

Sairusi Nabogibogi¹

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Sairusi Nabogibogi. The name will mean little to the present generation of Fijians. But to those of us marching lock, stock and barrel into niggling middle age, the name was synonymous with violence, terror and unspeakable criminality. It was fearsome enough to send unruly children into blanket-wrapped silence in the menacing darkness of their thatched houses. Sairusi was a man of many parts: a charismatic criminal, a serial prison escapist, a proto-Fijian nationalist fiercely opposed to colonial rule and European dominance, an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, a fiction writer of talent, a self-proclaimed messiah and divinely ordained saviour of his people, in short a man of destiny. He was the undoubted hero of the Fijian underworld of the 1950s and 60s, much as Apolosi Nawai had been at the beginning of the 20th century. Now this once feared man and all that he claimed to stand for survives only in the fading memories of a passing generation.

Sairusi Nabogibogi, 5ft 8in tall, built a bit like the heavyweight boxer Sonny Liston with the ‘same air of brooding menace,’ as reporter Matt Wilson put it, was born on 2 September 1932 at Nakawakawa, Wainunu, Bua, son of Miriama Kadrudru of Nakawakawa and Josefa Nabogibogi from Nayavutoka, Ra. When he was only three, his father saw a vision of Sairusi as a returning messiah marked for great things. But his early career was unremarkable. He was educated at Ratu Kadaualevu School and the Queen Victoria School, where Apisai Tora was

¹ This article is based on official secret Fiji files at the Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, and on reports of interviews with Sairusi in the Fiji Times.

among his contemporaries and with whom he formed a life-long, but not trouble-free, association. From high school, Sairusi went to the Nasinu Training College, but was expelled in 1949 for allegedly loitering around the women's dormitory. Sairusi protested the drastic sentence, especially, he said, when other similar offenders were let off lightly or went unpunished. But as Sairusi was Sairusi, his fate was sealed. He told the Controller of Prisons later that 'it was at this point he made up his mind deliberately to become Fiji's worst-ever criminal.' I am not sure if Sairusi used the word 'criminal' to describe himself – probably not – but that is what the records report.

Sairusi's first serious brush with the law came in 1951 when he was charged with criminal trespass and larceny. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to nine months imprisonment. Released from prison on 10 May 1952, Sairusi returned to his old ways, becoming a 'confirmed and expert burglar,' in the words of the Fiji Intelligence Service, which described him as the 'smartest Fijian criminal in Suva.' Throughout the 1950s, Sairusi continued to tempt fate and live dangerously at the edge. But his luck ran out when he was charged for a series of sexual assaults on European women in Suva. He denied the charge before the Suva Magistrate's Court, claiming that he was being framed for his political beliefs, but he was convicted and committed to the Supreme Court for sentence. On 21 July 1958, Chief Justice Sir George Lowe, who would later chair the inquiry into the 1959 riots in Suva, sentenced Sairusi to eight years' imprisonment and ordered that he, Sairusi, be kept under police surveillance for five years after his release. Sairusi appealed his sentence, without success. That embittered him deeply. He felt that 'he had been savagely treated' without being given a chance to reform. It was not only what Sairusi allegedly did that terrified the establishment; it was what it represented in the closed world of colonial society – a potent mix of race and sex and violence, a fear of the other, the crossing of sacrosanct boundaries – that perhaps weighed even more heavily on the minds of the officialdom. An example had to be made of him to deter others.

Incarcerated, Sairusi decided that he would not be a 'normal' prison inmate. He was sent to Suva Gaol but, accused of trying to organise a breakout among the prisoners, was transferred to the Natabua Prison in Lautoka in April 1959. The transfer did not help. Sairusi quickly established himself as 'the acknowledged leader of the prisoners,' who was 'virtually in charge of the gaol.' How did this come about? Because Sairusi became a champion of racial equality. 'When I went there [to prison], Fijians and Indians had a piece of sack to sleep on and one blan-

ket, that's all,' he recalled in 1972, while European and Part-European inmates had mattresses, pillows and bed sheets. 'We were all prisoners and we should all have had the same facilities.' His agitation paid dividends, which endeared him to his inmates. He continued to break out almost at will, under the nose of the prison wardens, and return to his cell with cigarettes, books, and liquor. His cell, 7ft by 8ft, with a wooden bed and nothing else, became his sanctuary. 'I did not listen to the radio,' he recalled. 'Sometimes I read all night.' He refused release from solitary confinement half way through his sentence because 'I wanted to be by myself and think and read.'

While in prison, Sairusi even managed to acquire a revolver and ammunition, though police also suspected someone else of being his accomplice.² On 21 September, Sairusi appeared before the Senior Magistrate in Lautoka on two counts of burglary and one of causing actual bodily harm. He was sentenced to four years imprisonment. Sairusi, ever determined to be his own man, railing at the world around him, did not mend his ways. Perhaps he could not. He kept breaking out, flouting prison regulation. Rules and regulations, and prison walls, were for lesser mortals, not for him. Living dangerously, he paid the price. On 19 January 1960, Sairusi was sentenced to a further year's imprisonment for breaking out of prison (and meeting other known criminals at the Lautoka Cemetery at night). Soon afterwards, he escaped from Natabua Gaol altogether.

On the run, Sairusi met up with an Indo-Fijian, let's call him Bhaggu, a notorious Lautoka-born criminal operating in the Sabeto area, a kind of Al Capone, the police said, a 'truly wicked man [who] operated an extremely profitable murder racket.' Together, Bhaggu and Sairusi wreaked havoc in the cane belt, breaking-in, threatening violence and cowering people into submission on behalf of whoever paid them. Bhaggu, the hired gun, was convicted of gun running in 1963, and sentenced to eight years imprisonment (reduced on appeal to four years). Released in 1966, he was murdered by a young neighbour. Those who live by the sword die by the sword, you might say. On 12 July 1960, the Commissioner Western, Mr McAlpine, was shot while getting out of his car at his house in Lautoka. The police reported that the would-be assassin fired one round from a single-barrelled shot gun at point blank range

² This suspect became an eccentric political figure, who featured prominently in the 1987 and the 2000 coups, as well as had risen to the rank of a minister in an unelected regime.

hitting McAlpine in the stomach. As he lay doubled over, he fired another hurried shot missing him, and then ran away. McAlpine survived but had to be invalided out of colonial service. All fingers pointed to Sairusi as the suspected assailant, though probably the incident was masterminded by Bhaggu himself. No evidence linked Sairusi to the shooting, nor to the shooting of a Sabeto farmer, (name withheld) as he held his one-year daughter in his hands. In the post war years, Sabeto had the reputation of one of the most murderous places in Fiji, and especially dangerous during the bitter sugar cane strike of 1960. McAlpine's shooting was, I suspect, linked to it.

Meanwhile, Sairusi's reputation for performing mysterious deeds escalated. Many thought he was a magician. As the police reported, 'it was even rumoured that he had a cloak which, when he put it on, rendered him invisible.' Some even believed that 'he could walk through walls as and when he wishe[d].' At any rate, he was deemed a sufficient enough menace to be befriended (though probably not bought) by some Lautoka businessmen, as well as some prominent Fijians in the civil service who shared Sairusi's anti-European views, including Apisai Tora and Ratu Mosese Varasikete. Even SM Koya, who often represented criminals in court in the 1960s, was reported credibly to have been in touch with Sairusi. On 4 October 1960, at Apisai Tora's request, Ratu Penaia Ganilau, then Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs, flew over to Lautoka to meet Sairusi. Sairusi had sought an audience with the high chief to deny any involvement in the shooting of McAlpine and Bhaggu and to demand a retrial of the 1958 court case against him. Nothing came of the meeting, which soured Sairusi's attitude towards the Fijian hierarchy. He was convinced that he was more wronged against than wrong.

A few months later Sairusi escaped to Suva, crashing through a police barrier at Lami. Once there, he once again found himself in the familiar company of looters and criminals. 'I really suffered during those ten months,' he recalled. 'Being an escaper is like living in a glass house. Everyone is watching you.' His run ended on 31 March 1961, when acting on information, the police captured him at his father's house in Raiwai. Although armed with a .22 rifle, Sairusi surrendered without a struggle. He pleaded guilty of unlawful escape from custody before the Acting Senior Magistrate at Suva's Magistrates Court on 22 May 1962, but insisted that he had been punished for crimes he had not committed in the first place. 'All sons of Fiji should get the same treatment whether red, black, white or yellow,' he told the court. 'My chiefs have let me down and this should stand as a guide for the future generations that they should

not rely on any one person but only on the Almighty God.’ His reference to chiefs perhaps recalled his fruitless meeting with Ratu Sir Penaia.

Sairusi was sentenced and sent to the Suva Gaol under maximum security. He was a mellowed now, not the daredevil of his younger days. But his resentment at alleged unfair treatment remained. On 15 July 1962, a Minister taking a Sunday service in the prison, convinced that Sairusi was on the mend, asked him to lead the prisoners in prayer. Grabbing the opportunity, Sairusi ‘gave a vehement plea to the Almighty to deliver the Fijians from European bondage.’ From then on, there were no more sermons for Sairusi. A letter he wrote to the Visiting Justice of Prison on 17 May 1965 indicates that revenge was very much on Sairusi’s mind:

A prisoner will never forget the person who began the whole procedure that brought his disgrace and captivity. And that person in most cases is the policeman. In his heart, the prisoner shall be nursing his hatred while at the same time he is thinking of ways and means for revenge. He will be hoping some day, somehow, somewhere he will have a chance to give the policeman what he deserves.

Mercifully, Sairusi was never again given that chance. Soon after writing the letter, Sairusi was examined by the government psychiatrist, Dr D.F. MacGregor. Was Sairusi mad, delusional? No, Dr MacGregor concluded. Instead of suffering from mental or nervous illness, Sairusi believed ‘himself to be a righteous man pursuing righteous causes and that he is for these reasons above the law.’ He ‘regards the law of this land as something imposed by arbitrary action upon a reluctant people and does not regard it as binding upon him.’ Sairusi, MacGregor said, was no ordinary man. On the contrary, he found him to be ‘sane, highly intelligent, forceful, charming, ruthless and utterly without regard for the law or for the rights of others if these conflict with his own wishes.’ Dr. Macgregor continued: ‘There is a field of human abnormality in which a person is not quite like others and yet suffers from no actual disease of mind; he might be regarded as falling within this category but medical science is powerless to influence such people and I have no medical recommendations to make.’ Sairusi recalled Macgregor telling him that if he, Sairusi, did not end up in St. Giles, he would end up as President of Fiji one day. ‘Interesting, isn’t it,’ he laughed.

Sairusi occupied his restless mind with other things. While in the Suva Gaol, he wrote a novel, *Tawa Cava* (Immortal) set during World War Two. Those who read it saw in the novel Sairusi’s ‘deep pride in his own race and considerable anti-government and anti-European feeling.’

In 1967, Sairusi entered a short story under the nom de plum 'Viti Viti Kabasi' to the Fiji Arts Council Literary Award, and won the second prize. The nom de plum, Sairusi said, meant 'the sound of the snapping twig is like a compass which points to one as to which direction the object of the noise is.' He received visitors – Meli Baleilakeba, G.O. Parr, and Sir Maurice Scott, and kept abreast of political developments outside the prison walls. He told a police constable early in 1968 that the Alliance Party under Ratu Mara (as he then was) had let Fijians down. Some in the Federation Party tried to entice him to their fold, but Sairusi would have no truck with them either, unlike Apisai Tora – with whom Sairusi had fallen out at the end – who had joined an 'Indian' political party he had once pilloried.

Released from prison in 1969 under a compulsory supervision order, Sairusi Nabogibogi returned to his father's village Nayavutoka in Ra. He contested the 1972 general elections on a nationalist platform (anticipating Sakiasi Butadroka's ideas by several years), for the Ba East Ra seat, but lost, winning only 1300 votes of some 9500 votes cast. In 1977, he stood for the Ra-Samabula Suva Fijian communal constituency for his party, the Fijian Conservative Party, but was equally unsuccessful, collecting only 1862 of the 7540 Fijian votes cast. Sairusi was concerned about the future of his people. 'In 100 years there may not be any full-blooded Fijians left', he said. 'I hope my chiefs are worrying about the same thing too and do something about it. I hope they do, from the bottom of my heart'. Racial miscegenation was a real worry to him. He wanted Fijian chiefs to forbid 'Fijians marrying other races,' forbid them dressing like the other races. 'The more we inter-marry, the quicker we are gone,' he said. And lack of Fijian economic progress caused pain as well. 'I am ashamed when I come to Suva. It does not belong to the Fijians. Does anything belong to the Fijians in the city? Does any business house belong to any Fijian? I walk in the streets here and I bend my head down. I am ashamed that I have nothing in this town.' Sairusi spoke words which many Fijians would have recognised, expressing a sentiment many would have shared.

Aside from politics, Sairusi focused his energy on establishing a communitarian self-help movement – the Messiah Movement – at Salemi, Nakorotubu in coastal Ra. Sairusi himself was the Messiah, the King. Salemi from Jerusalem. His own separate compound was called 'Salaam,' the Arabic word for peace. Accounts vary about what the Movement stood for, but it was broadly akin to the kibbutz: all for one and one for all, share and care altogether. It sought to instil discipline and a strict

work ethic among the youth (*Cauravou ni Salemi*). Labour was strictly supervised, responsibilities carefully apportioned, a planned program of daily routine observed, and people were held accountable for the performance of their duties. Classes were held and attended by young and old. English was taught, but Fijian culture and tradition received special emphasis, because, Sairusi believed, they were in danger of being lost, corrupted by alien influences. The individual work ethic, with all that it entailed, was not for him or his people. Indeed, everything done at Salemi was done within the framework of Fijian culture, or a particular version of it, under Sairusi's presiding genius. He had many followers across the country who were enticed by his vision for a pristine pastoral community, hypnotised by his charismatic personality. Sairusi's hold on his followers was such that they refused to believe that he had died. He suffered a heart attack at Salemi and died in the village. His followers kept his body erect against the wall for several days before they finally buried him. Some still believe, to this day, that he will return as their messiah.

It is tempting to view Sairusi Nabogibogi as a maverick, an odd ball, albeit a dangerous one. He was probably that, and more – and less. Sairusi was no saint. That he himself would admit. He was a complex, conflicted character. Viewed historically, he belongs to a long list of dissident Fijians swimming against the currents of their time and the tenets of their own society. His deeds and thoughts bring to mind the name of Apolosi Nawai at the turn of the 20th century, a strong-willed person convinced of his own righteousness and manifest destiny, railing against a world he was convinced was out to get him, and determined to set things right by his own light. The fire he tried to light flickered for a while. Now it is part of a past, vanishing beyond recall.

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