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Robert Nicole writes a compelling and engaging book on the resistance to colonial rule in the interior region of Fiji from a grass roots level. This book has been successfully adapted from Nicole’s PhD thesis, although some parts may be a little too theoretical for a non-academic audience. The chapters are well written and easy to follow for any person who has an interest in this topic.

Nicole challenges the idea that all indigenous Fijians were accepting of their country becoming a British colony. He states that he wanted to “highlight a number of alternative dates, events, and characters that seldom if ever get a mention in our conversations about the past” (p. 13). In doing so, he discusses a number of resisting strategies of not only the indigenous population but also the Indian population who opposed the colonial administration’s ambition of not only establishing European political domination but, more importantly, creating an economically viable colony. In Chapters 1 to 4 the author examines larger organised resistance events and movements, including some that are relatively unknown. This provides the reader with background information on the structures of country’s politics and economics as well as its peoples’ involvement with traditional and introduced religions.

By examining the Colo War of 1876 Nicole begins to give the reader an understanding of some of the key characteristics of Fijian society before British colonisation. This is followed by consideration of the oracle priest Navosavakadura and the Tuka Movement, providing ample evidence that Fijians were not passive, and did not easily fall under colonial rule. This was an important movement as elements of it were incorporated into the Viti Kabani (Fiji Company) of 1913. From 1900 to 1903 New Zealand began what came to be known as the Movement for Federation in an attempt to annex Fiji. Nicole shows that although there appeared to be a lot of support from Fijians for this movement, in reality, the people used this as a way to express their discontent with the current government. Nicole states that the Viti Kabani, which was established in 1913, was to be the greatest challenge to the colonial administration of that time and it was described as “a powerful example of unarmed resistance” (p.70). He then explores the organised plantation protests of the indentured Indian labourers, beginning with Governor Gordon’s policy of introducing Indian indentured labourers to work on the plantations. Nicole then describes how
the poor working and living conditions of the indentured Indian population led to a number of organised protests, in an effort to combat the inhumane treatment they received on the plantations.

The remainder of the book, Chapters 5 through 7, is dedicated to exploring and discussing everyday resistance in ordinary lives. Nicole starts with Fijian resistance and how people from within the villages resisted colonial administration, especially objecting to the surveying of land and having to pay tax. He also examines the resistance of the people against their chiefs who, in some areas, were in compliance with the colonial administration. The majority of the resistance from within the villages was non-violent. This passive resistance included:

…grumbling about their chiefs, the transformation of the ancient luveniwai ritual into a subversive pastime by village youths, ongoing tax evasion, village absenteeism, the boycott of the registration of land titles, the manipulation of religious rivalries by villagers to evade communal obligations, and the use of education as a means to break free from the cycle of chiefly exaction, tax work, and agricultural labour (p. 128).

Each of these activities is discussed with explanations on how they were used, the effect they had on the village and the response of the colonial administration.

Details of the everyday resistance of the Indian indentured labourers on plantations are described, including physical and violent resistance as well as the more passive resistance. For example, Nicole describes how workers attacked some overseers and plantation managers when they were ill-treated to a breaking point. And how some labourers used evasion of work, absenteeism, desertion, sabotage and petitions as forms of passive resistance, or what Nicole has described as “weapons of the weak” (p. 159). The final chapter is a fascinating exploration of the everyday resistance by women. This is an area that was difficult for Nicole to research as there are no individual accounts recorded by either indigenous Fijian or Indian women. Instead Nicole intensively researched individual actions that the Colonial Secretary’s Office was notified about and through generalised reports where women, who required special attention, were discussed in a broad context. He provides discussions on women who resisted being chattels and under the control of men in a number of ways, including using European laws of divorce and leaving Fijian husbands for European men, until the laws were amended and women were imprisoned if they left their husbands and abandoned their duties, refused to marry, and did not fulfill marital conjugal obligations. Drawing on his research findings, Nicole has discussed each of these forms of resistance by both indigenous Fijian and Indian women.

This book is well written, coherent and has a logical flow that makes it an easy and pleasurable read. Nicole’s use of maps provides the reader with an understanding of the areas that he is describing and explaining. He has also included some interesting historical photos. It is a pleasure to read a history of Fiji that delves into areas that have been little researched and give a different perspective of colonial administration in Fiji. I highly recommend this book for all scholars of the Pacific Islands as an addition to their bookshelf.