

7

Piecing Together a History of Suva Prison

Nicholas Halter

Suva Prison has long been an imposing concrete landmark in the capital of Fiji – whereas once its walls and buildings symbolised modernity and the progress of the British colony in Fiji, today they represent the decay and dereliction of incarceration. Constructed to be the main prison in the colony, Suva Prison in 2020 is one of 15 ‘correction centres’ and serves as a receiving and remand centre. Despite its prominent position in the capital, little is known of the lives of its transient inhabitants. Not only have they been physically obscured behind the whitewashed coral walls that line Foster Road, they have also been lost within the colonial archive. What little remains tells a story of a racially divided Fiji under British colonial rule and haphazard efforts to regulate and control a dissident populace.

This chapter pieces together the archival remnants of Fiji’s colonial prison system to chart the development of the Suva prison from its establishment in the new capital in the 1880s until the 1960s. It considers the construction of prison buildings, the segregation and classification of prisoners, the system of punishment and discipline that was imposed and the reforms to prison legislation and operations. The 1960s was a significant decade for Fiji’s prisons, marked by the implementation of a new Fiji Prisons Act in 1966 that sought to address international standards for imprisonment and rehabilitation. It was also a decade when Suva Prison inmates prepared to move to a new facility at the same time

as the country prepared for independence from Britain in 1970. Most of Fiji's colonial prison records from the late nineteenth century onwards were stored at Suva Prison and destroyed in a fire during a prison riot in 1979. What remains is a varied collection of papers from the Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO files), Legislative Council minutes and Annual Colonial Reports to Britain containing correspondence, prisoner records and statistics. As a result, scholars have relied on the account of BM Sellers, superintendent of prisons in 1962, who published the only documented history of Fiji's prison service in the *Proceedings of the Fiji Society*.¹ Piecing together the archival remnants of Fiji's colonial prison system offers an understanding of the institutionalised and racialised colonial hierarchies and assumptions of the twentieth century.

Construction

The first documented prison in Fiji was established in the town of Levuka on Ovalau island in the 1860s. Many of the inmates were Fijians who refused to pay taxes to the self-proclaimed Tui Viti, Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau. He was a Bauan chief who had gained ascendancy during a time of colonial contact and commercial enterprise and had attempted to set up a formal government to control his territories, which were mostly confined to the eastern provinces and coastal areas of Fiji. Prior to the prison's establishment, Fijians who were alleged to have committed crimes were arrested and detained aboard visiting warships, and in some cases taken to foreign countries illegally and against their will, such as the well-publicised case of a Rewan man, Rō Veidovi, in the 1840s.² Levuka had the largest concentration of European residents in the late 1800s, and so it was chosen as the capital of the British colony and the site of the first colonial prison in Fiji in 1874 when the Deed of Cession was signed. The exact location of the prison is unclear – reports from the *Fiji Times* newspaper suggest the prison was surrounded by an 8-foot wooden fence and was situated across an open square opposite the wooden police station then known as 'Totoga'.³ Surviving colonial reports suggest the

1 BM Sellers, 'Development of Fiji prison service', *Proceedings of the Fiji Society 1955–1963* 6 (1962).

2 Antony Adler, 'The capture and curation of the Cannibal "Vendovi": Reality and representation of a Pacific frontier', *The Journal of Pacific History* 49, no. 3 (2014): 255–82, doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2014.914623.

3 Matilda Simmons, 'First police station', *Fiji Times*, 25 January 2020. 'Totoga' may have been a reference to the Tongan native police who worked there, but this name later changed to 'Totogo'.

prison was small, with only eight cells in 1894.⁴ The British established administrative centres around the country, which included approximately 20 lock-ups supervised by European police officers and district officials. They were usually located wherever a magistrate was. These lock-ups began as simple huts with reed fences and were gradually replaced with stone and crushed coral structures built by the inmates. One of these lock-ups on the mainland of Viti Levu at Namena (now called Naburenivalu Village) in Tailevu province likely held prisoners that could not be accommodated in Levuka. Like many other prisons in the British Empire, Namena kept unwelcome individuals at arm's length from the colonial centre. Interestingly, villagers have since reinterpreted this colonial legacy by claiming Namena village was chosen for a prison because of the might of their warriors who served as prison guards.⁵ Namena prison was closed in 1888.⁶

Prisons played an important part in maintaining British colonial rule. Not all chiefdoms had agreed to the Deed of Cession signed by Cakobau in 1874, and there were many disgruntled Fijians, particularly in the western districts of Viti Levu, that resisted British rule. Robert Nicole has documented indigenous resistance during the so-called 'Little War' of 1875 in the Colo region.⁷ As Nicole has shown, British forces were ill-equipped to fight a protracted war in the rugged highlands of the Colo region and, for a time, were unable to gain superiority in their colonial mission. However one successful tactic for pacifying the population was to imprison key leaders. By removing antagonistic individuals from their villages and placing them in urban prisons some distance away, the British found they could discourage rebellious activities in the rural areas. This trend continued throughout the twentieth century. Notorious Fijian leader Apolosi Nawai was jailed and later exiled to Rotuma in the early 1920s for his critical views of the Colonial Government, for example.

In 1882 the capital was shifted to Suva on the main island of Viti Levu to allow for further expansion of the town, and it quickly became a central hub in the British Pacific empire, and in the Pacific region generally. It is

4 Colony of Fiji, *Blue book of Fiji for 1894* (Suva: Government Printer, 1894), 199.

5 'Namena Tailevu – Noda Gauna', YouTube, 16 July 2010, youtu.be/9KeZfVGY8IY (site discontinued).

6 Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) F88.2241, CSO Secretariat Files, National Archives of Fiji (NAF).

7 Robert Nicole, *Disturbing history: Resistance in early colonial Fiji* (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2018).

not clear when the prison was first built, but it likely began as a series of huts behind a reed fence and was gradually replaced with coral rock buildings in the late nineteenth century.⁸ Both the prison and mental hospital were located close to one another on the outskirts of the town, along with the Lovonilase cemetery. As institutions of incarceration, it was important for both spaces to be situated away from the capital. The low-lying land around Walu Bay where the prison was constructed was once occupied by the *kai* Walu or fishermen according to Colman Wall's history of precolonial Suva.⁹ Other indigenous settlements were located on the ridge above Walu Bay, most notably the rocky outcrop known as Uluvatu, but were gradually displaced by colonial Australian planters who acquired land. The last major Fijian settlement in Suva, once located at the southern end of the peninsula near the present-day Fiji Museum, was relocated to Suvavou ('New Suva'), not far from the prison and mental hospital. One of the pragmatic justifications for moving prisoners, mental patients and indigenous people to the edge of Suva was the availability of land for gardening.¹⁰ Symbolically, the move kept these groups of people out of sight and out of mind, to be joined in the twentieth century by the town's rubbish dump.

According to a report by the National Trust of Fiji, the prison was initially called Nasēsē, derived from the Fijian word *sese* meaning 'wrong or foolish'. The people who went there were also called *na sese*.¹¹ Another explanation may be that the prison was originally located at Nasēsē in close proximity to the police compound at Nasova, before it was moved to Korovou sometime in the early 1880s. Nasova, like Totogo and Draiba, was one of a number of placenames that were transferred from Levuka to Suva during the shift of capital.

8 According to BM Sellers, 'I am told by old colonists that the gaol was composed of a collection of huts behind a reed fence and that the road stopped at the foot of Old Hospital Hill'. Sellers, 'Development of Fiji prison service', 46. Robert Nicole's chapter in this collection identifies Suva prison on a map of the town dated 1882.

9 Colman Wall, 'Historical notes on Suva', ed. Paul Geraghty, *Domodomo* 10, no. 2 (1996): 28–39.

10 Historian Jacqueline Leckie also noted it was considered beneficial for a hospital to have 'breeze'. Jacqueline Leckie, *Colonizing madness: Asylum and community in Fiji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvgs09bn.

11 Bart van Aller, *Suva gaol* (Suva: National Trust of Fiji, 2015). Other interpretations of *na sese* may exist. 'Sese' can also be translated as 'to wander' or 'to lose one's way'. Colman Wall claims the suburb of Nasēsē at the southern end of the peninsula was named for the waves breaking there.



Figure 7.1: ‘View of the jail and depot from the hospital’, n.d.

Source: P32.6.38 Fiji Museum.

Over the next 30 years, the Suva prison was gradually expanded and strengthened. Coral rock walls replaced reed fences (some of which are still visible from Foster Road in 2020) and by 1894 the prison was comprised of 23 cells and six wards.¹² A fixed execution chamber was constructed in July 1905, and between 1912 and 1913 a two-storey block containing 171 cells was constructed. This building was the first ferro-concrete building in Fiji and was proclaimed by British colonial reports as evidence of a modern and progressive colony. Subsequent correspondence suggests the prison was underfunded and overcrowded in the following decades.¹³ Electricity was introduced in the 1920s but there was no sewerage system so prisoners had to empty buckets from their cells on a daily basis. Other buildings were constructed by prison labour with bricks from the Fiji Brick Company under the direction of prison officer William Peter Marr. These included a prison hospital and officer’s quarters. Levuka prison

12 Colony of Fiji, *Blue book of Fiji for 1894*, 199.

13 Correspondence details that requests to update prison security and construct new buildings like a chapel were denied. There were detailed debates about how best to employ prisoners as labourers and the cost of food rationed for prisoners.

continued to operate throughout the twentieth century but Suva Prison grew to become the largest prison in the country and home to Fiji's most serious criminal cases. From 1900, all prisoners serving sentences greater than three months were sent to Suva, with numbers fluctuating between 300 and over 1,000 in any given year.



Figure 7.2: 'Suva Prison, 1946'.

Source: Bart van Aller, *Suva Gaol* (Suva: National Trust of Fiji, 2015).

There is little evidence available that gives insight into the daily lives of inmates in Suva Prison. A strict regimen was imposed that confined inmates to their cells with the exception of labour, meals, exercise and divine service. Prisoners were allowed to send and receive letters but visits were not permitted without permission or unless a prisoner was on death row. European tourists to Fiji at the beginning of the twentieth century came in increasing numbers to Suva and occasionally commented on the prison. Many of these visitors were curious about the building and its inmates, particularly the apparent lax system of supervision and discipline. Beatrice Grimshaw's well-publicised travelogue in 1907 was one of the most notable accounts of the time and she reacted with shock that prisoners

could roam in and out of the grounds as they pleased.¹⁴ Few travellers took a close look within the prison grounds and there is no evidence of dark tourism or a fascination with the inner workings of the prison, as there was with visitors to New Caledonia.¹⁵ Rather, most made observations from a safe distance, noting that prisoners worked in the farms, or in the case of Suva, cleaning the grounds of the cemetery. Their observations and praise of British efforts to discipline the Fijians conformed to a broader British colonial narrative in the Pacific that reinforced the civilised nature of British rule over purportedly ‘savage’ peoples.

Activities at Suva Prison have remained similar from its establishment until the early twenty-first century. Prisoners still attend to the cemetery as they did in the early 1900s, tending to plots and digging graves. They also provided labour for other government work, such as gardening on Government House grounds, repairing public buildings, working as boat crews or medical staff, and producing items such as mats, brushes, printing and ‘tinsmithy’.¹⁶ By the 1940s the prison had been expanded to accommodate a saw mill, taro farm, tailors and canvas workers, blacksmith and tinsmith, sanitary services and a bakery. The prison bakery was ‘one of the leading bakeries in the Colony, baking an average of nearly 2000 pounds of bread per day’. Several requests for more funds and equipment were recorded between the 1930s and 50s, with 11 bakers producing hand-made bread for most of the Suva area, including all government departments, schools and the hospital.¹⁷

Segregation

Within Suva Prison, colonial authorities reinforced the racial division of Fijians, Indians and Europeans with a system of classifications for both inmates and prison staff. This replicated policies outside the prison that provided different rules for different sections of society from the beginning of British colonial rule until the 1960s: Indian indentured labourers

14 Beatrice Grimshaw, *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1907).

15 Nicholas Halter, “Cannibals and convicts”: Australian travel writing about New Caledonia’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, ed. JZ Wilson, S Hodgkinson, J Piché and K Walby (New York: Springer Nature 2017), 867–84, doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56135-0_41.

16 The latter were introduced in 1911. *Colonial Report – Annual Fiji, 1911*, No. 727 (London: H.M.S.O., 1912).

17 Gaol bakery oven Suva, 1937–1953, CSO F121/39/1, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF. The bakery was eventually transferred to Naboro prison in the 1970s where it continues to operate today.

were governed by Indian Labour Ordinances while Fijians obeyed Fijian Native Regulations. An ordinance ‘for the better regulation of prisons’, more commonly known as the Prisons Ordinance 1884, established strict rules and procedures underpinned by racial assumptions and prejudices. It appointed a superintendent of prisons to oversee operations of all the prisons of Fiji: usually a European man residing in Suva.¹⁸ Beneath him were jailers, a European man for each prison, who was tasked with living in the compound and maintaining control of the inmates. Jailers were also expected to keep 11 books documenting details such as prison incidents, punishments, rations and visitors. Later, around 1917, another position, the inspector general of prisons, was created. This was another European position modelled after British prison reforms of the 1830s, which appointed inspectors to ensure prisons were uniform and acceptable.¹⁹ Details of the men who ran the prisons and the records they kept are either scattered in the archives or missing, which is surprising considering their influence on the conduct and development of Fiji’s prisons. These three men oversaw a number of warders who were responsible for day-to-day operations in the prisons, the majority of whom were Fijian men.

Following World War II, population growth in the colony forced changes to the way prisons were operated and staffed. To accommodate its size and functions, Suva Prison was staffed by two European overseers, one European clerk, one non-European clerk, an Indian medical practitioner, 29 male warders and two female warders, according to 1944 records.²⁰ Little is known about these prison officers – how they were chosen, and how they related with one another and the inmates. There was a ranking system among the warders, and different uniforms were supplied for Fijians (sulus) and Indians (turbans). A request in 1949 by Fijian warders for sandals and coats similar to the ones policemen were given suggests that prison staff were not regarded as highly by Europeans as the famed Fijian ‘native’ policeman, a figure much publicised abroad for their distinctive uniforms.²¹ Unlike the police forces, prison staff did not receive any formal training until the 1980s.

18 According to CSO files, Mr Halkett was the superintendent of prisons in 1884. Leckie, *Colonizing madness*, 1.

19 A British Act of 1835 authorised inspectors in prisons. Eric Stockdale, ‘A short history of prison inspection in England’, *The British Journal of Criminology* 23, no. 3 (1983): 209–28, doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjc.a047376. The first *Annual Colonial Report* on Fiji to mention this post was 1917.

20 Prison department annual report, CSO F121/4/2, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

21 Prison warders uniforms, 1949, CSO F121/30, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

Rules

The ways in which Fiji colonial officials classified prisoners was inconsistent and changed over time. Eric Stockdale's history of prison reforms in Britain in the 1800s argues that 'classification' became the preferred idea to 'separation'²² and that this was likely applied to the colonies too. In practice, classifications of prisoners according to crimes and ethnicity had direct implications for their living conditions. The 'Prison Rules' within Fiji's 1884 Prisons Ordinance was the first official document that established four classes of prisoners:

Prisoners shall be classified as follows:-

First class viz. – Prisoners sentenced to penal servitude or imprisonment with hard labour.

Second class viz. – Prisoners under sentence of imprisonment only.

Third class viz. – Prisoners awaiting trial or under examination.

Fourth class viz. – Debtors comprising persons confined for contempt or upon civil process of for want of sureties to keep the peace.²³

All classes except first class were allowed privileges such as wearing their own clothes, buying products in the prison, sending and receiving letters more regularly, and not being forced to shave. Third class prisoners were separated from the main population and permitted access to a legal adviser. The *Blue Books* produced by the Fiji colony provided general statistics of the prisoners' sentences. One example from the 1894 *Blue Book* is typical, when Suva Prison hosted 519 prisoners, of which 457 were serving penal servitude (presumably class 1), 62 were there 'for safe custody until trial' (presumably class 3) and none were registered for debt (class 4).²⁴ These *Blue Books* show that Fiji's prison population varied erratically from 300 to 1,300 between the 1880s and 1920s (on average less than half a per cent of the population when compared to census data). Discernible trends in these statistics are obscured by the absences, inconsistencies and probable inaccuracies within colonial reports.

22 Stockdale, 'A short history of prison inspection in England', 214.

23 'Prison rules' in An Ordinance for the Better Regulation of Prisons, No. 12 (14 November 1884), 51.

24 Colony of Fiji, *Blue book of Fiji for 1894*, 198.

Official records of the ethnicity of inmates varied as categories and classifications changed over time. Annual colonial reports published statistics of crimes committed and prisoners interred, usually labelled 'natives' or 'Indians' in the nineteenth century. This evolved as annual reports of the early twentieth century categorised inmates as European, Fijian, Indian and Polynesian, but in some cases other labels such as half-castes, Rotumans, Chinese, Samoans and 'others' were used in prison documents and national censuses. Criminal statistics provide a clearer picture of ethnicity because they followed a more standardised report format in the annual reports, with the majority of cases reported as Indian offences. In 1900 for example, 8,799 offences were reported: 708 were offences against the person, 387 were larceny, 148 were offences against property and 7,556 were 'principally breaches of the Labour Ordinances by Indian Immigrants'.²⁵ Occasionally the number of breaches of Native Fijian Regulations was reported, but this was a small number compared to Indian Labour Ordinance cases. The over-representation of Indians in Fiji's prisons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I argue, reflected dissatisfaction with British colonial policies at the time. Although some Indians did commit serious crimes, there were also those who were subjected unfairly to harsh penal regulations and punishments for minor transgressions because they upset colonial officials, resisted colonial regulations or agitated for greater political recognition. Overseen by iTaukei warders and supervised by European officials, Indian prisoners were likely to be misunderstood or mistreated by the justice system. Brij Lal has shown that British colonial officials often misinterpreted statistics and drew erroneous conclusions based on racialised assumptions. His study of incidents of suicide among Indian indentured labourers pointed to a misconception that Indians were predisposed to crimes of passion and violence because of the limited number of Indian women available.²⁶

Europeans were a small minority in the prisons, and the standards for Europeans were very different to those for indigenous peoples, as they were informed by racial prejudices. In 1963 LJ Riddell petitioned to be transferred to Australia to be closer to his family. He wrote, 'I am continually referred to by the other prisoners as being un-natural

25 *Colonial Report – Annual Fiji, 1900*, No. 727 (London: H.M.S.O., 1901), 16.

26 Brij V Lal, 'Veil of dishonour: Sexual jealousy and suicide on Fiji plantations', *The Journal of Pacific History* 20, no. 3 (1985): 135–55, doi.org/10.1080/00223348508572516.

European'.²⁷ In 1961 a Suva inmate Thomas C Norman petitioned to be deported to his home in England because he claimed 'the conditions here are for a native not European'. He claimed:

My work is in the cemetery, where I am a curiosity [sic] piece, being the only white man, to tourists etc. and this adds to my humiliation of being a prisoner.

Norman was one of the few prisoners who described the relationships within the prison, noting:

I receive the same treatment as a native, and they are quick to take advantage of that and that is not good as there is already enough trouble with racial prejudice here, and the possibility is that the boys will try to treat Europeans outside the same.

The Colonial Secretary's Office regarded his claims as exaggerated and noted that there were also 14 Part-Europeans in the prison, and that he received a full European diet as well as 'the usual European table appointments'.²⁸ Europeans received more quantities of food and more expensive items like potatoes compared to other inmates. When costs were high, fresh meat was replaced with tinned meat, and bread with biscuits.²⁹

Suva Prison remained an overwhelmingly masculine domain, although there were some women imprisoned there. According to annual reports of the country's prisons (from which women were sometimes omitted entirely), the number of women in prisons ranged between zero and 10 until the 1960s, compared to a general prison population that ranged between 300 and 1,300. Initially female prisoners were housed in a female section of Suva Prison, according to Sellers, with a matron assigned to supervise and keep the females apart from the males.³⁰ They were not usually mentioned in great detail and, when mentioned, were not considered a threat: for example, a report of a prisoner charged with larceny in the 1960s described her as 'just a domestic'.³¹ Levuka Prison was converted in 1964 for women prisoners. However, in 1976 it was converted to a male prison and all female prisoners were moved to Suva, where a separate dormitory was constructed.

27 CSO F121/5/41, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

28 CSO F121/5/25, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

29 CSO Minute Paper No. 2619/1899, Department of Prisons, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

30 Sellers, 'Development of Fiji prison service'.

31 CSO F121/31/17, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

The age of offenders was also not reported in official statistics, though it was likely recorded in individual prisoner files. Juvenile offenders under the age of 16 years were allegedly housed at Suva Prison from 1925, but it is not clear how they were dealt with prior.³² There were a series of experiments in moving juveniles to alternate locations such as Makuluva Island (in 1929), 9 miles (in 1938) and Naboro (in 1965), until a formal complex for young offenders between 16 and 19 years of age was constructed in Nasinu in 1971.

Punishment

The operation of prisons in Fiji was modelled after British practices of incarceration, like many other colonial prisons in the empire, and involved a highly regulated system of rules and punishments to enforce discipline. Initial reports in 1880 noted that there was little crime in the colony, but it was feared contact with Europeans would ‘wear away their respect for authority’.³³ Thus prisons were considered an important institution for teaching the indigenous population about British justice and values. These early experiments in incarceration typically ignored precolonial forms of maintaining law and order in Fijian society.

Missionaries were some of the first to document how iTaukei communities enforced disciplinary measures before colonial contact. In 1860, Thomas Williams and James Calvert published a detailed description of punishments.³⁴ Chiefs usually determined the type and severity of punishment, which could include fines, the seizure of property (land or a canoe), the destruction of property (the burning of a house or plantation), physical harm (the loss of a finger, ear or nose), beatings (by hand, or with clubs or stones), or death (by clubbing, shooting or strangulation). Williams and Calvert’s account should be read within a broader context of colonial mission reports that demonised Melanesians as ‘savage’ by referring extreme cases, such as strangulation or cannibalism. The term *buturaki* has been used more recently with reference to domestic violence to suggest a traditional culture of beating, but it is not clear whether

32 Jone Luvenitoga, ‘Fiji correctional service to celebrate 114 years of service’, *Mailife*, 22 October 2018.

33 *Colonial Report – Annual Fiji, 1880* (London: H.M.S.O., 1883). Of the 891 reported cases, 194 were for ‘common larceny’ and 104 for ‘drunkenness’.

34 Thomas Williams and James Calvert, *Fiji and the Fijians* (New York: Alexander Heylin, 1860), 22–25.

this was a widespread practice in precolonial times. Imprisonment was not common – captives of war (*bokola*) were often killed and eaten or ceremonially buried beneath house foundations (*yavu*) soon after their capture. Williams and Calvert reported instances when women could be seized and taken to another village as punishment, or when individuals could be tied up for short periods of time (to suffer from physical pain and exposure to the elements).

The nature of traditional Fijian society suggests that the crimes of one individual would likely have required a response from the village to which he/she belonged. Ceremonies of reciprocity and exchange were likely specific to particular regions within the Fiji Islands. Mary Rokonadravu gives an example from the province of Rewa of *Keteniyalewa* ('the woman's womb') to describe the use of land to ensure the protection of women in marriages.³⁵ In 1908 British colonial administrator Basil Thompson described a process in which land was seized as punishment for adultery:

As soon as the offence became known, the friends of the injured person planted reeds (*sau*) on the land of the offender, or of his family as a token of forfeiture. Reeds so planted were called 'ai-wau-tu-i-vuni-vudi' (the club set in the banana patch). The family of the offender knew that they must either abandon the land or fight for it (which they seldom did). When by the lapse of time, the offence was forgotten, the land could be redeemed.³⁶

Williams and Calvert recorded five types of *soro* or atonement that were used throughout Fiji, with a whale's tooth, a reed, a spear, a basket of earth or ashes.³⁷

In stark contrast to traditional forms of punishment, the colonial justice system identified and removed individuals from communities for punishment or imprisonment. This was a successful method for pacifying the population and isolating dissenting individuals from their communal settings. For example, in 1894 the annual report mentioned an intertribal

35 Mary Rokonadravu, 'Open letter to Mr. Kris Prasad (Fiji)', *Medium*, 30 October 2019.

36 Basil Thompson, *The Fijians: A study of the decay of custom* (London: William Heinemann, 1908), 373.

37 *Ibid.*, 24. Five kinds of *soro*: with a whale's tooth (*tabua*), with a reed (*mata ni gasau*), with a spear (*mata nimoto*), with a basket of earth (*kau vanua*) and with ashes (*bisi dravu*).

disturbance on Vanua Levu that left 10 ‘natives’ dead after a skirmish with the government party. The leaders were tried in Suva, with two being executed and the rest imprisoned.³⁸

European prisons were initially a holding place for the transfer of prisoners but sometime in the late eighteenth century prisons became a form of punishment. French philosopher Michel Foucault theorised that the ‘technology of discipline’ within the prison was an additional punishment to incarceration. Responding to the excessive punishments of public torture by European sovereigns, reformists called for a more generalised and regulated form of punishment from the state. What emerged was a system of rules and regulations that observed, classified and controlled bodies within institutions.³⁹

In Fiji, discipline was maintained with a system of ‘corporal punishments’ that were formalised by the Prisons Ordinance. They resembled similar punishments in other British colonies like Papua New Guinea and included flogging, shot-drill and the death penalty. Floggings were a common punishment at the turn of the century – the Prisons Ordinance permitted 100 lashes with a cat-o-nine tails, with 39 allowed at one time. In an 1888 case, a man convicted of aggravated assault on his wife was sentenced to 20 lashes, which were administered in prison.⁴⁰ Floggings continued as late as the 1960s, with a report of ‘6 strokes’ given to one man for ‘defilement of a girl’ in 1960, though with less frequency.⁴¹ Shot-drill, which involved carrying heavy weights across an open ground, was used as an alternative punishment for breaching prison rules. The Prisons Ordinance allowed no more than two hours per day. Other forms of punishment included solitary confinement, standing for long periods, leg irons and a reduced diet.⁴²

The ‘technology of discipline’ in Fiji was fine-tuned in the 1910s as the colony attempted to standardise the prisons system. When the new ‘modern’ Suva Prison compound was constructed in 1913, the annual report also announced improvements to the ‘discipline of prisons’ and ‘separate confinement’. This included abolishing shot-drill as a punishment and replacing it with a ‘system of marks for good behaviour’.⁴³

38 *Colonial Report – Annual Fiji, 1894* (London: H.M.S.O., 1895).

39 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (New York: Pantheon Books 1977).

40 CSO 88.2241, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

41 CSO F121/31/12, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

42 768 punishments were recorded in the 1894 *Blue book* for a prison population of 519.

43 *Colonial Report – Annual Fiji, 1913* (London: H.M.S.O., 1914).

A new position above the superintendent of prisons, called the inspector general of prisons, was also created sometime in this decade. Proforma reports on individual prisoners gradually became more standardised, listing a prisoner's conviction, their mental and physical condition, any particular incidents they had been involved in in the prison, and ranked categories of behaviour, work, relationship with prison officers and outlook (see Table 7.1). This is further evidence of the system of classification imposed by the 'technology of discipline'.

Table 7.1: 'Report on a Prisoner Under Regulation 129 of the Prisons Regulations, 1963'.

Official Comments					
Behaviour	Bad	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Work	Bad	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Relationship with prison officers	Antagonistic	Sullen	Fairly Co-operative	Co-operative but reserved	Good
Outlook	Unregenerate	Lethargic	Confused –difficult to assess	Accepts the justice of his punishment	Remorseful –likely to reform

Source: Annual prisoner reports 1961–1965, F121/31/5, CSO Secretariat Files, National Archives of Fiji (NAF).

The most serious case of punishment was the death penalty, which existed in Fiji from 1899 to 1964. At Suva Prison the first hanging occurred on 4 April 1899 at a temporary gallows set up on the hill behind the wall before a fixed chamber was built in 1905.⁴⁴ Great care was taken by the inspector general of prisons to ensure the gallows were 'of modern construction' and working order – he reported in 1917 an average of six prisoners per year had been hanged in the last 10 years.⁴⁵ That same year colonial officials debated the length of rope required to ensure death. A 'table of drops' used in English prisons specified the length of rope needed according to prisoner's weight, and Fiji officials suggested 'a longer drop for the Indians who are lighter than Europeans'.⁴⁶ Such a macabre discussion may have been due to failed executions in the past, as was the case of Antonio Franks who survived a hanging in Levuka in 1872.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Sellers, 'Development of Fiji prison service'.

⁴⁵ Minute by Inspector General of Prisons to Colonial Secretary, 7 July 1917, Colonial Office (CO), CO83 No.41409, Public Record Office, London.

⁴⁶ Executions at Suva, 10 July 1917, CO83 No.41409, Public Record Office, London; Table of Drops, 18 September 1917, CO83 No.46201, Public Record Office, London.

⁴⁷ Anurag Subramani, 'The execution of Antonio Franks, Part 1 and 2', *The Fiji Times*, 17 and 24 November 2019.

Executions were carefully controlled and orchestrated events. Attended by an executioner, religious minister and prison officers, the *Fiji Times* reported:

Condemned criminals were told the infamous instruction to take their last look at Beqa Island, known in the iTaukei language as *Rai ki Beqa* before they were led to the gallows, at the back of Suva's Korovou Prison.⁴⁸

Executions were reported to have occurred at night. Prisoners sentenced to death waited in a separate 'condemned cell compound'. It is not specified why this was the practice, but comparison with execution practices in Papuan prisons suggests the death penalty was regarded as a sensitive matter and British colonial officials were reluctant to make corporal punishment public for fear of retribution.⁴⁹ Despite such care being taken to orchestrate the death penalty, deaths in custody were inconsistently recorded in official records. Inquiries were required by law upon a death in custody, but these records cannot be found today. Some annual reports did not distinguish between deaths in custody and executions, or whether deaths in custody were by natural causes or suicide. When executions were recorded, numbers ranged between zero and 10, or an average of three per year.

Threats

Apart from those prisoners who were tasked with public works in Suva town, few residents would have known about the inner workings of the prison or its inmates. As the largest prison in Fiji for much of the twentieth century, it was home to some of Fiji's most serious criminals and was likely viewed by the public as an important institution for ensuring dangerous threats were safely behind bars. Newspapers regularly reported criminal cases, but did not usually report on the perpetrators after they were sentenced. Instead, prisons only appeared in the news when there was a riot or an escape. Riots were rare in Suva Prison until severe overcrowding created favourable conditions for disruption in the 1960s onwards. Escapes occurred with greater frequency, particularly in

48 John Mitchell, '150th anniversary: Fiji's death penalty', *The Fiji Times*, 30 October 2019.

49 Adam Reed, *Papua New Guinea's last place: Experiences of constraint in a postcolonial prison* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 33.

the early days of Suva Prison when it was still in construction, much to the fascination of newspapers and the public. Punishment for escape could be up to five years imprisonment according to the Prisons Ordinance, but this did not deter three escapees in 1892, four in 1893 and four in 1894.⁵⁰ Later, in a 1944 prison department annual report, seven escapes were reported but only one was from Suva.⁵¹ In contrast to official reports of statistics, the *Fiji Times* provided more exciting tales of escape for its readers. In one curious case, a Samoan traveller called Pila Wilkes was sentenced to six months imprisonment in 1936 for illegally landing in Fiji as a crew member aboard the *Aorangi*. It was discovered that he had escaped similar charges in Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and soon after, he managed to escape from Fiji.⁵² Such cases show that Pacific Islanders were not static or passive, and that colonial attempts to control and restrict the indigenous population were not always successful.

Other forms of resistance were likely within prison compounds in Fiji but were either underreported or the documents have since been lost. One surviving file referred to a 'sit down strike' of prisoners in relation to the transfer of iTaukei prison staff in 1965.⁵³ In an earlier case in 1956 a man sentenced to 12 months imprisonment for indecent assault began a hunger strike and refused medical treatment for six days.⁵⁴ Other minor forms of resistance can be found in the letters of inmates and their families who would write letters appealing to the prison or the courts.

Though Suva Prison did contain some prisoners who had committed serious crimes, these were a small minority compared to the rest of the prison population. Not all records distinguished between those serving long sentences and those in remand but when they did, the statistics reveal that many of Suva Prison's inmates were temporary. Of the 457 prisoners sentenced to penal servitude at Suva Prison in 1894, 275 were serving sentences less three months, 177 less than one year, 47 less than five years and only 18 over five years.⁵⁵ Those prisoners serving short sentences at Suva Prison committed minor crimes such as refusal to pay fines and taxes, or disobedience of laws designed to restrict the indigenous population.

50 Colony of Fiji, *Blue book of Fiji for 1894*, 198.

51 Prison department annual report 1944, CSO F121/4/2, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

52 *The Fiji Times*, 6 July 1936.

53 Epeli Vuase – petition against transfer of prison staff, 1965, CSO F121/5/60, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

54 Prisoner Thomas Lancaster Norman Davis, CSO F121/35, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

55 Colony of Fiji, *Blue book of Fiji for 1894*, 198.

Until the 1940s, there was strict control of non-European populations in Suva town. Fijians required a licence to buy or drink alcohol (prescribed by the 1892 ordinance ‘to regulate the supply of spirituous liquor to natives and others’), and the *Fiji Times* recorded incidents of fines being given for breaking curfew or dancing without a licence.⁵⁶ In Suva town, the most common arrests were for drunkenness, assault and burglary, with reports of Fijian and Indian gangs in the urban centre.⁵⁷ According to the minutes of one meeting with the colonial secretary in 1961, the increase in iTaukei inmates was attributed to ‘Provincial Tax Defaulters’ who discovered a loophole in the Fijian Affairs Regulations by which they could cancel their tax obligations with a stay in prison.⁵⁸ In this specific case, prison was not necessarily a deterrent. Contrary to European notions of punishment and incarceration, prisoners in Fiji were often mobile and transient. Adam Reed observed a similar trend in Papua New Guinea’s prisons; inmates there referred to it as a ‘bus stop’ because of the constant movement of inmates in and out of the prison.⁵⁹

Reforms

For the most part, Suva Prison and the incarceration system in Fiji generally remained largely unchanged for the first half of the twentieth century. A major shift was prompted in 1955 when the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners was adopted. It specified rules regarding work, recreation and education for prisoners, and alternative proposals for forestry work, stamp collecting and trade training were considered by Fiji officials.⁶⁰ A visiting committee visited Suva Prison in 1961 and noted significant overcrowding.⁶¹ In 1961 the governor reported a 15 per cent rise in the prison population per annum, and an increasing proportion of crimes of violence (‘approximately

56 In one case in 1936 a Fijian, Samuela Naisoro, was fined £2 for conducting a native dance without a licence inside a building at midnight. *Fiji Times*, 21 July 1936.

57 Minutes of a meeting with Colonial Secretary, 13 March 1961, CSO F121/30 Naboro prison complex, 1960–1965, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

58 Minutes of a meeting with Colonial Secretary, 13 March 1961, CSO F121/30 Naboro prison complex, 1960–1965, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

59 Reed, *Papua New Guinea’s last place*, 77.

60 Several proposals for work details were considered in response to the UN regulations. Prison labour and employment, 1955–1957, CSO F121/32, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

61 Gaol Visiting Committee Suva Reports 1961, CSO F121/1/1, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

half') across the country.⁶² The composition of the prisoners had also changed – the majority of inmates were iTaukei, reflecting the economic disparity between indigenous Fijians and the growing Indian population. Officials were also conscious of external scrutiny and complaints about the treatment of prisoners. The superintendent of prisons suggested to the colonial secretary that Hindu priests be provided because he was worried the prison staff would be accused of trying to convert Indian inmates to Christianity by only providing a Methodist service.⁶³ The outcome of the UN standard was the development of Fiji's first Prisons Act in 1966. It formally established a Fiji Prisons Service headed by a controller, with new clauses regarding female prisoners, and revisions to prison rules and punishments. The new Act represented a shift in focus towards reform and rehabilitation in the prison system.

Concerns about the rehabilitation of prisoners and overcrowding that decade, combined with a prison riot in 1963, contributed to pressure to establish a new prison at Naboro, 18 kilometres west of Suva. Naboro was initially proposed in 1961 as an experimental 'corrective training centre' where youth with short sentences could be sent for a six-month stay to 'shock' them.⁶⁴ The Naboro Prison Farm was completed on 22 July 1965 with capacity for 96 inmates. It was later expanded to include a medium security facility in 1968 and a maximum security facility in 1972. It is now the largest prison facility in Fiji, with a current capacity of 342.

Since Fiji's Independence in 1970, the country's prisons have come under closer scrutiny as the government has worked on decolonising its institutions and meeting international standards for imprisonment and rehabilitation. There is a lack of history of Fiji's prisons, as admitted by Vijay Naidu, Mahendra Reddy and Steven Ratuva in their 2009 report on Fiji prison reforms.⁶⁵ According to their report, Fiji's Independence in 1970 marked a shift from the colonial days of 'containment' to 'correction', and was followed by several government inquiries – the Grant Report (1974), a Royal Commission (1975), the Bale Report (1980) and the Buadromo Report (1994) – that attempted to address concerns about the

62 Letter from Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 March 1961, CSO F121/29 Prisons, rural – expansion of, 1960–1961, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

63 Visits by Hindu priests to Suva gaol, 1956, CSO F121/33/1, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

64 Minutes of a meeting with Colonial Secretary, 13 March 1961, CSO F121/30 Naboro prison complex, 1960–1965, CSO Secretariat Files, NAF.

65 Vijay Naidu, Mahendra Reddy and Steven Ratuva, *Fiji prison reforms: From containment to correction and beyond* (Suva: Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy, 2009).

corrections system. Isolated incidents within prisons have also prompted government action, such as a 1979 Suva Prison riot, which resulted in the establishment of a staff training centre adjacent to the prison in 1981 and a training college at Naboro in 1983. Significant legal reform was not made until 2006 when a Prisons and Corrections Act replaced the Prisons Act of 1966 after a review by the UN Development Programme and Fiji Law Reform Commission.⁶⁶

Today there are 15 prisons in Fiji, the largest being the facility at Naboro that has a minimum, medium and maximum security centre and a prerelease centre. Suva and Lautoka each have a remand centre and a women's correction centre. There are also prisons in Nasinu, Levuka, Labasa, Ba and Taveuni.⁶⁷ Due to disrepair, the central building of the Suva Prison complex has been empty since 1998. Consultations with the National Trust of Fiji to protect the heritage building were unable to prevent its demolition in late 2019.⁶⁸ Opposite this site on Foster Road there is another contemporary building, the Tagimoucia Art Gallery. Since 2008, prisoners have promoted their products there as part of the 'Yellow Ribbon' rehabilitation program introduced by Iowane Naivalurua, then commissioner of prisons and correctional services, and supported by local Suva volunteers such as Jane Ricketts, a retired educator who has been teaching art to prisoners for over a decade. A creative writing course by Mary Daya in 2008 highlighted the experiences of Suva's prisoners in their own words and was published as an anthology titled *Shedding Silences*.⁶⁹ These unique examples of creative expression and rehabilitation would not be possible without the quiet dedication of many volunteers who regularly visit the prison to provide support, training and inspiration to those behind the walls, and they highlight the vast potential of those prisoners who are given a second chance.

66 Shailin Gonelevu, 'From containment to correction and reformation: Exploring punishment and reform in the disciplinary system of Fiji Women's Prison' (master's thesis, University of the South Pacific, 2015).

67 '15 Corrections Centres', Fiji Corrections Service (2017), www.corrections.gov.fj/institutions (accessed 24 March 2022).

68 van Aller, *Suva Gaol*.

69 Mary Daya, ed., *Shedding silences: An anthology of writing from Fiji prisons* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2008).

This text is taken from *Suva Stories: A History of the Capital of Fiji*,
edited by Nicholas Halter, published 2022, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/SS.2022.07