PERSECUTION IN FIJI: THE STORY OF THREE LDS COUPLES

by Joseph K. Whitford

To legitimize my presence, I first need to respond to the question: Why do we study inter-racial marriages in Fiji? Permit me to cite two Fijian scholars on this particular subject. First, B.K. Both, in his Fijian Way of Life states, "Virtually no miscegenation occurs between Fijians and Indians." Robert Norton, author of Race and Politics in Fiji adds:

"Institutional differences limit interracial cooperation and strengthen consciousness of economic inequalities. Day to day association is inhibited by linguistic, religious and other cultural distinctions. The rarity of intermarriage is related to these differences and in turn helps to perpetuate them."

I admit, indeed there are relatively few unions of this sort because of the numerous ramifications involved. The 1976 census results for Fiji failed to mention what the numerical statistic was possible because of its limited few. In gathering information for this presentation, I too had a difficult time locating couples. However, I did manage to find three, two of which live in the Suva region, the capital of Fiji and the other presently attending Brigham Young University-Hawaii. All three couples are made up of Indian husbands and Fijian wives. The purpose of this study is three-fold. First, to explore the history of these two peoples, understand why there are so few marriages between them. Second, to expose the vast differences and most importantly, to understand how these LDS couples cope, if they do, with these vast differences. To understand the virtual non-existence of interracial marriages, we must first realize some important aspects of Fijian history. In June of 1875, the year after cession by Great Britain, Sir Henry Stirling Gordon, later Lord Stirling, arrived in Fiji to assume the position of Governor. His personality radiated confidence in being able to assure success to the Indigenous Fijians. The idea was to separate them from the rest of society to preserve their traditional culture. According to Gordon, the further existence of the Fijian race depended on isolation from foreigners, especially the "corruptive" planter community. These aspiring agriculturists saw the indigenous population as an efficient labor force. Gordon would have none of that. Conversely a measles epidemic ravaged the Fijian population. Estimates ranged as much as 40,000 deaths, one-third of the entire native total. The population eventually recovered 60 years later. However, not before a drastic psychological letdown. Fears that "their lands were about to be confiscated" and then their being removed to small reserves was an actuality.

In order to preserve the indigenous people and perhaps more importantly insuring their self-respect, Gordon established a separate political entity for the Fijians, to govern themselves. Indigenous officials were appointed in their respective provinces to carry out their own affairs. Courts were also established which affected only the Fijians. The planter community generated a limited amount of capital to sustain the government. Consequently, a native tax system was established to generate the needed funds. Gordon established a tax in kind. Each province raised crops to sell to the government which in turn sold it to others. From the Fijian perspective, they found this type of system to be less oppressive. Laboring for the planters would have meant having to engage in greater tasks with little remuneration. Selling crops to the government insured, a fair return which alleviated the avenue of bartering through a middle man at a fraction of the value. Perhaps most important was the Fijians not having to be severed from their communal existence.

Along with insuring Fijian autonomy, Gordon guaranteed their lands would not pass to foreign hands. Prior to the establishment of the Native Land Ordinance, western claims to land titles amounted to over one million acres. After a commission investigating these titles, headed by Gordon himself it was decided only 400,000 acres were purchased properly. This total represents the extent of the freehold (free simple) lands today. The remainder, some 3,000,000 acres, remained and still remains in Fijian hands today. The foremost concern of the colonial government was the preservation of the indigenous people and their lands. At its inception, the new policies were virtually ignored. However, because of the labor restrictions placed on the Fijians, the planter community had to look elsewhere to fill the void. With previous experience in Mauritius, Gordon reported to Indian landfs on Mar. 4, 1879, the first migrants landed at Fiji, 498 in all. Their value was seen in two ways. First, it shielded the indigenous Fijians from the "detrimental aspects of the process of assimilation," and second it enabled them to secure and maintain their own pace. The Indians served under contract for five years. Gordon didn't pay much attention to permanent Indian settlement, although he expected 75% of the labor force returned to India. Eventually, 40% of the indentured labor force returned to India. In the 37 year period culminating in 1916, 60,000 Indians worked in Fiji.

How did the Indians come to Fiji? There were many reasons. Some decided on their own to improve their station in life, others by the misrepresentation of labor recruiters. India provided for the indigenous a stable social structure and family in their family and society. Migrants to Fiji found family life unstable. Wives were hard to find and keep. The recruiting proportion of men to women was 100-40. Coupled with this problem many lost their honor, respect and status belong to an Indian village.

How did the two communities view each other in the early 20th century? In fact there was evidence of cultural borrowing. Indians developed the relaxed attitude and drank yagua (awa). On the other hand, the Fijians acquired better planting techniques and ate curry. In 1932 the retired Secretary of Indian Affairs
There is practically no inter-marriage though ever larger tracts the population lives in close proximity to Fijian villages. Most Indians can speak Fijian and quite a number of Fijians know Hindustani. It has been said that the Fijians despise the Indians. There may have been some of this feeling in the past but I do not think it is pronounced nowadays.

From the perspective of this Indian government worker, relations seemed cordial. Perhaps they were, but as time passed on, the Indian population struggled to improve their economic status in life. When the indentured system was alleviated in 1910, the Indians who remained in Fiji settled with almost no money at all. By pooling resources among themselves, they eventually managed to build up successful businesses. So much so that by 1950 the wealth had greatly increased. Economic inequality had set in. The poverty stricken, illiterate Indian community of the earlier decades had improved. Many established themselves as small shopkeepers and adept agriculturists. The latter occupation was so prosperous that exported sugar cane was worth twice as much as the Fijian copra and banana. Their financial stability also came from secondary industry and services. What was previously thought to be a positive administrative move to preserve the Fijian way of life, had turned into a very sheltered policy. The indigenous people could not compete economically with the Indian community. The skills necessary to increase one's salary in an urban environment were not taught in the communal setting. If it is a consolation, the Fijians were able to maintain their culture, language and land. However, with the vast economic improvements of the Indians and in wanting to acquire the modern necessities of life, many felt envious toward their migrant neighbors. In addition to the obvious economic inequality, stereotypes surfaced among the races.

Government deputation reported:

Fijians and Indians have always held aloof from one another. The Fijians, being landowners, looked down upon the Indians as laborers, and it is a coincidence that the word 'coolie' in Fijian means a laborer. For Indians, the term 'Fijian' was called upon to repress. At the same time, the Indians have been irritated against the Fijians.

The dissemination of these judgments and its extent among these two communities is hard to evaluate. In an effort to grasp a sense of the apparent biases, Dr. Brij Lal, a prominent scholar in Fijian history was consulted. To the Indians, the Fijian was viewed as an unenterprising and lazy individual, whose culture was not worthy of emulation. On the other hand, the Fijian saw their counterpart possessing no cultural identity and being physically smaller. When posed with the question why so few inter-racial marriages, Dr. Lal replied there is no incentive on either side. A union between them was seen as nothing to gain. Both communities were raised under totally different circumstances. In essence the indigenes were raised in a communal subsistence economy, whereas many Indians were uprooted and individualized.

Because the tremendous differences just from their respective backgrounds. Similarly, the economic imbalance and the derogatory judgments by both parties have created an undesirable rift.

The majority of the people involved in my survey did harbor prejudicial feelings toward the other race. Obviously their family environment promoted such a behavior. However, it was not restricted to either race. Knowing about the economic imbalance felt by the Fijian, I surmised that the prejudicial feelings would be limited to the Fijian wives. I was incorrect on two notions: first one of the wives felt she had no ill feelings toward the other race, while one of the Indian husbands expressed his dislike for the Fijians. Those who responded as having been raised in a strong racial tradition were the ones who had a difficult time developing friendships with the other race; those who lived in all-Indian or all-Fijian communities tended to be less hospitable in developing positive inter-racial relations. On the other hand, those who attended non-segregated schools tended to be friendlier.

Other research has been made at this time. Since all three couples are now LDS, when asked to relate some negative experiences with other race they all replied they had none because of the respect given. Some of the Hindustani made their ill-feelings previously but probably wanted to forget about their undesirable past dealings. The repentance principle is alive and well in Fiji. Outside of the school setting, none of the people mingled with the other race while growing up. The distinct difference between races seemed to have disseminated among these individuals while growing up in their respective families. Most followed their traditional way of life. With these attitudes instilled in them by their parents and living environment, how difficult was it to cross the barrier and begin dating someone from the other race?

As expressed by the couples themselves, the dating process eliminated much of the negative feelings for obvious reasons. The problem for the couples was not so much the glaring differences between the two of them, but what family and friends and the general public thought of their social affair. One Indian husband remarked when he called his then Fijian-girlfriend at the Government office where she worked, her friends would continually try to dissuade her from any further contact.

Family reaction to the dating was one of shame to its other members. This feeling prevailed on the Indian side. Understandably so, considering the Indians saw themselves as being more industrious and financially stable of the two.
Five of the six interviewed expressed extreme family pressure. One reply was, "A few friends and relatives asked me if I was truly serious and not stupid." The other, an Indian, was raised in a LDS home and had the parents' faith and support. The social pressure was too great and to marry was instead a trial.

Surprisingly, very little cultural differences occurred during the dating process. This is somewhat puzzling to understand. Several conclusions can be drawn however. One explanation, the most common, is love blinded all cultural distinctions. Seriously though, some were sure to have arisen, though not important enough to be mentioned.

Also somewhat startling was the supposed religious differences of the couples. However, all the Indians are non-Christian, either Muslim or Hindu. This was not an issue in this particular study. If there were any similarities between the couples prior to marriage, religion was it.

Families continued to show their ambivalence when the respective wedding took place. In two of the marriages only the wife's family attended. This is another indication that the Indians were in disagreement of an inter-racial union more so than the Fijian. The Indian tradition of absolutely no inter-course with Fijians was indeed of greater importance than to attend to their sons' wedding. It is not so difficult to determine why these Indians reacted the way they did on a memorable occasion. The disgust that one of their kind would actually stoop so low as to marry a Fijian would indeed be a justifiable cause.

The other marriage with the LDS Indian male was performed by his bishop and his family were all in attendance. Only an aunt of the Fijian bride attended. Perhaps there were two reasons for this occurrence. Obviously, her marrying any Indian was one and the idea that he was a Mormon could have been another.

In addition to the family opposition which continued after their marriage, another important issue arose. That of possessing land for their family. Of the land Fijian's owned by the Fijians under the direction of the Native Land Trust Board. The remaining 17% is held by the government (crown lands) and private owners in freehold. For example, in a marriage the husband and wife being Fijian, land is set aside in a given village for them at no expense; providing it is cultivated and maintained. A problem is a dramatic decline in the amount of land one cannot own land unless some of the freehold land comes available. Consequently, land is leased for 10 or 20 year intervals by the land Trust Board. There were mass migrations to the west coast of Canada and United States in the 1960's and 1970's because the future of many Indian families were tenuous at best.

In these inter-racial unions, freehold land was luckily available to be purchased. For one couple, this was their last resort. They had applied to the Land Trust Board to live amongst the Fijians, but one of the chiefs in the particular village did not approve of the marriage and they were rejected. Fortunately, land was available for these couples to take advantage of. For many non-Fijians this is not the case.

Despite the continual opposition, these inter-racially married couples have found the Church to be a tremendous strength in each of their lives. Only one of the six has yet to be baptized, but that will shortly change. Two of the couples are sealed in the temple. Each was asked how much of an influence does the Church have in their lives? Most responded by saying it has brought them even closer together. An Indian husband admitted, 'Without the Church I always wonder if we would still have been married today.' His wife continued, "When we first got married, my dad got sick for two weeks. He didn't leave the house, because I was Indian and married to the Indian and he was very, very ashamed to look at the people. I thought that if nobody wanted us at least the Church is there, and we got plenty friends, many people who fellowship us, who be family to us. In fact, I think now the Church members are more like family to us than our own people."

I became even more curious and inquired what principles in the gospel help to solidify their relationship. Some very important principles were mentioned. Sacrifice was very important. One of the Fijian wives remarked, 'We had to sacrifice so many things. . . . our culture, our family in order for us to get married.' Other pertinent principles included forgiveness, sharing, caring and love for all man. Another popular response was the Church's teaching of the family unit. Concerning this principle, President David O. McKay said:

'The home is the basis of a righteous life, and no other instrumentality can take its place nor fulfill its essential functions. The problems of these difficult times cannot be better solved in any other place, by any other agency, by any other means than by love and righteousness, and precept and example, and devotion to duty in the home." (Introduction in the 1966 Family Home Evening Manual)

In more recent times Elder Bruce R. McConkie has proclaimed:

Eternal families have their beginning in celestial marriage here in mortality. Faithful members of them continue in the family unit in eternity, in the highest heaven of the celestial world, where they will have eternal increase. (Dan 132-140, 133:1-28.) Perfect peace and a full endowment of all good graces attend such eternal families. Latter-day Saint families begin here and now to enjoy much of that peace, joy, love and charity which will be enjoyed in eternal fullness in the exalted family unit. (p. 273 Mormon Doctrine)

In these times of opposition, especially in the experiences that I have related, it would be well for all of us to remember the words of President Joseph F. Smith, "The home has been the chief characteristic of superior over inferior nations. The home is more than a habitation, it is an institution which stands for stability and love in individuals as well as in nations. These important instructions should be heeded by all of us. Pertaining to this study, the one lesson that will always be implanted in me as a result of my acquaintance with these choice members, is the principle that all of us are children of God. To
quote one of the Fijian wives: "I know I am a child of God and I know everyone are children of God and no matter what race, color, creed or religion we are all children of God. That makes a difference."

Despite the opposition, these three Indian-Fijian couples have grasped on to something that transcends all earthly laws and prejudices, that being the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a country where the population consists of 51% Indian and 43% indigenous Fijians, where envy, jealousy, and unnecessary judgments are rampant, it is gratifying to know that these members of the Church have tossed aside the norms of Fijian society. The Church has played a significant role in their lives in helping them to overcome the trials that have beset them.

If there is a lesson that can be drawn from this study, it is to love your fellowmen. These three couples have broken the tremendous barrier which exists in Fiji. Shouldn't we, surrounded by less severe restraints, love all men? If they in Fiji can do it, so can we. THANK YOU!