

Retracing Footprints

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I grew up in the Levuka of the 1960s. Looking back now as an adult, there was an inexplicable quality about the place I cannot quite fathom. But those who have lived there will know what I mean. Am I reminiscing through rose tinted glasses? Perhaps, perhaps not. One tends to accentuate what is good when doing so. What is so striking is the sense of security and wellbeing I had then, attributable to a sheltered childhood and a certain naïveté.

It was a time of innocence. My world was a lot simpler then. For I was just a boy taken with the joys of the moment: little pleasures like swimming in the sea at Nasova or at the fresh water falls at Nosonoso, playing with the Momoivalus next door and other children around, picking guavas in the hills behind our house or going to the movies at the Liberty Theatre, across the street from Kang Jack War's shop on the waterfront. It cost six pence. The entrance fee was refunded and the movie cancelled, if the proprietor felt he wasn't going to make a profit. For one waiting expectantly all week for 'the pictures', it was a bitter blow.

The old capital spilled out along the waterfront, squashed on a strip of flat land which was shaped roughly like a triangle, between the sea and the mountains which loomed behind it. Beach Street ran the length of the town at the base of the triangle, a dividing line between the waters of the Koro Sea and the motley collection of wooden buildings of shops, churches and houses, with the wharf and fish cannery at one end and Levuka Vakaviti village at the other. Almost in the middle of the waterfront was the Roman Catholic Church with its bell tower and clock, a prominent feature of the town. Here I sometimes attended mass with close relatives, totally bewildered about when to genuflect, kneel or stand as Father Hannan officiated. On the other side of the street, closer to the shops adjoining the church in the direction of the wharf, stood an obelisk-like memorial to the Great War, one of several dotted around the town.

The stores Burns Philp ('BPs') and Morris Hedstroms ('MHs') faced each other, greeting visitors arriving by boat; the former landward and the latter on the seaside. The shops were a mixture of Chinese, Gujarati and Indo-Fijian businesses, the names and face a pleasant but distant memory from long ago. The talkative diminutive Piyoi younger brother of Kang Jack War, friendly Gulabdas, the tailor with a tape measure dangling around his neck, the lordly Vallabh who planted the *baka* trees along part of the waterfront, fastidious Maneklal always dressed in white and chewing betel nut, gruff Kang Kee Tong whose milkbar was a popular haunt, genteel Young Yet his shop stuffed with all manner of things, obliging Ambalal the shoemaker and amiable Rishi Ram who cut my hair, to name a few. In his barber's shop, Rishi had a painting of the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' at Balaclava during the Crimean War, with the immortal words from Tennyson's poem printed beneath. It fascinated me endlessly, wondering what it was like to be facing certain death on the frontline. Having sated my imagination, I would indulge my appetite for Indian confectionary as Rishi Ram also sold sweets and condiments: bean, peanut, rourou, gulgula, lakari meetai, gulab jamun, barfi and jalebi.

We lived in the government settlement at Nasova, just out of the town past the cannery. Our house was an old colonial residence, allegedly part of Government House when Levuka was in its heyday, with wide verandas and high ceilings. It had ample grounds and a picket fence. One of our neighbours was a farmer called Singh and his wife Ram Pyari. Singh and Ram Pyari were extremely hard working folk who succeeded in establishing a considerable business. They bequeathed that work ethic to their sixteen children. He and Ram Pyari were good friends of my parents, my father always willing to assist whenever he had land disputes with some of the Taukei. The road in front of the house ran from Levuka to the villages dotted along the coast, most known as the 'Qalivakabau' which meant they had close ties with the island of Bau.

Across the road were a grey sandy beach and a small jetty where afternoons were spent jumping off it and swimming in the clear waters. During the Suva-Levuka yacht race in October, quite a few boats would anchor near the jetty. A creek divided the District Commissioner's residence, on a slight rise behind our house to the right looking from the sea, and the provincial compound. It comprised the Roko Tui Lomaiviti's house behind the impressive bure where meetings and traditional gatherings were sometimes held. Across the road, opposite the provincial compound by the sea, an open area edged by hibiscus hedges contained a stone monument marking the spot where the ceding of Fiji took place. Along the shore from there, the ghost ship Joyita lay beached for many

years, a desperate, dilapidated wreck.

Traditional authority was stronger then. I remember the respect and deference accorded my father and the other chiefs I knew. The 'sevu' or first fruits were brought to our house from the nearby villages that owed allegiance to Bau. My father discouraged the practice because it detracted from the Taukei fending for themselves and taking care of their families. It has since fallen into disuse. Taukei were regulated by the Native Regulations which gave legal sanction to chiefly authority prior to their abolition in 1968. Before then it seemed as if time had stood still in a sleepy hamlet like Levuka. I do not regret its passing for we live in less hierarchical times where merit and achievement are the signifiers of social mobility.

I recall my father admonishing me once when I was behaving in a petulant and highhanded manner, 'You are not a chief, only the son of one. Whether you will be a chief, will depend on your ability to lead and the willingness of people to follow and defer to you.' A rather heavy admonition for a seven year old, but I think I 'got' it. On another day, in a conversation with Samisoni our gardener, I overheard my father say 'Only time will tell whether your son will "beka" mine.' 'Beka' is the equivalent of 'saka' in the Bauan dialect, being the Taukei response of deference to people of rank or notability. I didn't know it then but change was already foreshadowed in my father's words. And I also learned from him the way in which he treated people as equals, shaped in part by fifteen years spent in New Zealand from the age of fourteen reinforced by an understated, retiring nature.

And there were the personalities who seemed larger than life to me. Ratu Etuate Cakobau, high chief of Bau and District Commissioner, princely yet at ease in any company. At his funeral years later, the people of Levuka went to pay their respects in Bau, the poignancy of the event accentuated by the multiracial nature of the delegation: Indo-Fijian women in white saris, Taukei women in black dresses and sulus, European and Part-European women in black as well, each carrying a mat in single file across the rara, all accompanied by their men in white shirts with long trousers or sulus.

There was old Mr Ricketts who would sit on the verandah of his house, shout 'Good morning' to me, smoking ceaselessly all the while, as I walked by to school. He had been a successful copra planter and married a Taukei, Bubu Wati. Sometimes, I would get fed up with this daily ritual and pretend I hadn't heard him. Mr Ricketts would tell my parents and a cuff on the ear would be my reward. There was Mrs Dora Patterson,

the town aristocrat, with her peaches and cream complexion and impeccable manners. Her husband, Mr Reg Patterson, was the proprietor of the vessels Ovalau and Jubilee which ferried passengers between Levuka and Natovi on Viti Levu. Aporosa from Nasinu, an elderly man whom I wasn't quite sure was either a little touched in the head or extraordinarily bright as he would often launch into speeches in perfect English. Auntie Mela Sandys was a gentle soul with sad eyes and a generous nature. And old Mrs Beattie, with her eccentric ways, and her love of hats and cats. They all are part of the indelible kaleidoscope of memories etched on my mind.

There were three schools within the township: Levuka Public School, Marist Primary School and Delana Methodist Primary School on Mission Hill, up the longest set of steps in the country. All were co-educational; only Delana catered principally for Taukei students from the islands of Lomaiviti. Levuka Public had a hostel which was run by Dr Aisea Erasito and his wife, Mrs Marieta Erasito. He was a close colleague of my father's, so I never saw the disciplinarian side which boarders often related. Out of town at the end of the road at Cawaci was St John's College for senior males, in the other direction at Tokou was Loreto Girls School for senior females, as well as the various primary schools that some of the villages had.

I attended Levuka Public for five and a half years with children from all backgrounds and communities. Maraia Riley, Pravin Damodar, Nolan Peckham, Steven Traill, Andrew Newton, Frank Blake, Mairul Nisha, Viliame Baravilala, Tuila McKay, Dorothy Browne. Diane Gibson and other names vanished beyond recall. They were happy times because Levuka was all I knew. Did the school make me more accepting and tolerant of others? Honestly, I have no ready answers. I played and studied with my peers without really thinking about ethnicity or race. But I also learned to accept that we had varying ways of doing things from the way we prayed, to the food we ate, to how we interpreted the world around us. Not better, not right, just different. This was not every one's experience, of course, but it was mine. And it was reinforced by some wonderful teachers such as Miss Matilda Gerish, Mrs Lutu Elder, Miss May Anderson and Mr Henry Elder who had the misfortune to teach the opinionated and self-indulgent brat that I was. These characteristics mystified my teachers and worried my parents, because neither my father nor mother had those traits.

Bowls was an important pastime, played by the European and Part-European women of the town, together with a smattering of Taukei and Indian women as well, including my mother. She was an extraordinary

person, open, compassionate and without prejudice; on talking terms with everyone in the town. I see in my mind's eye Mother and the other women in their regulation white dresses, white socks and white canvas shoes playing on the green which was screened from prying eyes by a thick hedge that was several feet high. And afterwards adjourning to the clubhouse for afternoon tea to sample the welcome delights of lamingtons, sponge cakes, jam rolls and assorted sandwiches the members brought to share. The bowling green was by Nasau Park where major celebrations and sporting events were staged. Next to the Bowling Green was the Masonic Lodge built in imitation ancient Greek style with its columns and porticoes. It was the subject of lurid and fanciful imagination, because no one seemed to know what its members did. My father was a member but he never talked about it. On the evenings they had meetings, he would leave immaculate in evening dress, returning in the early hours of the next morning. Not a word was said or questions asked, but Levuka's most prominent male citizens belonged to it.

The only bar was at the Royal Hotel, across the creek from the Bowling Club. One could also drink at the Ovalau Club if one were a member. Asaeli from Draiba, the barman, was an institution. Although he wielded his authority lightly, no one ever tried to trespass. It was then quite exclusive with membership being restricted to the leading citizens in the business community and senior public servants. There was one incident where the Collector of Customs, Ram Harakh Bechan, was refused membership after being proposed for membership by Ratu Kamisese Mara. He was admitted sometime later. Race and ethnicity were issues, but submerged and largely overlooked so long as invisible limits were honoured. Dancing took place next door at the old town hall. There wasn't much of a night life so young people looked forward to any excitement they could have. Any fracas was swiftly answered with a night in the cell of the police station, a stone's throw across the creek. Peter Posa, the New Zealand guitarist, came and performed once and the place was packed. In front of the town hall, a bridge across the creek that flowed past the Royal Hotel led to the police station and government offices. This was the government centre of the town, located inland from Beach Street.

The population of the town was culturally diverse with Chinese, Japanese, Gujaratis, Indo-Fijians, Part-Europeans and a small number of Taukei public servants. The majority of the Taukei lived in Levuka Vakaviti, on the outskirts and in the Taukei villages that formed the hinterland of the town. Saturday was market day and Levuka would be filled with throngs of people in town to do their weekly 'basa' (selling of produce) and purchase supplies. Punts would come from Motoriki and outly-

ing villages on Ovalau not yet linked by road to sell their crops, vegetables, fish and shellfish. It was also the day for sports fixtures whether rugby, hockey, soccer or netball. In our early years, my father used to referee rugby matches. As the senior medical officer and a traditional leader, he was prominent in the community. Unfortunately, my father didn't have the temperament for umpiring because he had high blood pressure and a quick temper. On one occasion fighting broke out between two teams from separate villages, my father told the police not to intervene and let the parties bash each other until they collapsed from exhaustion. On another, when a punch up began, he stopped the match, dressed the teams down and walked off leaving the players shamefaced and embarrassed.

The market was also on Beach Street, past the shops and over a sturdy bridge at the mouth of a creek which rose in the mountains and flowed down past Levuka Public School, the police station on one bank, the Ovalau Club on the other, by the Bowling Club, the Royal Hotel and into the sea. Beyond the market, Beach Street passed the butchery, where Uncle Lambert Leung and Rati plied their wares, the technical school and some private houses, before it reached the hospital. Opposite the hospital was a disused shipyard with an inlet for beaching boats. A small hill adjoined the inlet on the approaches to the hospital. Atop it was another memorial to the fallen of the First World War. The Anglican Church stood next to the hospital and before one got to Levuka Vakaviti, there was Wong's bakery and adjoining properties. Vagadaci, the home of much of the Part-European community, lay just past it with the Rileys, the Bowers, the Wilsons, the McGoons, the Newtons, the Blakes and many more. The rest were scattered throughout the town, in houses three or four generations had occupied from the earliest days of Levuka. Largely descended from early settlers and Taukei women, they were the defining element of the population because their forbears had established the original settlement and they helped perpetuate a sense of continuity.

The different communities interacted in the town and in the market as well as in school. It was an easy going relationship based on mutual respect, esteem and need. What helped were the factors which allowed a balance to be maintained among the different ethnic groups. I believe what enabled this crucible of tolerance and accommodation to take root and grow was a remarkable alignment of interests. For all of them, Levuka was a staging post en route to elsewhere. Whether it was to Suva or beyond in search of distant horizons and a future which beckoned. So there wasn't competition as such for jobs or for business, the trajectory of most young people's paths led away from Levuka; acting as a safety valve. People were content to relate to each other as they always had:

Taukei coming into town to work at the fish cannery, sell produce and secure supplies, Gujeratis and Chinese merchants continuing to sell to everyone and Part-Europeans working in blue collar jobs as electricians, plumbers and handypersons. Taukei and Indo-Fijians public servants came and went on regular postings. But that only explains part of the equation. Just as important were the people themselves with their spirit of decency and forbearance for each other. This is not to say Levuka was Shangri-La; it wasn't. There were squabbles and disputes as there were in any place. It's just that the ethnic dimension, the millstone around our collective necks, wasn't as pronounced there as elsewhere.

The communities recognised their dependence on each other. It didn't happen overnight, but over several decades; a realisation which subsisted subconsciously, but was never openly expressed, because there was no need. The people of Levuka were too preoccupied with their lives, their families and their community and would have been bemused by this sort of discussion. Tacit recognition of diversity was sufficient for Levuka's stoic citizens. They were comfortable about it, without any need for showy affirmation or a glitzy parade. Levuka was common ground where the people of Ovalau engaged, conducted business with each other and then withdrew to their private spaces. The town wasn't 'owned' by any one person or group, but belonged to them all. This shared sense of proprietorship was palpable and reflected in the fierce loyalty to and affection for the town. And while the numbers of Taukei in the hinterland of Levuka were far greater than the Part-Europeans and Indo-Fijians combined in the town, no threat was felt or a sense of intimidation prevalent. The differences were there but people chose not to emphasise them. Because in that engagement, a rare feat was accomplished: a measure of trust and a respect for boundaries among all the communities. It was a reassuring familiarity born out of an evolving relationship with each other. One built over generations with individuals as well as with their families, making the bonds stronger.

I owe Levuka a debt of gratitude. It is one I can only repay in the consideration I give others, irrespective of who or what they are. Because that is what I learned in the nine years or so I lived there. The circumstances of Levuka are not easily replicated elsewhere. But there are lessons to be learned in the ways different communities in a small town came to appreciate each other in spite of the tensions and the obvious difficulties that existed between them. They lay not in grand initiatives but in the small every day gestures which helped to establish trust, step by painstaking step; dealing with neighbours' equitably over time and treating them with mutual respect. Not with special treatment, or favouritism

or discrimination but 'same same, tautauvata'. I learned that from Levuka not as a blinding 'on the road to Damascus' like experience, but in the ordinary daily humdrum doings of the people who lived there when I was growing up.