handicraft items like pottery and mats (Vulaono, 1998, p. 7). Robert Nicole argues that the ‘household and garden were the primary sites where women cultivated a sense of personhood, obedience, duty, order, morality, sexuality and their work ethic’ (2018, p. 188). Thus, women’s decision-making roles and their acts of resistance were confined to the private sphere and included judgements about the household, children, procreation, and women’s bodies. After Fiji was ceded to Britain on 10 October 1874, the traditional or pre-colonial roles of Indigenous Fijian women began to change. Indigenous women’s choice to be involved in waged labour and their subsequent movement out of the villages were central issues of concern to the colonial authorities and Indigenous men. While it is argued that these changes were necessary to accommodate the pressures of ‘an intensive political and commercial contact’ (Lal, 1992, p. 4), i-Taukei women did not passively accept them. Robert Nicole contends: ‘the early meetings of the Bose Vakaturaga reveal that the position of women in decision-making was eroded, that their freedom to drink

yaqona was curbed, and their rights to land (which varied from place to place) were expropriated and secured for men only' (2018, p. 190). The movement of Indigenous Fijian women and girls to urban centres was also restricted. In 1923 and 1926, women who were away from villages for more than twenty-eight days were required to obtain the Chief's consent (Lal, 1992, p.67).

While Sir Arthur Gordon, managed to prohibit Indigenous Fijians from engaging in plantation work, he was unable to stop women from finding employment in what the colonial administrators termed 'questionable places of employment' (Lal, 1992, p. 66) such as saloons. Indigenous Fijian women also worked as house workers and governesses for white women. During the late 1800s, colonial officials and the Bose Vakaturaga argued against Indigenous Fijian women's involvement in waged labor, particularly their movement to urban areas away from the village (Nicole, 2018, p. 196). Although i-Taukei women's desire for economic empowerment and financial independence from men was impeded by the introduction of colonial laws and internal controls to ensure that they remained in the villages and fulfilled their responsibilities there, they 'continued to run away from their villages' and oppose colonial and patriarchal attempts to curb their 'growing immorality' (Nicole, 2018, p. 196).

### **The Make-Em-Get-Married Society**

The concept of patriarchy, institutionally reinforced through heterosexual marriages, has simultaneously shaped the production of gender identity and ideology. M'Mahon paints an extremely sensationalized picture of i-Taukei marriages in 'An Island Paradise' as he asserts that 'bachelorhood is not tolerated in Fiji'. He goes on to insist that 'there is in every town a Women's Vigilance Committee, what might be called a "Make-Em-Get-Married society"' (M'Mahon, 1923, p. 52). The Women's Vigilance Committee that M'Mahon refers to here is absent in Fiji's historical and archival records. Although chiefs and i-Taukei men have played a role in coercing Indigenous Fijian women to marry against their wishes, the presence of a committee of women in every town pressuring women to get married seems like a bizarre overstatement. Below is M'Mahon's account of the marriage process:

When a young lady of Fiji comes to a marriageable age and has no lover, her mother arranges seven or more curls at the back of her head, on the left side. Then dressed in her best, the daughter saunters around the town "making eyes" in a discrete fashion at all the eligible bachelors. If after a few days no offers of marriage come along, the mother puts some white pigment over the curls to make them look grey. This is intended to indicate that her daughter is going to age with worry and regret, and that the bachelors are not as gallant as they used to be. This usually has the desired effect, and in a few days the young lady is besieged with matrimonial offers, the successful suitor finally leaving at the girl's house his "card" – a small whale's tooth (M'Mahon, 1923, p. 52).

M'Mahon concludes that the custom of marrying off women in Fiji is 'as amusing as it is effective' (1923, p. 52). Clearly 'the man of the land reporter' has distorted his reporting of a sacred ritual here to amuse his readers.

Traditionally, Indigenous Fijian marriages had a functional purpose and were used to connect two families (Kaitani, 2003, p. 115). It was the man who sought approval from the woman's relatives by presenting a tabua (whale's tooth). The woman's family exchanged gifts in

return as the marriage was agreed upon. The ‘seven or more curls’ that were arranged by the mother on a girl’s head are the tresses symbolizing virginity. Miliakere Kaitani elaborates on this ritual: ‘In Lau, a female was from birth expected to have a virgin lock. This was a small portion of hair, on the left, that was never cut since birth. The tresses symbolized that the particular female was a virgin. If a young woman was no longer a virgin, she was expected to cut the tresses’ (2003, p. 115). The symbolic aspect of the ritual is not mentioned in M’Mahon’s rather flamboyant sketch where he manages to transform a serious and sacred tradition into a ridiculous affair with i-Taukei women being presented as desperate to be married off. Archival documents tell another story.

In 1904, the Colonial Secretary expressed his concern about the autonomous nature of the young Indigenous Fijian woman, especially the manner in which she ‘prolonged her liberty as far as possible by showing a disinclination for marriage, which would tie her to one man and transform her life from one of frivolity to drudgery’ (Colonial Secretary’s Office, No. 2, 1904). Values associated with individualism, personal fulfilment, and women’s sexual emancipation are highlighted here. Robert Nicole cites the words of an exasperated Roko Tui Ba in 1880: ‘How can the population increase when the people refuse to marry? In some towns it is reported that there are a large number of marriageable women and they positively refuse to be married to anybody’ (2018, p. 190). These acts of resistance by Indigenous Fijian women fostered patriarchal resentment towards their separation of sex and procreation. The colonial authorities frowned upon voluntary childlessness and the decision not to marry, and chiefs sometimes imposed compulsory marriages in such cases (Colonial Secretary’s Office, No. 2, 1904). As the colonizers attempted to regulate i-Taukei women’s sexually autonomous nature, they strove to enforce ideal Western values of chastity, purity, and goodness.

### **Abortion and Reproductive Rights**

I-Taukei women played an active role in making decisions relating to fertility before and during the colonial period (Colonial Secretary’s Office, 1893). The procurement of abortion through the ingestion of herbal decoctions was frowned upon by the colonizers and missionaries. Colonial agent, S. M. Tripp, wrote to the chief of Nasowale in Kadavu on July 18, 1904:

Although it is impossible to procure evidence sufficient to support legal proceedings, yet there can be little doubt that in every town one or more women practice the art of procuring abortion. In the towns adjoining the hospital I have little difficulty in singling out the woman who according to common opinion carry out these practices, but it is often difficult to get anyone to make a definite charge or to furnish legal evidence that the crime has been committed (Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, No. 24, 1895).

Prior to colonization, abortion was widely practiced and regarded as a natural method of regulating reproduction. With the arrival of the colonizers, stiff penalties for abortion and contraception were introduced: ‘Any Fijian woman whose baby was born dead or died before its first birthday was required to undergo a magisterial inquiry’ (Luker, 2005, p. 359). The criminalization of abortion by the colonial administration was a significant deterrent in the fight for reproductive rights for Indigenous Fijian women. While women around the world were lobbying for the pro-choice stance on abortion, this right was being taken away from i-Taukei women by the colonizers and Indigenous Fijian men.

Despite the introduction of the Native Council Regulation Number 2 of 1877 that imposed a two-year sentence plus flogging for those who performed or assisted in performing abortion and the subsequent increase of this charge to three years in prison in 1898, Indigenous Fijian women remained undeterred by these penalties and continued to 'procure abortion again and again in succession' (Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 24, 1895). For example, on October 14, 1884, an Indigenous Fijian woman, Davilo, was prosecuted for 'the willful procurement of abortion by drinking the herbal decoction wainikoka' and subsequently sentenced for two years (simple imprisonment) for breaching Native Regulation 2, 1877 (Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 1571, 1886 and Mishra, 2016). Here it may be suggested that Indigenous Fijian women like Davilo resisted the burden of unwanted pregnancies by challenging naturalized and essentialist images of mothers and wives projected by the colonial authorities and male chiefs. This perception may have been guided by an implicit agreement amongst abortionists, midwives, and traditional healers that matters relating to women's bodies were taboo (sacred) and male intervention in such matters was unacceptable.

### **Qele ni Ruve**

Discussions about the emancipation of i-Taukei women in the early 1920s cannot be separated from the formation of the largest association of Indigenous Fijian women, Qele ni Ruve. This organization was born out of the collaborative efforts of the Adis of Fiji and middle-class white women. Qele ni Ruve (or the group belonging to Ruby/Ruve) was founded in 1924 by Ruby Derrick, wife of the principal of the Lelean Memorial School in Fiji. It was a critical moment in women's collective organizing in Fiji as it attempted to unite all i-Taukei women by imparting skills and knowledge to them. When Derrick retired as the organization's head, its headship was taken over by chiefly women although the majority of its members were rurally based women. The organization was renamed Soqosoqo Vakamara where soqo is defined as 'to gather or assemble', vaka is a prefix, and marama means 'a lady' (Capell, 1941, p. 201, 252, 136). Mirroring the agenda of the white ladies in Fiji, the Adis, through the Soqosoqo Vakamara, cultivated and strengthened Western and traditional hierarchal structures by perpetuating the status quo and advancing the home sciences taught by the missionaries. The agenda of the Soqosoqo Vakamarama was centred around teaching village women skills like sewing, cooking, cleaning, traditional handicraft skills, and bringing up healthy families.

Although the Soqosoqo Vakamara has been criticized more recently for its close association with the Christian churches (Norton, 2009, p. 223) and its continued leadership by chiefly women, it may be argued that 'collective networking through the church provides opportunities to share ideas and identify strategic interests and allow time out from mundane everyday activities' (Scheyvens, 2003, p. 24-25). Shiasta Shameem asserts further that: 'The moment women organized activities in associations and organizations in the village, they were negotiating a separate space for themselves' (Personal Communication, 24 May 2002). Moreover, by learning the patriarchally-defined skills of European women, Indigenous Fijian women empowered themselves economically by earning an income and learning how to survive in a market-driven economy (Baro, 1975, p. 41). Whether the money was used to send their children to school or to build a bus-shelter or lavatory for members of the village, women were playing an active role in improving the living standard in their communities and meeting their immediate needs. The platform of such associations is consistent with an anti-poverty approach—that is, one that aims to enhance women's productive role through income generation (Visvanathan, 1997, p.

20). Today, aside from cooking, sewing, and making handicrafts, some women from the Soqosoqo Vakamara engage in individually or group managed micro-financed projects including chicken farming, vegetable gardening, and flower and horticulture businesses (Norton, 2009, p. 227). Therefore, M'Mahon's claim that the Adis of Fiji were helping in the emancipation of their native sisters may be evident in the way their leadership in the Soqosoqo Vakamarama has contributed to the long-term economic empowerment of all Indigenous Fijian women.

## **Conclusion**

Thomas M'Mahon's columns 'Emancipated Women', 'An Island Paradise: The Story of Fiji', and 'The Land of No Bachelors' offer a valuable contribution to the discourse of women's history in Fiji. They are important because they demonstrate how somewhat inflated and distorted notions of chiefly 'women's emancipation' intersected with the image of the 'new woman' in the 1920s. The Adis of Fiji were categorized as such by M'Mahon because they were modern, sophisticated, and educated in the home sciences. They were privileged women interacting with and mimicking white middle-class women in the upper echelons of society. As they were being constructed in this way by the Western media, their native sisters were actively resisting their everyday oppression by challenging the authority of colonial administrators and male chiefs. Their struggle to engage in waged employment in the late 1800s, their resistance to marriage and motherhood, their procurement of abortion and use of herbal remedies to regulate pregnancies, and their participation in income generating skills to ensure that they have access to money, are examples of the critical role i-Taukei women played in their own emancipation. While the Adis did assist in the economic empowerment of i-Taukei women through organizations like the Soqosoqo Vakamara, some of the more radical acts of women's emancipation were emanating from rurally based women who were individually and collectively advocating for their social, sexual, cultural, and economic liberation. These more inclusive articulations of Indigenous Fijian women's emancipation in the 1920s are absent from M'Mahon's portrait of emancipated women. As there is limited scholarship on Indigenous Fijian 'women's emancipation' in the late 1800s and early 1900s, this article has attempted to critique M'Mahon's 1920 interpretation of this concept and make further contributions to this discourse.

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