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Translocal Entwinements: Toward a History of Rabi as a Plantation Island in Colonial Fiji

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Wolfgang Kempf

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Abstract

The texture of place is the product of a historically and culturally specific nexus of relationships, often transcending by far local and regional networks. Translocal connections are unearthed by reconstructing how a certain island away to the north-east of the Fijian archipelago, Rabi Island, was progressively remade as a colonial landscape of plantations. Against the backdrop of a history of translocal entwinements Rabi Island reveals itself as a relational place, which plantation workers from Melanesia and Micronesia, and even from distant India, operating under a regime of colonial administrators, European owners, lessees and managers, helped to shape, indeed reshape, over a period lasting some eighty years. The local given of a plantation economy on Rabi Island delivered, in the aftermath of World War II, the spatial and economic platform for resettlement of the Banabans, a community whose home island, Banaba, situated far away in the Central Pacific, had been rendered largely uninhabitable by industrial-scale phosphate mining. Thus, colonial power structures were integrally involved in forging relationships between the islands of Banaba and Rabi.

Keywords: place, plantation economy, indentured laborers, resettlement, colonialism, diaspora, Rabi Island, Banaba (Ocean Island), Fiji, Kiribati

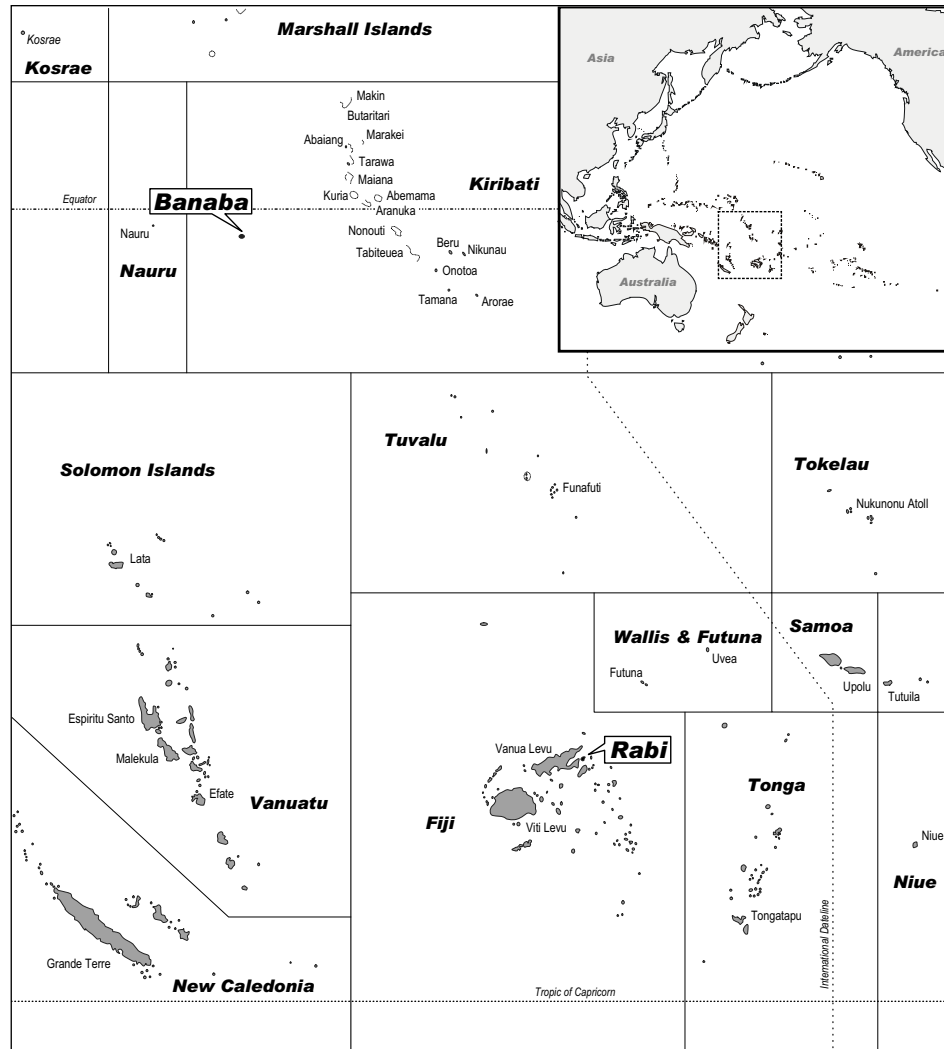
Translocal Entwinements

Toward a History of Rabi as a Plantation Island in Colonial Fiji

Wolfgang Kempf

Introduction

Rabi Island in north-eastern Fiji has for more than sixty years been home to a community of diasporic Banabans. This community has its origins in Banaba (or Ocean Island) in the Central Pacific, an island held since 1979 by the sovereign state of Kiribati. Banaba once possessed, like its island neighbor Nauru, extensive phosphate deposits, but these have been much depleted in the years since the turn of the twentieth century (see Williams and Macdonald 1985). The prospect that continued mining would soon render the island uninhabitable caused the British colonial administration to resettle the Banabans in Fiji at the end of 1945. The ensuing historical processes of decolonization and nation building in the Pacific led to a situation where the Banabans recognize two home islands, separated by more than 2000 kilometers of open sea and belonging to different Pacific nation states (see Map 1). Banaba in Kiribati has been, ever since phosphate mining finally ended in 1979, a largely marginalized, ecologically ruined place,



Map 1

which is jointly administered by a small contingent of Banabans from Fiji and by officials representing Kiribati. Rabi Island in Fiji, by contrast, is today the political, social, and cultural hub of the Banaban diaspora. In the decades since relocation, the Banabans have turned the island into an enclave, with the express aim of guaranteeing the resettled community's survival as an independent ethnic minority living in Fiji. The overwhelming majority of those generations of Banabans who were born on the island or

who grew up there, invariably now see that island as home (see also Kempf n.d.b)

Whereas the history of phosphate-rich Banaba and the relocation of its inhabitants to Fiji has attracted much scholarly attention (see e.g. Binder 1977; Ellis 1935, 1946; Macdonald 1982; Maude 1946; Maude and Maude 1994; Silverman 1971; Williams and Macdonald 1985), the colonial history of Rabi Island¹ is, as yet, little explored. In this treatment, therefore, I offer a historical reconstruction of the colonial land tenure practices that helped to turn Rabi into an island of plantations. Here I shall focus primarily on the translocal entwinements of which the island was part. The present historiographic sketch of Rabi Island rests, in the first instance, on a mode of conceptualizing the local that regards places not as essences but as processes (Massey 1993, 1994). Accordingly, places should not be read as self-contained, static entities, their nature solely specified by inherent factors or qualities. Rather we must view each place as a dynamic configuration, crafted by history in a unique melding of practices, linkages, and power relationships. The texture of place – of a particular place – stems from a historically and culturally specific intertwining of relationships often far transcending local and regional networks. The history of this translocal intertwining is also pivotal to understanding Rabi Island. Such a relational perspective will permit me to identify connectivities between Rabi Island and Banaba that a) long antedated Banaban relocation to Fiji and b) were generated by the structural conditions underlying capitalist-colonial expansion.

If, then, conceptualizing place as process seems to me a highly promising move, it is partly because it bears directly on my research interest, i.e. studying Rabi Island's colonial history from the perspective of plantation ownership. Doug Munro (1993:2), in his overview of the constitutive features of plantations, has stressed not only their organizational and internal structure but their outward orientation as well. Thus the capital to run the plantations, as also the owners and managers themselves, generally came from the metropolitan centers; the plantations were orientated towards export, and were usually manned by large numbers of imported, low-paid laborers. This outward-looking orientation was no less integral to Rabi as a

1. In the literature Rabi Island is known by various written forms: Rambi, Rabe, Rambe, Rabi.

plantation island – whether it involved indentured laborers recruited from Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, or even from far-way India, or else the fact that decisions relating to land tenure, management, etc., were usually taken in places a world away from Rabi.

A historical reconstruction of translocal networks has the additional advantage of supplying a lens through which to view, and gain a deeper understanding of, Banaban resettlement on Rabi Island. For the British colonial administration which, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, oversaw the operation, proceeded on the understanding that copra production on Rabi would be able to sustain the new arrivals economically. The Banabans, in turn, have drawn their own historical and cultural understandings when deploying Rabi's specific spatiality as a plantation island to create a place where they might survive as a sovereign entity – remaking this Fijian island as their new homeland. In this essay I shall reconstruct the – till now – largely unknown colonial history of Rabi as a plantation island; with the broad outline in place, I will then turn to correlating that prior history with the advent of Banaban resettlement.

The origins of Rabi as a plantation island under European tenure go back to the time when the Tongan government was readjusting its political relationship with Fiji. When King George Tupou I of Tonga in February 1869 ceded power over Tongan possessions in Fiji to the former Tongan governor and new Tui Lau, Henry Ma'afu, he explicitly exempted from the transfer a single island: Rabi.² This island, which the Tongans had taken over in 1855 with the consent of the then Tui Cakau, was put up for sale in Sydney.³ The Tongan king's decision to sell Rabi Island is the point of departure for the present historical sketch, in which I review translocal entwinements and how these covered Rabi with a tapestry of plantations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. See Spurway 2001; France 1969:84–85; *Fiji Times*, March 11, 1874, "Fiji As It Is".

3. Cf. Spurway 2001:60, footnote 28; See F 1/12-9 Letter dated 14 February, 1869 from Tubou Haabai, Secretary Tongan Government to J.B. Thurston, Acting British Consul, NAF.

Rabi as a plantation island: the beginnings

On June 17th 1870 two brothers, Edward and John Dawson, and their partner John Hill of Sydney bought from Tonga's King George Tupou I the Fijian island of Rabi for the price of £1300.⁴ The original title deed from June 1870 was written on (perishable) normal paper, therefore some time later Captain John Hill asked the Tongans to re-issue the deed on parchment.⁵ According to this second document, dated December 26th 1871, the Dawson brothers and Captain John Hill each owned half of the island; they also owned fishing rights over coastal waters for a mile out to sea. Captain Hill then set about turning Rabi into a plantation island. The *Fiji Times* of January 28th 1871 reports that Hill started out on the east end of the island (in the area of Suetolu) with upward of 120 men. He then turned his attention to Nuku, situated diametrically opposite on the north-western side of the island.⁶ There is little information as to where Hill got his laborers from, but there are a few indications that they were mostly Melanesians. Various sources concur in stating that men from Tanna Island (now part of Vanuatu) were working at this time on Rabi Island.⁷ In a piece headlined "Rabi" from the *Fiji Times* of February 7th 1874, the correspondent gives a vivid sense of how Christmas was celebrated on the island:

The usual Christmas festivals were here celebrated in first class style. It has been the rule since the purchase of this fine island by Captain Hill, to give all his people, white and black, a holiday twice a year, when, in addition to the usual feasting, sulus, blankets, mats, and such prizes for good conduct, &c., as may have been won during the half year, are distributed. These feasts are always held at Christmas and the Queen's Birthday (24th May). The recent one was a great success in every sense, consequent on all being in the best of spirits – Captain Hill, from having completed a very fair picking of cot-

4. The sale of Rabi Island was reported in the the pages of the *Fiji Times*, September 10, 1870.

5. See Fiji, Minutes of the Executive Council Sitting for the Rehearing of Claims to Land, The Governor, JQ 6306, A5 L3, 1879–1880, V.1. Case 35, Rambai, Appendix 83B, NAF.

6. See Appendix, Map 3; the map (from the 1940s) shows the locations Nuku and Suetolu, which were retained as plantation sites by all owners and lessees following after Dawson and Hill.

7. See e.g. Cumming 1881:48–50; see also Fiji, Minutes of the Executive Council Sitting for the Rehearing of Claims to Land, The Governor, JQ 6306, A5 L3, 1879–1880, V.1. Case 35, Rambai, Appendix 83B, NAF.

ton; and the laborers (about one hundred and fifty) from being entitled to numerous prizes for extra good work in the field. From an early hour cooking became the order of the day, pigs, fowls, fish, yams, breadfruit, &c., &c., disappeared rapidly under huge mounds of fire called Fijian ovens. Then the grand distribution took place which evidently gave great satisfaction to both giver and receivers. ... Sports were got up, and some very spirited contests took place in running, leaping, swimming, archery, and throwing the spear. A very interesting match among about fifty foreign laborers with muskets took place, the firing at 200 yards, any position. A Tanna chief took this prize, having made all centres. During the afternoon an excellent rifle match came off, the whites being in this instance the competitors. The weapons were of a very superior class, and the shooting first rate. The ranges were 500 and 1000 yards five shots at each. The result showed Captain Hill winner of the first prize; Mr. Wood second; and Mr. Greaves third. A large and pleasant party were entertained by Captain and Mrs. Hill, bumpers were drained to the prosperity of the Island, the host and the hostess; and after a day's rest, all separated for their respective stations and duties on the property highly pleased with their holidays.

If the laborers were allowed to handle weapons and compete to see who was the best shot, this was no mere matter of sport; it was also intended to demonstrate a defensive capability vis-à-vis the outside world. For Captain Hill's take-over of Rabi Island in July 1870 had not been without its share of problems. When he arrived, he found a contingent of some 150 Fijians growing crops on part of the island with the permission of the Tui Cakau. Hill reached an agreement with the chief that the Fijians could stay until the yam harvest, but then they had to go. When the Tui Cakau asked to be allowed to buy a plot of land, so that some of his people could stay on the island, Captain Hill categorically refused. It appears that in the following months Hill's men were shot at more than once by the Fijians. The situation remained tense until the Tongans, who had got wind of Hill's difficulties, intervened. They conveyed to the Fijian chief a message, threatening him, in as many words, with consequences if he did not withdraw his men from Rabi. This *diktat* by the Tongans soon had the desired effect.⁸ From then on, Captain Hill underlined his determination to control and defend the island by keeping men under arms (and occasionally holding shooting contests). Clearly, Rabi Island was a contested place of translocal entwinements.

8. See Fiji, Minutes of the Executive Council Sitting for the Rehearing of Claims to Land, The Governor, JQ 6306, A5 L3, 1879–1880, V.1. Case 35, Rambi, Appendix 83B, NAF.

Fiji's cession to the British Crown (in the person of Queen Victoria), which took place in 1874, brought changes to the legal framework governing the right of Europeans to acquire and hold land in the new colony. Although the Crown respected acquisitions of land made by Europeans prior to cession, proof had to be furnished in each case that the transaction had been lawfully concluded; only then would the Crown issue written recognition of legal title. A commission was set up to examine individual cases. Sir Arthur Gordon, the first governor of Fiji, of whom more later, made sure that the final power of decision over claims by Europeans to land rested in his hands. He wished to keep a tight rein in the colony on such acquisitions, so as not to jeopardize his policy of vesting in local Fijian kinship groups inalienable rights of ownership over most of the land (France 1969:114–116; see also Kelly 2003).

Rabi Island was the object of Land Claim Report No. 1 of the Lands Titles Commission. The initial finding being inconclusive, the case was then referred to the Executive Council. The central question was whether the King of Tonga had acted within his rights in selling the island to Europeans. In his testimony, the Tui Cakau disputed this categorically. But he admitted to knowing of a family tradition according to which his father – or it might have been his brother – had given the island to the Tongans. John Hill, in turn, could produce the original contract from 1871, which, in the name of the previous owner, King George Tupou I. of Tonga, certified that the island had indeed been lawfully sold.⁹ The officials handling the case at the Lands Commission Office in Levuka felt unable to reach a final decision and therefore, at the beginning of 1876, forwarded their report to Governor Gordon.¹⁰ The Executive Council finally ruled in favor of the Dawson brothers and John Hill. The colonial government explicitly recognized the three men's claim to ownership of Rabi as per Crown Grant; this was registered on April 25th 1878 in Levuka, albeit with the Crown reserving title to fifty acres of government reserve.¹¹ A petition submitted a year later (1880)

9. The original contract is reproduced in full in the minutes of the Executive Council Sitting for the Rehearing of Claims to Land (see JQ 6306, A5 L3, 1879–1880, V.1. Case 35, Rambi, Appendix 83B and 83C, NAF).

10. See Land Claim R/No. 1 (in P. 33) "Report on Rabi Island, Claimed by John Hill and John and Edward Dawson", Lands Commission Office, Levuka, 01st. January 1876, NAF.

11. See Registrar of Titles, Suva, Fiji: Crown Grant, Register of Titles.

by the Fijian side was dismissed by the Executive Council. At that point, all avenues of legal redress against the Crown Grant were exhausted.

When hearings for the Land Claim Report took place on December 11th 1875, Captain Hill testified that in his five-and-a-half years of owning Rabi he had invested some £15,000; he estimated his holdings on the island at some 40,000 coconut palms, 30 acres of sugar cane, plus a few cotton fields. Hill, who ran the estate on behalf of John and Edward Dawson, lived with his family on the north-western side of Rabi – or so I would assume, for on the exact whereabouts our source is silent. Governor Gordon visited the island in June 1877 and noted in his journal:

June 22 – Sailed for Rabi. They put us into a boat some eight miles from the island, and we had a very pleasant sail to it. Hill's place is quite the nicest I have seen in Fiji. House surrounded by neat lawns and bright crotons – cocoa-nuts [sic] bending over nice grass – works neat, clean and pretty. Hill met us on the beach with two splendid dogs, immense German mastiffs, and at once took us to bathe in a very nice bathing pond beyond the works. Clear water, short turf, shadowing cocoa-nuts. Then we went up the hill to the house and saw the family, – Mrs H., numerous children, their tutor, and the cracked Taviuni doctor. On the whole I like Rabi hugely. The view near the house is *most beautiful* [emphasis in original].¹²

Sir Arthur Gordon's elitist take on Rabi's landscape dwelled on how very agreeable and civilized the place had become under the ownership of that particular planter. The island clearly resonated positively in Gordon's memory. In later years his estimation of Rabi, which he also viewed very much as an asset, would once again be important for the colonial history of this plantation island.

The workforce in the early years of the plantation economy on Rabi Island

Dawson and Hill had purchased Rabi Island with the intention of building a profitable plantation economy there. But such an undertaking could not succeed without a sizeable workforce. At the time Captain Hill was starting

12. See Stanmore, 1st Baron, Records of Private and Public Life, 1875–1880, vol. 2; Du 600 S 833, Vols. 1–4, NAF.

out on Rabi, planters in Fiji habitually brought in labor from elsewhere in the Pacific. But there is a paucity of information about the Pacific islanders recruited in the years 1864–1875 and brought to Fiji, since no source material worthy of the name is available (Siegel 1985:42). Hence, we can say little about the exact nature of the workforce employed by Captain Hill on Rabi Island in the years between 1870 and 1875. If the figures given in the *Fiji Times* can be believed (they were mentioned already in the previous chapter), we are looking in the early years at something between 120 and 150 laborers on Rabi Island. Scattered hints that these were Melanesians from what is now Vanuatu (especially from the island of Tanna) accord with generally available data about the provenance of Pacific islanders working in Fiji at the time in question (cf. Derrick 1950:169; Siegel 1985:44, 46).

For the years after 1875 our sources improve considerably (cf. Newbury 1980; Shlomowitz 1986; Siegel 1985). Thus the picture that emerges from the various registers of Pacific islanders working in Fiji is that Captain Hill recruited, over the 1876–1884 period, a total of 136 Pacific islanders to work his coconut plantations. A list showing the regions of origin of the islanders sheds light on just how heterogeneous Captain Hill's workforce was (see Appendix, Table 1): we learn that 32 came from Vanuatu (i.e. from one or other of the islands of Malekula, Merelava, Malo, Ambae, Ambrym, or Espiritu Santo), 40 from the Solomon Islands (from Malaita, Florida, or Guadalcanal) and 64 from Kiribati (from Nikunau, Beru, Banaba, Onotoa, or Arorae).

Conditions under which Pacific islanders could work in Fiji were, in the aftermath of cession, hedged in by legal restrictions. The laborers concluded contracts limited to no more than three years. Male and female contract workers both earned a minimum wage of £3 a year, while adolescents were guaranteed at least £1; added services in the form of payment in kind, medical care, etc., were commonplace. When they had served their time, islanders could decide whether they wanted to remain in Fiji or be repatriated to their home islands. The return ticket was provided free of charge by the contracting party (Shlomowitz 1986:110–116, 118–120).

Captain Hill then took the step of beefing up his Pacific workforce with contracted laborers from India. The decision to import Indians to work the local plantations had the backing of no less than Governor Gordon, who hoped, by this means, to spare the indigenous Fijians from being exploited

in their own land. The first vessel, the *Leonidas*, with some 500 Indian migrants on board, reached Fiji in May 1879. At the time, though, planters showed little interest in the *girmitiyas* (the Hindi expression *girmit* means contract, while *girmitiyas* means contract worker) and would have preferred to recruit from the local pool of Fijians (see Lal 2000:143–151). Captain Hill was therefore exceptional among plantation owners in taking on 52 men, 25 women, and 29 children from the *Leonidas* and fetching them over to Rabi Island (see Gillion 1962:69; Lal 2000:147, 2004:39). In trying to gauge the ethnicity of the laborers Hill assembled on Rabi Island, the breakdown of persons under contract in the year 1879 is especially informative (see Appendix, Table 2). This list makes clear that on Rabi Island under Captain Hill almost all the main regions of origin (i.e. where Fiji sourced its migrant workers from in the nineteenth century) were represented at one time or another, with the sole exception of Papua New Guinea and Japan; among these regional sources were Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, and even India (cf. Leckie 1990; Munro 1990:XLVIII; Shlomowitz 1986:109–11; Siegel 1985).

Nor was it the case that the *girmitiyas* on the *Leonidas* were the only contract workers – or indentured laborers, as they were called – from India to be brought by Hill to Rabi Island. In the ensuing years a further contingent arrived, numbering all of 45 Indian migrants. According to archival sources, Hill in the years between 1879 and 1885 employed upward of 150 Indian laborers on Rabi (see Appendix, Table 3). As a rule, the Indian migrants signed up – indentured themselves – for a period of five years. When they had served their time, these *girmitiyas* could, if they wished, return to India at their own expense; if, however, they agreed to stay on for a further five years, the colonial government would meet the costs of repatriation.¹³ The Indian migrants had to work six days of the week; Sundays and holidays were days of rest. The going wage for men was a shilling a day. For women it dropped to nine pence; payment to persons under 15 years of age was job-dependent or else at the employer's discretion. Since men and women alike could not always meet their work targets, if only because they were set so high, often the money they were paid fell short of the set minimum (Lal 1993:190; Shameem 1990:148–149). The situation of women within this

13. Most of the *girmitiyas* decided they would stay on in Fiji (see Lal 1993:189; Shameem 1990:148).

system was especially precarious. Pregnancies and post-natal care contributed to them being absent from work and ate into their earnings. Under such aggravated conditions of life, few were the women who could fend for themselves or their children; child mortality was correspondingly high. Marriage, liaisons or prostitution often offered a way out of economic misery (see Shameem 1990; Lal 1985).

Of the precise living and working conditions of the Indian migrants on Rabi Island virtually nothing is known. What the sources tell us is that between 1879 and 1888 no fewer than 48 children were born on Rabi Island to *girmitiyas*. According to the Plantation Register of Indian Immigrants on Rabi Island, 43 of these children had parents who came to Fiji on the *Leonidas* (see Appendix, Table 4). To give an example, the first child born on Rabi Island (in November 1879) was a girl, the parents being Kasee M. Budhu (no. 1) and Maharania Sitalee (no. 76).¹⁴ The baby was named after the Fijian island on which she was born: “Rambi”. But what we can generally say about the choice of names for children born on Rabi Island to *girmitiyas* is that they were intended, almost without exception, to establish a link with the culture and history of the western world. The excerpt (see Appendix, Table 4) shows, for instance, some children being named after American states (e.g. Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia and Carolina). Moreover, the five plantations that had sprung up on Rabi Island also bore the names of American states, in this case Virginia, Texas, Florida, Maryland, and Georgia.¹⁵ Thus the very act of naming fitted the children of Indian migrants into the colonial system of representation. Through their names they were assigned the same place in the social hierarchy as also

14. See “List of Passengers, *Leonidas* May 15th 1879,” NAF. Kasee M. Budhu died in May 1881 (see Plantation Register 1879 – June 1893, NAF).

15. I owe this information to a prospectus of the Pacific Islands Company, Ltd. In it, the company has collected (using contemporaneous publications as sources) and cited brief passages bearing on Rabi Island. The information concerning the names of the plantations on Rabi Island was cited from “Sailing Directions for the Pacific Islands,” Vol. 2, Hydrographic Office, Admiralty, London (1891). See PMB 1205, Reel 5, MP 1174/1/248, The Pacific Islands Company, Limited, “Short Notes on the Islands referred to in the Prospectus,” NLA. Unclear is just why American place names should feature so prominently in what was, after all, a British colony. In a tabulation of the coconut plantations on Rabi from the year 1945, which was compiled by Donald G. Kennedy in connection with the Banaban resettlement, a number of these names from the time of Dawson and Hill can be seen to recur (see Appendix, Table 9).

determined their parents' identity, namely that of the plantations. Children of the *girmitiyas*, to be sure, were also given Christian names (Adam, Eve, Maria) or else names evocative of Roman history (Pompey, Caesar, Brutus, Mark Antony, Cato) or the ancient Greeks (Plato). This general practice of conferring European names on the newborn children of Indian migrants should probably be seen as an exercise in colonial power; but also as expressing a conviction that not just the Indian laborers, but even their offspring, needed to be defined, controlled, and generally fitted into the prevailing hierarchy of planters and laborers.

Ownership, leasing arrangements and the nature of the workforce on Rabi Island (1890–1945)

Between 1887 and 1889 there were increasing signs that a fundamental change in who held title to Rabi Island was in the offing. On September 13th 1887 a caveat was inserted in the title deed to Rabi Island, whereby Josiah Smale, a silk manufacturer from County Chester in England was accorded the right to prohibit “dealings with this land.” Edward Dawson and John Hill had encumbered Rabi Island with a mortgage to the tune of £ 8000. In the following two years, Captain Hill took steps designed to cut the number of *girmitiyas* on Rabi Island. In August and November 1889 Captain Hill arranged for some of his Indian workers to transfer to the Holmhurst Estate on Taveuni, a neighbouring island. When Josiah Smale partially withdrew his caveat, as registered on May 6th 1890, he cleared the way for provisional re-issuance of the title deed to Rabi Island, thus paving the way for changes to land tenure. This need to rewrite the certificate of title to Rabi Island arose from the fact that John Dawson had died back in November 1880. Edward Dawson had then applied for his brother's stake – one-third of Rabi Island – to be made over to him. Hence it was that on May 6th 1890 the administration issued the new title deed to “John Hill and Edward Dawson and Edward Dawson as Executor.”¹⁶ But this transfer was no more than a formal correction to the particulars of ownership, rendered

16. See Certificate of Title from May 6th 1890, Registrar of Titles, Suva, Fiji.

necessary by the death of John Dawson. On the very same day, Hill and Dawson sold Rabi Island for the sum of £9,780 to Josiah Smale.

The new owner, whose title deed was registered on June 6th 1890, decided to lease Rabi Island to a number of companies. The first contract of lease – set to run for five years, with an option of renewal for another two – was duly signed on June 11th 1890 by Messrs Corbett and Hunt of Suva Butchers. The laborers they employed on Rabi Island were chiefly brought in from Kiribati, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands (see Appendix, Table 5). But it is not so easy to gauge the numbers involved, since in the years between 1893 and 1896 the company again took to hiring Pacific islanders whose three-year contracts for Fiji had expired, prolonging these by a year (renewable each year). Apropos of this, none of these rehired laborers appear in any subsequent list, that is to say none do who were already on Rabi Island; the only ones listed are those from plantations elsewhere in Fiji who were brought over to that island.

Seven years later, in 1897, the newly set-up Pacific Islands Company Ltd. signaled an interest in Rabi Island; the company was, the sources tell us, pursuing the goal of “... securing the Lease of the Island of Rambai, in the Fiji Group, with the option of purchasing the Freehold. This Island contains an area of about 28 square miles, and by the latest accounts had [*sic*] five plantations, containing upwards of 110,000 cocoa-nut trees”.¹⁷ Initially, however, Pacific Islands Company Ltd. leased Rabi from Josiah Smale for a smaller term, i.e. for six months at a time. To manage the island the company engaged Captain Langdale, the then owner of the Fijian island of Wakaya. Langdale evidently then employed a largely Fijian workforce to keep Rabi’s plantation economy running. An in-firm report on the general condition of Rabi Island, which for some years now had been in a sorry state following a hurricane and ensuing drought, initially dampened expectations. But it was especially the company’s chairman, Lord Stanmore, who remained unswayed and continued to stress the island’s enormous developmental potential; Lord Stanmore (earlier Sir Arthur Gordon) knew Rabi from his time as Governor of Fiji. In July 1899, the company agreed to lease the island for a period of ten years.

17. See PMB 1205, Reel 5, MP 1174/1/248, Pacific Islands Company, Limited, 21st May 1897, NLA. See also *The Fiji Colonist* 2 Oct 1897, page 7.

Between the years 1897 and 1899 the affairs of Rabi Island had been handled by one of the company's employees, George C. Ellis. From his office in Sydney he corresponded (among his other duties) with Rabi's manager and generally kept an eye on economic reports, plantation management issues, payment flows, and the like.¹⁸ In the spring of 1900, his brother Albert F. Ellis, likewise on the company's payroll, happened to set sail for Ocean Island (aka Banaba) and Nauru. Inspecting both islands, he stumbled upon lucrative amounts of high-grade phosphate, a discovery that was to be a turning-point, and not only for the Pacific Islands Company, Ltd. (Ellis 1935:56–62, 87–89; Williams and Macdonald 1985:30–43). It would also affect the future of Rabi Island.

The new imperative of phosphate extraction was reflected in the Pacific Islands Company Ltd. re-inventing itself as the Pacific Phosphate Company Ltd. What then followed – Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. of Port Sunlight in the English County of Chester (where Josiah Smale just happened to come from) leased Rabi Island from January 1st 1903 for the duration of 21 years – was no coincidence. Not only did William Lever, a businessman by profession, inject fresh capital into this new mining venture, he also acquired the coconut plantations that had formerly belonged to the Pacific Islands Company Ltd. (Williams and Macdonald 1985:56). It was in the course of this latter transaction that Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. took over the lease on Rabi. To Josiah Smale the lessee paid a yearly emolument set at £800. Against this background we can see that the entry under "Rabi" in *The Cyclopedia of Fiji* is somewhat misleading, especially in its ascription of ownership:

The enterprising firm of Lever Bros., manufacturers of Sunlight soap, own the island of Rabi, lying off the eastern end of Vanua Levu, to the north of Taviuni. ...Attention is devoted almost exclusively to the cultivation of the cocoanut [sic], and the output of copra exceeds 400 tons per annum. The manager for Messrs. Lever Bros. is Mr. Percy Lyons. The island formerly belonged to Captain Hill, now resident magistrate at Loma Loma (1988:295, orig. 1907).

At first Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. employed migrant workers chiefly from Melanesia on Rabi Island. From the Pacific Islands Company Ltd. the

18. See PMB 1174, Reels 3–6 and 8, NLA.

new company took over five Solomon Islanders from Malaita, originally carried to Fiji on the vessel *Iowa* in November 1901. Between 1904 and 1908 Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. then imported a further 47 migrant workers from Malaita to work Rabi's plantations (see Appendix, Table 6).

In the ensuing years, however, Levers Pacific Plantations Ltd. recruited no further Pacific islanders for its plantations, heavily favoring Indian migrants instead. This switch of preference probably had much to do with the termination, in 1911, of the "labor trade," whereby Pacific islanders could come and work in Fiji. Putting an end to this practice was a political act, designed to give planters especially in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands sole access to the local labor pool (cf. Shlomowitz 1986:110–11). The Plantation Register of Indian Immigrants indicates that Levers Pacific Plantations Ltd., in the years between 1909 and 1916, brought to Rabi Island a total of 108 laborers (among them 27 women and 14 children) (see Appendix, Table 7).

The *Sutlej V* was the last of 87 ships that transported migrants from India to Fiji. With the rescinding of all current contracts in 1920, the colonial government finally jettisoned the system of indentured labor. The various Plantation Registers of Indian Immigrants show that Rabi Island was implicated in Fiji's indenture system particularly in the opening and end phases. In the more than 40 years since the first *girmitias* put into Fiji on board the *Leonidas* (1879), upward of 300 Indian migrants and their offspring had resided on Rabi Island.

Lever's Pacific Plantation Ltd. had already worked the plantations on Rabi Island for almost nine years when Josiah Smale died in August 1911. Smale stipulated in his will that his daughter Helen Gertrude Smale,¹⁹ as well as William Bates and Arthur Thomas Pattinson, his designated execu-

19. In an earlier brief review of the history of Rabi Island, I erroneously stated that Helen Gertrude Smale was Josiah Smale's wife (see Kempf and Hermann 2005, footnote 2). Subsequent research has shown though that Smale in fact married a Harriet Dawson on 14 October 1868. A birth certificate indicates that Helen Gertrude Smale was the daughter of Josiah and Harriet Smale, her date of birth being 24 November, 1871. For kindly assisting me in this matter, I wish to extend an especial thanks to Liz Green, Archivist of the Record Office in Cheshire, United Kingdom.

tors and trustees, were to take possession of Rabi Island.²⁰ A deed of transfer, certified in June 1914, effectively made Helen Gertrude Smale the sole owner of Rabi Island. In December 1923, shortly before the lease was due to expire, Helen Gertrude Youdale (as she now was, having in the meantime married) sold Rabi Island for £20,000 to Lever's Pacific Plantation Ltd. A fundamental restructuring of the company in the late 1920s led to the plantation island being sold in June 1929 for the sum of £29,213/11/2. to Lever's Pacific Plantation Pty. Ltd. Only with the transfer of ownership to this company do we have concrete figures for the copra economy on Rabi Island, these stretching over a period of 15 years. The data – most of it statistics – relates to the annual number of laborers employed as well as to production and sales figures for the years 1930–1945 (see Appendix, Table 8). Despite the exact tabulation of the number of laborers working on Rabi Island, we learn little or nothing about their places of origin. Sources from the 1940s mention Solomon Islanders and also Fijians as being there; the Administrative Officer E.R. Bevington, who paid a visit to Rabi in January 1944, wrote the following: "... labour is chiefly Fijian speaking Solomon Islanders, and Fijian. The Solomon Islanders have lost their jet black colour and are hard to tell from the Fijians. These are very poor people without land indentured many years ago..."²¹

In light of the statistics cited above, it should be noted that in the 1942–1945 period Lever's Pacific Plantations Pty. Ltd. no longer owned Rabi Island, but leased it. The company had sold the island to the Western Pacific High Commission in March 1942, converting their stake into leasehold. The trail leading to this transaction takes us back to Ocean Island.

20. See Registrar of Titles, Suva, Fiji, Certificate of Titles Book. See also Last Will and Testament of Josiah Smale of Park Mount Macclesfield in the County of Chester, Esquire, 25th August 1910, page 2, Her Majesty's Courts Service, York Probate Sub-Registry, York, England.

21. E.R. Bevington to H.E. Maude, January 30th 1944. In: Banabans: Purchase of Rabi and proposed purchase of Wakaya as future home for. 1940–53. WPHC 6/I CF 48/5 Vol. II., UAL.

Rabi Island as a new homeland for Banabans

Ever since 1900, when Albert F. Ellis discovered extensive phosphate deposits on Ocean Island, mining operations there had proceeded apace. The insatiable need for new land led, time and again, to conflicts with the local population, the Banabans. With a view to facilitating access to the phosphate reserves, mining company and colonial administration alike had toyed – as early as 1909 – with the idea of moving the Banabans to another island (see Williams and MacDonald 1985:89, 148, 257). But most Banabans rigorously opposed having their community uprooted and resettled. It took forced expropriations, designed to access more land for mining, plus the ongoing, and irreversible, destruction of their homeland, for the Banabans to seriously reconsider the idea of buying a second island in Fiji, if only for the sake of future generations. The Banabans even had a particular island in mind: Wakaya. Whereupon the Western Pacific High Commission ordered a study of that island's agricultural potential and its suitability for resettlement; but the result was negative, especially on the latter point. Finally, Lever's Pacific Plantations Pty Ltd. offered in October 1941 to sell Rabi Island for the sum of £25,000 (Australian currency). It took a spate of telegrams between Suva and Ocean Island before, in mid-March 1942, a majority of Banabans consented to a compromise deal in the form of buying both islands – Wakaya *and* Rabi. So the Western Pacific High Commission proceeded, that same month, to purchase Rabi Island for the agreed sum from Lever's Pacific Plantations Pty Ltd., using to that end moneys from the "Banaban Provident Fund," which was administered by the Commission.²² Plans to purchase Wakaya, however, came to nothing, because

22. The colonial government had, way back in 1931, set up the "Banaban Provident Fund" to receive royalties accruing to the Banabans from phosphate mining; the government also agreed to act as trustee, administering the fund on the community's behalf. Proceeds from the fund were expressly reserved for the future purchase of a new home island (Maude 1946: 5–6, 10). On the purchase of Rabi Island see 19th March 1942, High Commissioner, Western Pacific High Commission to Mr. F.E. Johnson, I.S.O., Treasurer, B.S.I.P., in Sydney; Important – Following for Clarke. In 'Banabans: Purchase of Rambi Island and proposed purchase of Wakaya as future home for. 1940–53' WPHC 6/I CF 48/5, Volume I, UAL. See also, Maude Papers I.F.6., H.E. Maude "The Purchase of Rabi for the Banabans", UABSL; see also Williams and Macdonald 1985:338.

the owners of that island and the Western Pacific High Commission could not agree on a price.

Henry E. Maude²³, who as Assistant Secretary to the Secretary of the Western Pacific High Commission played a prominent part in the purchase, later recalled that Lever's had been extremely keen to divest themselves of Rabi, because they feared the Japanese might occupy Fiji in the not-too-distant future. From an economic perspective, Rabi would then be as unprofitable as Lever's holdings in the Solomon Islands were by then, as the latter had already fallen into Japanese hands. If Maude's statements are to be believed, the company was so elated at seeing the back of Rabi Island that it threw a dinner party for the Treasurer of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (his staff included), who had nailed down the transaction.²⁴

With the transfer of title in 1942, the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific was now the official owner of Rabi Island.²⁵ The Western Pacific High Commission immediately leased the island, with its plantations, back to Lever's Pacific Plantations Propriety Ltd. for the duration of the war. In any event, all contact with the Banabans had ceased after the purchase went through. Japanese troops were now occupying Ocean Island, having reached it in August 1942. Logistical bottlenecks caused the Japanese occupiers some time later to deport all the Banabans to various other islands: Tarawa, Nauru, and Kosrae (Maude 1946:12; see also Hermann 2003:91–93; Kempf 2004). When the war ended, the British colonial administration concentrated the surviving Banabans on Tarawa. There it was made clear to them that, owing to widespread destruction wrought by the war, they would not be able to return immediately to Ocean Island. The British administration then suggested the Banabans might care to take the bold step of beginning anew on Fiji's Rabi Island. But if after a trial period of two years they still thought it best to return to Banaba, their wishes would be respected. Finally, on December 15th 1945, 703 Banabans and 300 Gilbert Islanders (who had become part of the community) landed on their new island in Fiji (see Maude 1946:12–13; Silverman 1971:147–148). Despite great

23. On the life and career of Henry Evans Maude (who is usually referred to as "Harry" Maude) see Woodburn 2003.

24. Maude Papers I.F.6., H.E. Maude "The Purchase of Rabi for the Banabans," UABSL. See also Williams and Macdonald 1985:338.

25. See Registrar of Titles, Suva, Fiji, Form of Transfer No. 29194.

initial difficulties, stemming largely from the unaccustomed climate, the unfamiliar environment and deep-seated estrangement among the migrants, a majority of Banabans voted, in a secret ballot held in May 1947, to make Rabi Island their future home. This decision, backed by 80% and more of all Banabans, was then codified in writing by the colonial administration in the form of a “statement of the intentions of Government” (often abbreviated to “statement of intentions”) and signed by the political representatives of both sides.²⁶

Although the Banabans had now decided to stay put, it was another six years before they officially took possession of their new island. To this end, the High Commissioner had first to transfer Rabi to the Governor of Fiji. To facilitate the transfer, a new deed was drawn up on December 11th 1952, merging Rabi Island with the 50 acres of government reserve, thus letting the Banabans take over the island in its entirety.²⁷ *The Banaban Land Ordinance* of 1953 finally stipulated that Rabi Island was “... Banaban land [which] shall be held by the Banaban community and the members thereof according to native Banaban customs as evidenced by usage and tradition and shall devolve and be dealt with according to such customs aforesaid” (*Laws of Fiji* 1953:96); the land rights to the island are inalienable. The ordinance was amended in 1965, designating the *Rabi Council of Leaders* as the elected political representative of Banabans and as sole trustee of Banaban lands. The Fijian government additionally granted the Banabans the right to conduct their own affairs, a prerogative also vested in the *Rabi Council of Leaders* (*Laws of Fiji* 1985; cf. Hermann 2001; Teaiwa 1997:132).

26. See “Banaban Lands and Funds: Report by Mr. H.E. Maude, M.B.E., on future of. 1946–1953. WPHC 9/II, F 48/5/10, Volume II, UAL. Cf. Maude Papers Part I B. Holland Papers (4) Correspondence and papers on Banaban affairs 1931–1949, Copy Statement of Intentions, 12.05. 1947, UABSL. See also Silverman 1971:167.

27. See Registrar of Titles, Suva, Fiji, Transfer No. 51188; Request for New Certificate of Title, Real Property Dealing No. 51189 and Certificate of Title No. 8095.

Restructuration of the plantation island of Rabi by the Banabans after 1945

Shortly before the Banabans were brought to Rabi Island, Major D.G. Kennedy, the administrative officer handling the resettlement operation, drew up a register of existing coconut plantations complete with map (see Appendix, Table 9 and Map 3). The government had reserved a key role for the plantations in the settlement project, as it wanted copra production to form the economic backbone of the Banaban community in Fiji. So when the resettled Banabans re-activated the Banaban Cooperative Society, which had been originally set up before the war on Ocean Island, they assigned it responsibility for running the greater part of the coconut plantations. The Banaban and Gilbertese laborers, working for the Society mostly on the plantations away to the south and the east of the island, were initially on a fixed wage with daily rations; later they were paid according to the amount of copra they produced. On the other hand, the plantations to the north of the island were divided up provisionally between individual family groups, who for the most part sold green copra to the Cooperative Society in Nuku. Especially in the early years on Rabi, when royalties



Copra production at Tengea (Vunisinu), the place later renamed Buakonikai.

Photo: H.B. Maynard

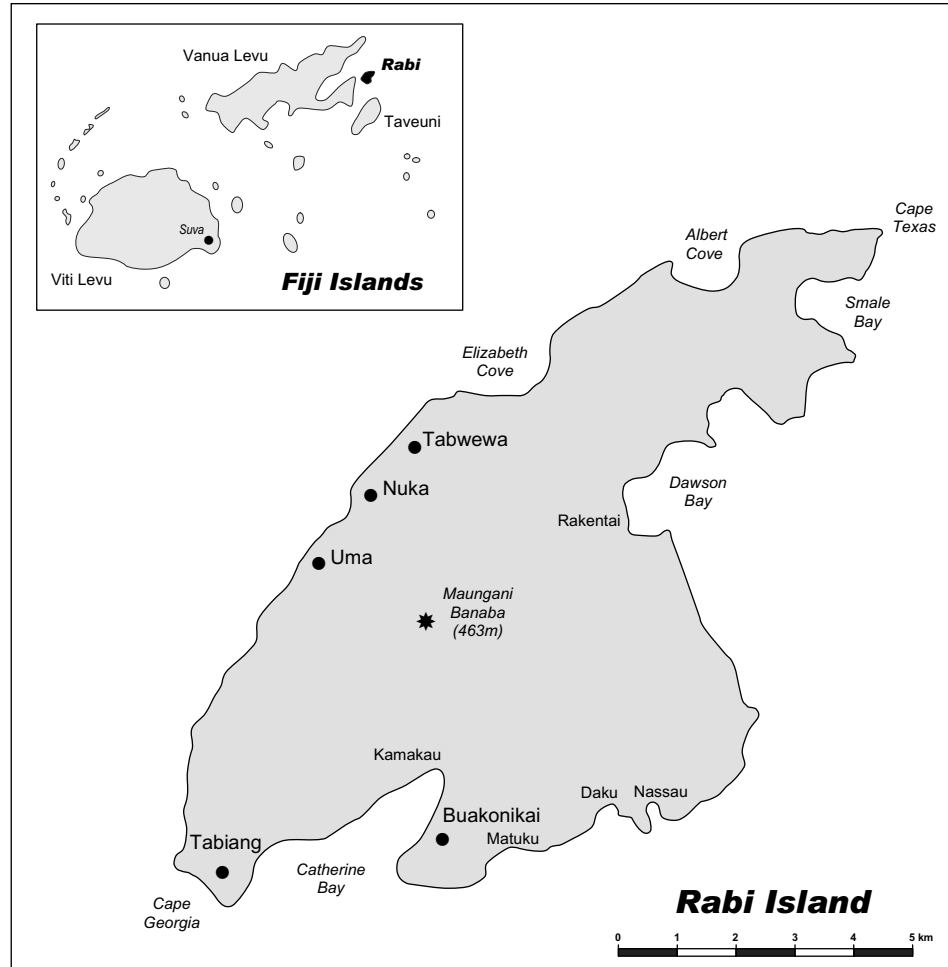
from the phosphate mining on Ocean Island had yet to come full stream, production and sale of copra was pivotal to the economic fortunes of the resettled Banabans (see Maude 1946:16; Silverman 1971:173–179, 212–213). The central importance of copra production during this time was also reflected in the settlement patterns adopted by the new arrivals. One has to know that when the migrants, all one thousand and three of them, reached Rabi in December 1945 they were first taken to a camp and accommodated there in army tents. This makeshift tent city was situated in Nuku, on the north-western side of the island (see Appendix, Map 3).

Nuku had been made the hub of the plantation economy by the former owners of Rabi; its infrastructure included a jetty, fifteen large buildings, and a drier used in copra production. Later on, when the Banabans began moving out of their tents to construct housing from bush material, they followed the spatial structures of the former plantation economy. When choosing where to place their first three settlements, the Banabans simply took over Nuku, Vunisinu, and Suetolu, i.e. the old centers of copra production that were originally created, developed, and maintained by Captain Hill, the Pacific Islands Company Ltd., Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd, and



The Banaban tent settlement in Nuku with Major D.G. Kennedy (center left)

Photo: H.B. Maynard



Map 2

others (cf. Silverman 1971:211; Kempf 2003; see Appendix, Table 9 and Map 3). These were given the names of, respectively, Nuka (“Center”), Tengea (called after a hardwood tree that grew on Banaba) and Rakentai (“Sun-rise”) – all of them names which established a linkage with Banaba, the home island.²⁸ It was from this configuration of settlements that the Bana-

28. See F 128/6 Banaban Settlement at Rabi Island. Miscellaneous. F.G.L. Holland to the Secretary to the Western Pacific High Commission, Suva, Fiji, 16th September 1946, NAF. See also Maude Papers Part I B. Holland Papers (4) Correspondence and Papers on Banaban affairs, 1931–1949, UABSL.

bans developed, during the first half of the 1950s, the settlement structure we find on Rabi today. The decision was taken to simply transfer to Rabi the original four villages on ancestral Banaba – Tabwewa, Uma, Tabiang, and Buakonikai. From being a provisional settlement in the immediate vicinity of Nuka, the administrative centre, the village of Tabwewa emerged – whose namesake on Banaba had traditionally claimed leadership status among the four villages; so it was now associated with the place from which Rabi was to be administered. To the south of Tabwewa the Banabans built the new village of Uma. Tengea (on the southern side of Rabi) gave rise to Buakonikai. A number of villagers from Rakentai – on the eastern side of Rabi – followed the urgings of their then leader and moved away in the 1950s to establish a new village on the south-west coast, Tabiang, which is between Uma and Buakonikai (see also Silverman 1971:211; see Appendix, Map 3). Within this context of settlement re-organization, the Banabans took the step of dividing up among the various villages the coconut plantations they had inherited (cf. Kempf 2003; Silverman 1971:210). Thus, Tabwewa was given rights over the plantations Daku and Nassau; Uma was assigned Matuku, and Buakonikai Kamakau, while Tabiang continued to run Suetolu/Rakentai. Concerning this apportioning of plantations to villages, it is clear that while the Banabans gave their settlements names fa-



Wharf at Tengea / Buakonikai.

Photo: H.B. Maynard



Copra production at Nuku (Rabi Island).

Photos: H.B. Maynard

miliar to them from the past, they also retained no small number of Fijian names, especially those of the coconut plantations – and as for the island itself, they continued to call it “Rabi.”²⁹

In sum, we can say that the Banabans, in re-creating their original four villages, transferred spatial structures from their island of origin to their new Fijian island of Rabi; further, that their intention, in so doing, was to underline a claim to ownership of both islands. Through this political process of superimposing two islands, as it were, the Banabans were able to create a “Banaba on Rabi,” an island space of otherness; thus they not only forged a link to their home island in the Central Pacific, they also staked out an autonomous identity for themselves as Banabans living in Fiji. Superimposition of the two islands was based on spatial structures laid down by the same plantation economy that had transformed Rabi Island over the previous 80 years.

Concluding Remarks

The colonial history of Rabi as a plantation island foregrounds the translocal entwinements that give this place its special character. The policy pursued by Tonga’s King George Tupou I. towards Fiji and the resultant sale of Rabi Island in far-away Sydney; the classification of Rabi Island as freely disposable property (freehold) by the British Crown; the importing of laborers from Melanesia, Micronesia, and India to first put in, then work, the coconut plantations; the interest shown in Rabi by British investors with business interests in the Pacific; the asynchronous periods of leasehold and freehold; also, how this island of plantations eventually felt the long arm of phosphate mining by receiving displaced persons from the island of Banaba in the neighbouring Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony – this historical sequence of inclusion in larger developments offshore has left an indelible mark on Rabi Island *qua* place. Rabi Island was long a place where plantation laborers of highly variable provenance worked side by side; whether Pacific islanders or Indian *girmitiyas*, it was they who, under a regime run

29. The names and sizes of the coconut plantations assigned to particular villages by the Banabans do not always tally with the plantation list compiled by D.G. Kennedy in 1945 (cf. Appendix, map 3).

by colonial administrators, entrepreneurs, European owners, and managers, substantially shaped the landscape of Rabi.

Focusing on Rabi's history also yields new insights into the political practice of representatives of British colonial power. A key player in this connection is Fiji's first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon (later Lord Stanmore). The general policies he pursued to protect the indigenous Fijians – vesting them with inalienable rights to 83% of the land; importing laborers from India to run the plantation economy in their stead – are a matter of record (see Kaplan 2004:75–78; Lal 1992:13–16). John Kelly (2003) has additionally explored two intellectual sources – J.W.B. Money and H. Maine – on which Gordon drew when shaping Fiji's colonial order the way he did. But Gordon's formative role in Fiji's colonial history only describes part of his impact on Pacific Societies. What has, in my view, received still far too little attention is the manner in which he continued to set agendas, following his return to England, as Lord Stanmore (cf. Chapman 1964:346–372). The history of Rabi Island has exemplary force in alerting us to the importance of both phases of his career.

For it is not as if Rabi Island remained unaffected by the policies pursued by Governor Gordon. Because he had confirmed its status as freehold in European hands, Rabi from that point on belonged to the small fraction of land in Fiji that could be sold freely on the market. Gordon's policies had the further consequence that Rabi was, for a time, a central plank in the life and work of Indian migrants. But the history of Rabi Island points as well to the later phase of Gordon's agency, whose reach extended well beyond Fiji. Politically influential, even in retirement, and now chairman of the Pacific Islands Company Ltd., Lord Stanmore argued in favor of a long-term leasing of Rabi Island. He was also actively involved in securing for his company exclusive rights to the phosphate mining on Ocean Island (see Williams and Macdonald 1985:15–17, 52–57; cf. Kempf and Hermann 2005:368–369). Finally, Lord Stanmore assumed the chairmanship with the successor firm, the Pacific Phosphate Company Ltd., which was able to obtain capital from the entrepreneur William Lever (later Lord Leverhulme) and so push forward with phosphate mining on Ocean Island (and also Nauru). And it was this factor – phosphate mining on both islands – that in terms of economy, society, demography, and power left such deep traces in this part of the Pacific.

As it happens, the business partnership with William Lever was advantageous for the Pacific Phosphate Company Ltd. in yet another respect. Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. declared its willingness to take over all those plantation islands in the Pacific that belonged to the Pacific Islands Company Ltd. At this point in my argument, let me emphasize that between 1890 and 1923 the island was owned by the Smale Family of County Chester in England. Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. was for a continuous period of twenty years (from 1903 to 1923) merely the lessee; only at the end of this time did it purchase the island from Josiah Smale's daughter (and heir) Helen Gertrude Youdale. All accounts to the contrary do not reflect the facts of the matter.

Stanmore and Lever, in their differential functions as politicians and entrepreneurs, exerted an influence that mattered for the Banabans' future in two ways: on Ocean Island (or Banaba) they set in motion a machinery that would permanently part the Banabans from their land (thus destroying their means of subsistence); and on Rabi with its plantation economy they were, in the final analysis, the prime movers (without knowing it) behind the economic and spatial modalities that would be so relevant when the Banabans were later resettled there. In addition, Stanmore and Lever were saying as early as 1909 that the Banabans should be removed from Ocean Island as soon as possible and resettled elsewhere in the Pacific (Williams and Macdonald 1985:89). And yet it was the historically conditioned structures of political and economic power that, in the final analysis, brought about this parallel development. So it would not be right to impute to Stanmore and Lever a master plan for the future of Ocean Island and Rabi. And in their calculations concerning resettling the Banabans, Rabi Island played at the time no role whatever. Nor would such a scenario do justice to the Banabans' own agency; it would take until 1940 – as the destruction of their home island proceeded apace – before they were finally ready to face facts and purchase a second island. And here it was the Banabans, be it noted, who explicitly favored the idea of an island in Fiji, as they did not wish to be resettled in a malaria-infested area (such as the Solomon Islands) (Silverman 1971:145–146; Kempf n.d.a). The Banabans accommodated themselves to Rabi Island, within the context of the then colonial power realities, by inscribing into Rabi's plantation landscape a collective reference to their island of origin. That the Banabans see Rabi Island today as a place guar-

anteeing their survival as an ethnic group in Fiji is, finally speaking, bound to the history of this plantation island no less than it is to that of phosphate mining on Ocean Island. Relationships such as these between two island homes alert us to how much understanding the local depends on construing places as processes.

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Appendix

Table 1 Provenance of Melanesian and Micronesian immigrants on Rabi Island under Captain Hill (1876–1884)

Vessel	Arrival in Fiji	Provenance of immigrants ¹	Island group	Men	Women	Children / adolescents	Total no. of migrants
Rosamand	1876 (Dec.)	"Nukunu" ²	Kiribati	10	9	5	24
Dauntless	1877 (Oct.)	Malekula	Vanuatu	2	—	—	2
Dauntless	1877 (Dec.)	Malekula	Vanuatu	2	—	—	2
Menschikoff	1878 (April)	Merelava ³	Vanuatu	1	1	—	2
Menschikoff	1878 (April)	Malo ⁴	Vanuatu	2	1	—	3
Patience	1878 (April)	Beru	Kiribati	—	3	—	3
Patience	1878 (July)	Beru	Kiribati	2	3	—	5
Dauntless	1878 (Sept.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	9	1	—	10
Daphne	1878 (Dec.)	Florida	Solomon Is.	4	—	—	4
Rose	1879 (Jan.)	Banaba ⁵	Kiribati	3	3	1	7
Marion Rennie	1879 (June)	Ambae ⁶	Vanuatu	9	—	1	10
Dauntless	1879 (Aug.)	Guadalcanal	Solomon Is.	3	1	1	5
Jessie Kelly	1879 (Sept.)	"Solomons" ⁷	Solomon Is.	4	—	1	5
Winefred	1879 (Dec.)	Ambrym	Vanuatu	3	—	1	4
Jessie Kelly	1880 (June)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	7	—	—	7
Winefred	1880 (Aug.)	Espiritu Santo	Vanuatu	7	1	1	9
Flirt	1880 (Aug.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	8	—	—	8
Borealis	1880 (Aug.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	1	—	—	1
Rose	1880 (Oct.)	"Line Islands" ⁸	Kiribati	4	2	—	6
Patience	1883 (Oct.)	Beru	Kiribati	2	2	—	4
Patience	1883 (Oct.)	Onotoa	Kiribati	1	1	—	2
Midge	1884 (Aug.)	Arorae	Kiribati	1	—	—	1
Midge	1884 (Aug.)	Beru	Kiribati	4	4	4	12
Total	1876–1884			89	32	15	136

Source: NAF, General Register of Polynesian Immigrants, Vols. 1, 2, & 3.

Table 2 Provenance of labourers hired by Captain Hill (1879)

Month (1879)	Region of origin	Total
January	Banaba (Kiribati)	7
May	India	106
June	Ambae (Vanuatu)	10
August	Guadalcanal (Solomon Is.)	5
September	Solomon Is.	5
December	Ambrym (Vanuatu)	4
Total Jan–Dec. 1879		137

Source: NAF, General Register of Polynesian Immigrants, Vol. 1 and Plantation Register of Indian Immigrants, Vol. 1.

1. The island names listed in the Register have been replaced by the names commonly used today. Exceptions are island names in inverted commas – here I have retained the name listed in the Register; such island names are then briefly commented in a footnote.
2. Very probably this refers to Nikunau, an island in what is now Kiribati. This I conclude from e.g. the fact that the vessel mentioned in the Register, the “Rosamand,” (sic) was also carrying islanders from other parts of Kiribati, such as the islands of Beru and Arorae.
3. The island name originally listed in the Register is “Maralab” (cf. Siegel 1985:45).
4. The island name originally listed in the Register is “St. Bartholon” (cf. Siegel 1985:45).
5. The name originally listed in the Plantation Register is “Panopa (Line).” The Gilbert Islands were frequently referred to in the Registers as the Line Islands. Since the same vessel, the “Rose,” was also carrying islanders from Onotoa, Beru, and Tapiteuea to Fiji, I conclude that the island referred to as Panopa is none other than Banaba, now in Kiribati (cf. Siegel 1985:45). The group of Banabans then living on Rabi Island comprised three men (Bakaioa, Tekerara, and Tabea by name), three women (Titetibong, Kinea, and Kamatoa by name), and one girl (Tekerau by name). A considerably larger group of Banabans, comprising a total of fourteen women and two girls, went to Taveuni. Another group of Banabans (two men, two women, and one child) were among those transported by the “Rose;” the group disembarked on the Fijian island of Cicea (see the General Register of Polynesian Immigrants, Vol. 1, 216, NAF).
6. The name originally listed in the Register is “Aoba” (cf. Siegel 1985:45).
7. No information is provided as to what islands in the Solomons these plantation workers originated from.
8. No further information is provided as to what islands these plantation workers originated from. But I make the assumption that by “Line Islands” the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati) is meant, as was the case in the preceding entries.

**Table 3 Indian immigrants on Rabi Island
under Captain Hill (1879–1885)**

Vessel	Arrival in Fiji	Men	Women	Children / adolescents	Total no. of migrants
Leonidas	1879 (May)	52	25	29	106
Syria	1884 (May)	14	6	1	21
Howrah	1884 (June)	1	—	—	1
Ganges I	1885 (June)	16	5	2	23
Total	1879–85	83	36	32	151

Source: NAF, Plantation Register of Indian Immigrants, Vol. 1.

Table 4 Excerpt from Register of Children born on Rambi

For illustrative purposes, I list below the first ten entries in the register. Entered in the first column of the Plantation Register is the name of the ship; then follows (in consecutive columns) the child's name, his or her sex, the registered numbers of the parents, and the child's date of birth:

Vessel	Name of child	Sex	Parents of child	Child's date of birth ⁹
Leonidas	Rambi	F.	D of 1 & 76	born 11.79
Leonidas	Butha	F.	D of 18 & 70	born 1.80
Leonidas	Florida	F.	D of 6 & 61	born 27.6.80
Leonidas	Georgia	F.	D of 23 & 59	born 25.7.80
Leonidas	Louisiana	F.	D of 37 & 72	born 28.7.80
Leonidas	Virginia	F.	D of 3 & 54	born 7.8.80 ¹⁰
Leonidas	Carolina	F.	D of 36 & 68	born 8.80
Leonidas	Adam	M.	Son of & 55 ½ caste Fijian	born 8.10.80
Leonidas	Levuka	F.	D of 39 & 60	born 17.10.80
Leonidas	Utah	F.	D of 20 & 40	born 20.10.80
etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.

Source: Excerpt from Register of Children born on Rambi. Plantation Register of Indian Immigrants, Vol. 1, NAF.

9. American readers should note that dates of birth are given using the British system, i.e. the day of the month precedes the month, not vice versa.

10. The entry is crossed out in the original. This indicates that the person has died. The addendum "Drowned 3.3.86 No. 298" points to the fact that the child died at the age of six (see Plantation Register 1879 – June 1893, Rabi Island, NAF).

**Table 5 Pacific Islanders on Rabi Island
under Messrs. Corbett and Hunt (1890–1896)**

Vessel	Arrival in Fiji	Provenance of immigrants	Island group	Men	Women	Adolescents	Total no. of migrants
Eastward Ho	1890 (Aug.)	Nikunau	Kiribati	1	—	—	1
Eastward Ho	1890 (Aug.)	Beru	Kiribati	1	2	—	3
Eastward Ho	1890 (Aug.)	Tabiteuea	Kiribati	4	1	—	5
Eastward Ho	1890 (Sept.)	Arorae	Kiribati	1	2	—	3
Meg Merrilies	1892 (July)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	4	—	—	4
Meg Merrilies	1892 (Dec.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	2	—	2	4
Reengaged	1894	Malaita	Solomon Is.	—	1	—	1
Reengaged	1894	Espiritu Santo	Vanuatu	1	—	—	1
Reengaged	1896	Guadalcanal	Solomon Is.	8	—	—	8
Total	1890–96			22	6	2	30

Source: NAF, Fiji, General Register of Polynesian Immigrants, Vol. 3 and Plantation Register (Polynesian) Vols. 3 and 4 (1878–1914)

**Table 6 Pacific Islanders on Rabi Island
under Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. (1904–1908)**

Vessel	Arrival in Fiji	Provenance of immigrants	Island group	Men	Women	Children/ adolescents	Total no. of migrants
Lady Norman	1904 (Sept.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	4	2	1	7
Clansmann	1905 (Oct.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	7	1	1	9
Clansmann III	1906 (Aug.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	8	—	—	8
Clansmann V	1907 (April)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	8	—	—	8
Clansmann VII	1908 (Jan.)	Malaita	Solomon Is.	15	—	—	15
Total	1904–1908			42	3	2	47

Source: NAF, Fiji, General Register of Polynesian Immigrants, Vol. 3 and Plantation Register (Polynesian), Vols. 4 and 5

**Table 7 Indian immigrants on Rabi Island
under Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd. (1909–1916)**

Vessel	Arrival in Fiji	Men	Women	Children/ adolescents	Total no. of migrants
Sangola III	1909 (Feb.)	6	2	1	9
Sangola IV	1909 (April)	6	2	—	8
Sangola V	1910 (March)	3	1	—	4
Santhia II	1910 (July)	3	1	—	4
Sutlej I	1911 (June)	6	2	—	8
Mutlah II	1911 (Aug.)	5	2	1	8
Sutlej I	1912 (April)	7	3	3	13
Ganges II	1912 (July)	7	3	2	12
Chenab I	1914 (March)	6	3	2	11
Chenab II	1914 (June)	6	3	2	11
Mutlah III	1915 (May)	3	1	1	5
Mutlah IV	1915 (Aug.)	3	1	—	4
Chenab III	1916 (Sept.)	3	1	—	4
Sutlej V	1916 (Nov.)	3	2	2	7
Total	1909–16	67	27	14	108

Source: NAF, Plantation Register of Indian Immigrants Vol. 7 and List of Ships.

**Table 8 Copra production under Lever's
Pacific Plantation Pty. Ltd. (1930–1945)**

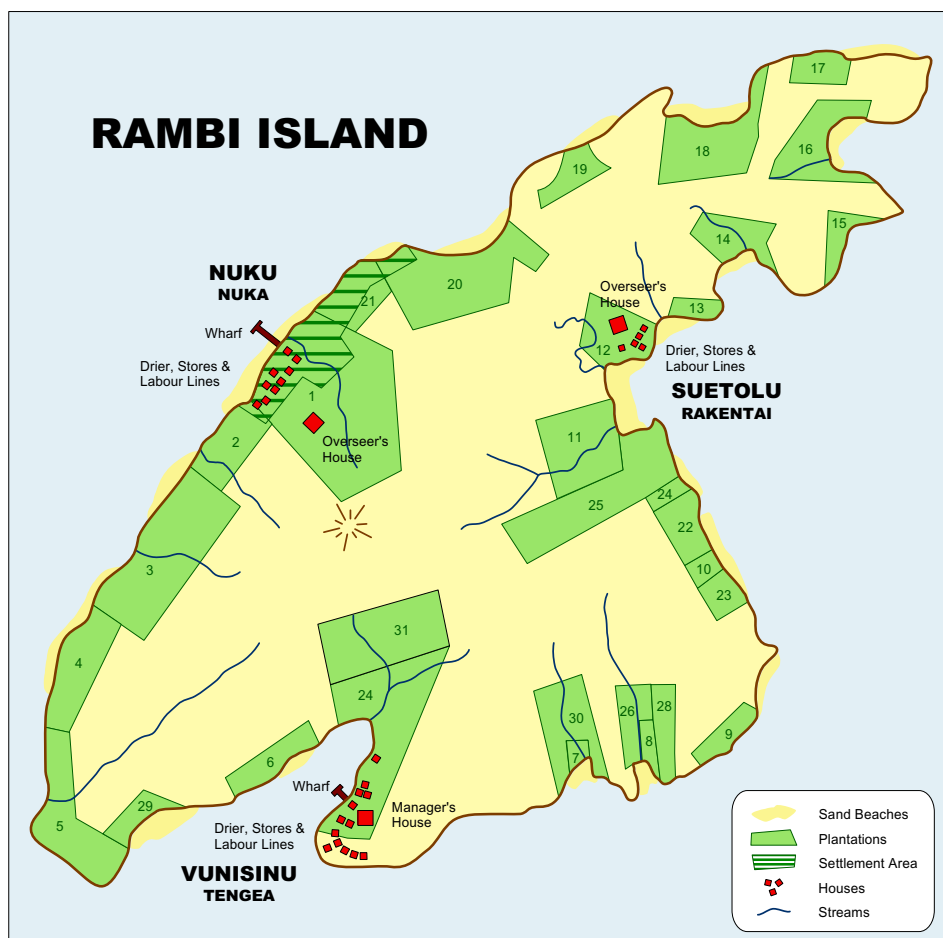
Year	Number of Labourers	Production in tons	Cost per ton on estate ex sacks, £.–S.D.	Sales in tons	Average price per ton
1930	109	461	11.16.10	473	18.12. –
1931	92	426	10.10.3	464	15.3.6
1932	88	402	12.16.3	343	17.3.7
1933	95	569	8.19.11	586	12.4.1
1934	98	566	10.11.7	526	10.5.11
1935	100	683	9.16.1	769	12.7.6
1936	100	777	10.14. –	812	17.6.1
1937	100	770	12.10.2	762	14.12.10
1938	100	819	11.9.10	818	7.17.8
1939	92	835	11.4.9	757	9.6.7
1940	90	666	12.18.8	719	9.6.7
1941	96	557	14.12.8	563	8.19.8
1942	75	629	12.13.2	645	15.7.5
1943	76	453	16.13.6	453	16.14.5
1944	52	334	20.10.2	328	20.12.9
1945	57	398	23.44.3	430	21.18.8

Source: UHA, Blue Book–Lever's Pacific Plantations Propriety Ltd. Catalogue Number UPG/7/3/1/6/1.

Table 9 List of coconut plantations on Rabi Island (1945)

Name of plantation	Acreage	No. of trees	Spaced (in feet)	Date planted
1. Virginia	149.6	12,033	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
2. Gesugesu	16.1	1,293	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
3. Vuna Vuka	223.6	17,957	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
4. Lesulesu	23.8	1,918	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
5. Georgia (I)	64.2	5,163	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
6. Old Buca blocks	29.9	2,403	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
7. Matuku (I)	5.0	409	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
8. Nasau (I)	13.8	1,110	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
9. Nautembula	36.6	2,941	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
10. Nasaya	5.9	475	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
11. Maryland (I)	70.9	5,696	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
12. New Florida	25.8	2,075	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
13. Coolie Point	6.4	516	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
14. Nasoba	26.2	2,107	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
15. Laltie	22.9	1,846	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
16. Texas	68.5	5,506	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
17. Nasau Vola	13.6	1,098	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
18. Albert Bay	23.7	1,910	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
19. Tombalala	20.0	1,607	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
20. Nukuloa	105.6	8,485	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
21. Vatalai	47.3	3,805	25 (approx)	btw. 1880 and 1910
22. Fulton Grove (I)	77.3	4,958	28	1913
23. Fulton Grove (II)	8.8	496	30	1914
24. Anulevu	50.1	2,800	30	1914–15
25. Maryland (II)	214.8	11,989	30	1916–22
26. Nasau (II)	89.6	5,000	30	1924
27. Buca (I)	639.7	35,700	30	1926–27
28. Nasau (III)	206.0	11,500	30	1927–28
29. Daku	188.1	10,500	30	1927–28
30. Matuku (II)	219.8	12,270	30	1928
31. Buca Highlands (II)	192.6	10,750	30	1929
Total	2,886.2	180,931		

Source: “Banabans: Purchase of Rambi Island and proposed purchase of Wakaya as future home for. 1940–53.” WPHC 6/I CF 48/5 Volume III, UAL.



Map 3: This map is a reconstruction. It is a combination of two historical maps, drawn by the colonial administrator Donald G. Kennedy in 1945. For the cartographic originals see the following sources:

Donald G. Kennedy to The Secretary, Western Pacific High Commission, 28th September, 1945: "Appendix II, page 2. Location plan of Rabi plantations. Numbers correspond to the serial numbers on the list." From: "Banabans: Purchase of Rambli Island and proposed purchase of Wakaya as future home for. 1940–53." WPHC 6/I CF 48/5 Volume III, UAL.

Major Donald G. Kennedy to The Secretary, Western Pacific High Commission, 8th October, 1945. Appendix II. Map of Rabi: "Showing present copra making settlements and the proposed area for the preliminary settlement of the Banabans at Nuku. Areas fronted by sand beaches are all considered suitable for future villages of hamlets...All these areas have clean permanent stream in the vicinity." From: "Banabans: Settlement of, in Fiji. 1945–46." WPHC 6/I CF 48/5/2 Volume I, UAL.

