

What's in a Demonym? A Note on a New and Uplifting Ethnonym

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Ethnicity is all important in Fiji, and labels for the different ethnic groups are a constant source of debate. A significant proportion of Fiji's population are descendants of indentured laborers from the Indian subcontinent. An appropriate name for these citizens has for a long time been a contentious issue. In 2017 a new name was proposed; one that signals the beginning of a change in attitude. This note reports on the new name.

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In 2017, two chiefs of the Fijian *vanua* of Noco and Rewa,¹ declared that the descendants of the Indian indentured laborers brought to Fiji between 1879 and 1916, would henceforth be known and referred to as *Luvedra na Ratu* “The Children of the Ratu (chief)”.²

Why was this significant, or at least newsworthy in Fiji? (refer to: Baleilevuka 2017; Boila 2017; Cava 2017; Krishna 2017; and Narayan, Danford, and Ravuwai 2017). To answer this question we must go back to 1874 when the leading chiefs of Fiji ceded their dominions to Great Britain. Colonial copra and sugar plantation owners had problems procuring a sufficient labor force. The Indigenous Fijians showed little interest in working on the plantations, and besides, the colonial government wanted to preserve traditional Fijian customs and values. In order to provide a large enough workforce indentured laborers were brought from the Indian subcontinent. Between 1879 and 1916, some 60,500 laborers were imported. This period was referred to by the laborers as the *Girmit* and they called themselves *Girmitiya*.³ Some 36,000 of them decided to stay in Fiji at the end of their indenture. By 1966, their descendants comprised 50.5% of the Fiji population. Since then, and especially since the 1987 coups, this proportion of the population had decreased to 37.5% by 2007 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2008).

Ethnicity is very important in Fiji. At each census, it is required that respondents declare their ethnicity (i.e. Fijian, Indo-Fijian, Part-European,⁴ Other Pacific Islanders, Rotuman, Chinese, European,⁵ and Others). Indeed, when entering the country, one is

also required to indicate on the immigration card, what “race” one identifies with. Even when one gets a speeding fine in Fiji, “race” is a required piece of information.

For many years now, there has been at times acrimonious discussion on the use of demonyms for Fiji’s people. Many Indigenous Fijians (aka *iTaukei*)⁶ object to any other Fiji citizens being called *Fijian*. This view abides by the general distinction made between the adjectival forms *Fiji* and *Fijian*. The latter is generally used to describe anything associated with the Indigenous culture and society. *Fiji*, on the other hand, is normally employed to denote anything to do with Fiji in general, not necessarily the Indigenous people and culture. For example, “the Fijian population” (only Indigenous people) vs “the Fiji population” (the entire population of Fiji). According to this view, it is incorrect to refer to any citizen of Fiji as a *Fijian*; only Indigenous Fijians have this right.

Demonyms for the descendants of the *Girmitiya* have included simply “Indians” (mostly used by Indigenous Fijians), “Fiji Indians”, and “Indo-Fijians”. The latter two terms have been attributed to politically correct academics and the so-called “chattering class”. However, either of these two terms have become more and more accepted over “Indians”, which is akin to referring to the descendants of African slaves in the United States as “Africans”. Fijians also use, among themselves, the term *kai Idia* (*kai* meaning a “person of a specified location”). This term is however, not used in general Fiji English or in official Government parlance. Similarly, the Fijian term for “Part-European”, *kailoma*, is also not used officially, even though the term has been embraced by the part-European community themselves.⁷

So, the decision by the chiefs of Noco and Rewa to name Indo-Fijians *Luvudra na Ratu* is significant.

The Tui Noco (Chief of Noco) said that when he was young, a well-known Indo-Fijian shopkeeper, Ram Karan used to sell sweets to the local schoolchildren. One day he had an argument with another man. The second man, a Fijian, challenged Ram Karan to a fight but he replied he was more worried about what the people of Noco would tell the Tui Noco. The fight never started because the Fijian man was ashamed of his own actions. It was because of Ram Karan’s demonstration of respect towards the Tui Noco that it had been decided to give the name *Luvudra na Ratu* to all Indo-Fijians. The Chief of Rewa, Ro Teimumu Kepa, declared that Indo-Fijians were looking for a sense of belonging, and that the acceptance of the *iTaukei* of Noco and Rewa of this new title has finally given Indo-Fijians a sense of unity. The Tui Noco said he and Ro Teimumu would approach the Government to formalize the relationship to make it meaningful that “we are one”.

Luvudra na Ratu is unlikely to replace *Indo-Fijian* or *Fiji Indian* because it is a Fijian expression and is somewhat cumbersome to use in Government documents etc. Moreover, it should probably be seen as a gesture of goodwill and an acknowledgement of acceptance, and it is doubtful whether the *iTaukei* of Noco and Rewa will discontinue to use *kai Idia* or other established terms. Furthermore, Ro Teimumu has added that *Luvudra na Ratu* is an *icavuti* “honorific title”. Such titles are not used in ordinary conversation, only in ceremonial contexts.

All things considered, even if the new demonym does not find its way into general and official vocabulary of English in Fiji, its coining and attribution are a step in the right direction.

Notes

- ¹ A *vanua* (broadly translated as “land”) is a concept that encompasses a number of inter-related meanings. In the sense it is used here, it refers to the land area with which a person is identified. It is a confederation of several *yavusa* (“clans” established through descent from a common ancestor). See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanua>
- ² Standard Fijian has five pairs of vowels, long and short /i, e, a, o, u/, seven diphthongs /iu, ei, eu, oi, ou, ai, au/, and 18 consonants /p, t, k, ^mb, ⁿd, ^ŋg, f, s, β, ð, m, n, ŋ, ^rr, l, r, y, w/. Orthographic *b* = /^mb/, *d* = /ⁿd/, *q* = /^ŋg/, *v* = /β/, *c* = /ð/, *g* = /ŋ/, *r* = /^rr/, *j* = /tʃ/~ⁿdʒ/, and *y* = /j/.
- ³ *Girmit* from “agreement (of indenture)”.
- ⁴ A person of mixed Fijian and European parentage.
- ⁵ Throughout the Pacific, the term “European” is used to refer to any Caucasian (or so-called “white person”), not necessarily someone from Europe.
- ⁶ Literally “Land-owner”, a Fijian term to refer to Indigenous people in general.
- ⁷ Literally, “a person in between”.

Disclosure statement

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