

Plum Pudding and the Twelve Course Christmas Dinner

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ABSTRACT Anthropological experiences are typically focused on "the others," that is, people one happens to meet in the course of field work, and who live in ways significantly different from oneself. A common assumption in American anthropology since the time of Franz Boas has been that the people of these different cultures are endangered, and are likely to disappear under the onslaught of western technology. Insights gained from and reflections upon an experience at a Christmas dinner in Fiji with British colonialist led the author to a deeper understanding that the "anthropological tables" may be turned.

Many years ago, a United States friend and I flew through the Pacific during a December on an anthropological quest. We wanted to visit several islands and learn something of remote Pacific cultures preliminary to design of further research. We stopped in Tahiti of course, then went on to Western Samoa, American Samoa, and ultimately flew towards Fiji, marveling at the tiny islands and atolls below, shining like pearls in a vast sea of blue. East isle was different, yet each had a chunk of what could only be fertile land, then a green iridescent ring of foamy crashing breakers. These islands presented a sparkling breathtaking beauty when seen from high up in the sky. As we landed at Nandi, in Fiji, the day before Christmas, I remember looking up before dawn to watch the strange southern Hemisphere starts, and wait for the first glimmers of dawn's light spilling over the mountains.

A beautiful sunshine-filled morning for Christmas day was forecast. We checked air schedules to the exotic end of our line, the New Hebrides. The next flight went out in two days, so we made reservations. With two days to enjoy, we decided to take a bus, to see as much of Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji, as possible. We started in Nandi, and our plan was to spend Christmas eve at the sailing port of Suva, half-

way around the island. Eventually we found the appropriate bus, grabbing the last two seats available. We noted a sign about air conditioning, but found, once on board, that the air conditioner was broken. Worse, when the driver started up the engine, we tried to open the windows, but we found that they were welded shut. The other tourists groaned with us and commiserated, as the heat of the tropical day quickly began to rise. Our start for Suva, given that broken down cooling system, was obviously a gross and sad omen.

The road became rougher and rougher as we exited Nandi, somewhat of a showcase for tourists. The horses, cows, and pigs in the road slowed our progress, and people walking along the trail disregarded the bus as much as the bus appeared to disregard the people, even when they were walking right in the middle of the road. As the hours began to pass, the heat intensified, the bumps and turns and slow speeds began to tell on our nerves and feelings. In fact, all of us on the bus became upset and angry, at the heat, the false advertisement about air conditioning, and the slow speed.

We should not have worried so much about those issues. Soon enough, a flat tire stopped us completely. We piled out of the bus, then watched the driver try to wrestle a spare tire from under the luggage compartments. He could not free the tire, so tried to enlist help from us. We passengers knew little of mechanical trades, so he sought out the occupants of a nearby roadside store. The store owner, and then his extended family, emerged, first to help, second to sell soda, souvenirs, and other merchandise, and third to share stories with the tourists. A young woman showed me her wedding pictures, then insisted that I take one of the precious photos away with me. I took her picture with my camera, and promised to send a copy.

After more than an hour of working on the

underside of the bus, the driver finally fixed the tire, and we moved on. Two hours late, we stopped for lunch, and from then on, the trails, for they were not roads, became even rougher. Tired beyond our ability to complain, we tourists finally became fascinated with the views: quaint villages and mysterious people in saris or muumuus or other strange non-Western dress. We began to study the green fields of taro and yams, tall groves of coconut trees, ever present fields of sugarcane, virtually empty ocean beaches, mountainous hills, and idyllic scenes in which one could go fishing, swimming, or just lazing about. Fiji was obviously a beautiful place, even though the heat and ride left much to be desired. We arrived in Suva at dusk, after about 10 hours of travel for an advertised 6 hour trip.

In Suva, my friend and I looked for a hotel, not realizing that Christmas might have left few rooms available. However, the initial hotel we found was so sad looking, with cockroaches crawling around on the floor and walls in the entry, that we kept walking about. Eventually, after traversing several streets, we located a hotel which had an advertisement "Spacious room equipped with everything." Not trusting advertisements after earlier experiences, we asked to look at the available rooms. The only redeeming grace was that there were no cockroaches visibly running around on the floor. We took a room, dropped our gear on the twin beds, and sought relief from the bar.

About 15 European appearing people were sitting around, clustered in small groups, talking and drinking, some smoking too. They were remarkably well dressed, in formal suits and gowns, but then we remembered that it was after all, Christmas Eve. We moved up to the bar, ordered drinks, and promptly had several of the people gather around us. They refused to let us pay for our drinks, and in fact, quickly began ordering more drinks for us. Then they began talking, all at their same time, so eagerly that we had to separate and focus our attention on one at a time. Their energies had been pent up for so long that they just burst forth with stories, personal histories, questions about the world we had left, and intriguing travellers' tales. One man, who had been teaching at the University of the South Pacific, told us about his wife's black and

blue eye, telling how he accidentally bashed her with a squash racquet during a vigorous game. She smiled sympathetically but sadly, with her one good eye staring at us. A large well-dressed woman shared the news that her British friend died just a few days ago. It seems that he had a pacemaker from an operation a few months before in England, and was still making payments for the operation and the pacemaker when he died. The hot tropical weather meant that he had to be buried on the day of death, and the pacemaker could not be removed for return to Britain. Because a large amount of money was still due, the woman felt or was somehow obligated to continue the payments. Not only that, she was stuck paying for his funeral, the burial plot, and the operation. She confided after the payments that she did not have sufficient funds to return to Britain.

The owners of the hotel served as bar tenders, pouring drink after drink, then telling story after story as well. Apparently they had both lived for many years in the Pacific, and we, like the others, listened, spellbound. Sailing ships, cyclones, lucky escapes, fishing accomplishments, islands scattered from one end to the Pacific to the other, and strange people were but a few of the many topics. With the collection of stories, the excellent exuded by these British expatriates, and the alcohol after as long and difficult day of travel, my anthropologist friend and I began to feel overwhelmed.

Still another fellow, obviously dressed as a well to do ship's captain, described how he spent years gaining a Fijian citizenship. That was necessary, he claimed, to import a hydrofoil boat, which was so powerful, so fast, and so big, that he was sure he would end up with a monopoly for tourists cruises in all Fijian waters. He shared his story though, namely, that he poured all his money into the venture, and his initial success was quickly followed by a cyclone. Sure enough, his boat sank, and now, as a Fijian citizen with virtually no money, he could not return to England. In all, we met perhaps fourteen or fifteen British people, and we were regaled with their stories of joy and woe. Some stories we did not know whether to take as truth or fiction, for they were beyond our experiences.

We shared our life in return. My anthropolo-

gist friend and I explained we were from the east coast of the United States, were working as anthropologists and would soon travel on to the New Hebrides. Our new British friends did not let us talk very much after that, for they wanted to tell more of their own stories. Then they treated us to still more drinks, and finally, invited us to join them for their Christmas dinner. The adjacent room had place settings that exceeded any I had ever seen in all my life. The fourteen pieces of silverware for each setting were made of real silver. The glassware was obviously crystal, the best crystal available in the South Pacific, we were told. The ensuing meal, some twelve courses, was formal and grand. An authentic English plum pudding was the finale, followed by a brief talk by the hotel owner. His speech included a prominent toast to the visitors who had travelled all the way from the United States in order to join their party just to celebrate Christmas. We had been treated royally. They would not let us pay for anything, not even a single drink, let alone the dinner.

Only later did my friend and I talk about the significance of that event. We had inadvertently participated in the gathering of the few remaining British colonialists in Fiji, indeed, we witnessed their grand celebration of a traditional English Christmas dinner. Their rituals for that dinner, so elegant and precise and formal, were symbolic of the rituals of the British empire, even if Fiji at that time provided a somewhat hostile environment. We decided quickly that we were impressed, indeed, we waxed emotional about the entire event. The British had by and large, left Fiji, and the Empire of former times was long gone. But these remnants, assembled with the

hotel owners, were the last, and they were determined to hold their customs strong, to celebrate their traditions in the grand style of yesteryear that they knew, and cover up their losses with as fine a party as they could possibly create. We knew that we had shared in a unique dinner, running the gamut of near loss and yet, continued and proud maintenance of tradition. We were treated to an old, indeed now historic, way of life. We shared in the profound emotional attachments to a culture long disappeared, and had a good party as well. Most anthropologists find only the traces of disappearing local tribal cultures, and here we were, face to face with the disappearing British Empire. What an eloquent story, in retrospect, it was.

After the dinner, we walked briefly about Suva, then slept soundly. The continental breakfast in the morning was paid for as part of the fees for the room. We were surprised by that added treat, pleasantly so. When we finished, we went off for the bus station again, feeling that we had experienced an earthshaking event. The "local" bus did not have any advertisements for air conditioning, and indeed, this return trip along the other side of the island was hot, humid, and rough. The rain helped, but the roads were worse and the trip longer. At the end of the day, we took a taxi to the hotel in Nandi and cooled off in air conditioned comfort.

We went on, and though we had many interesting subsequent ventures, I continue to think about the significance of the survival of the British colonial tradition in Fiji. The many messages of that event continue to haunt me when I think of an reflect on the future, for us all, in this time of accelerated cultural change.