EXHIBITIONS

*World War I, Fiji and Ratu Sukuna: an exhibition*. Fiji Museum, Suva, Fiji. 13 November 2014 – 31 March 2015. Curated by Larry Thomas.

The 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I received wide coverage in Fiji, with special features on Fiji’s involvement in the war in the newspapers, in magazines *Niuwave* and *Mailife* and in posts on popular blogs Fijivillage and Fijilive*.* Thehighlight of the commemorations in Fiji in 2014 was the opening of a four-month exhibition of World War I memorabilia, visual recordings, medals, family photographs, archival documents and items from 1914–18 at the Fiji Museum. In opening the exhibition, the Fijian president, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, noted Fiji’s role was small, with a Fiji Labour Corps comprised of iTaukei (Indigenous) men, who performed non-combatant roles, along with 357 European or part-European soldiers who fought, with over 100 killed. Ratu Epeli added that although Fiji was a small island colony caught up in a global war, the exhibition was important to ‘keep these memories alive because we owe it to the millions of men and women who gave their lives’. The exhibition was a joint initiative of the Fiji Museum, the National Archives of Fiji and the French Embassy. At the opening, the French ambassador to Fiji, Giles Montagnier, declared the importance of remembering the service of Ratu Sukuna, recipient of the Croix de Guerre (Cross of War), and commemorating the First World War, ‘in which Fijian men also fought and died in the fight for freedom despite not being directly involved as a country’. The exhibition achieved both these aims of commemorating the war service of Fijians and acknowledging Ratu Sukuna, but fascination with material objects, old ‘stuff’ and photographs of recognisable ancestors, both iTaukei and European, was the main attraction, judged by gasps and joyful recognition on the opening night and at subsequent viewings. The exhibition was well attended throughout its run and received regular media attention. The curator, Fijian filmmaker and playwright Larry Thomas, expressed hope that the exhibition would ignite interest from those whose family members had participated in the war. It is hard to judge the level of public interest, but *Fiji Times* reporter Earnest Healey noted that after publishing a double-page feature on Fiji in World War I, he had been inundated with old photographs and stories from relatives of the soldiers who took part in the campaign.

The Fiji Museum exhibition was spread over several spaces, arranged in conventional displays in glass cases. It was well labelled and covered a wide range of Fijian involvement, including the labour corps, nursing, service on the front, and acknowledgement of the Fijians who also entered the war through the New Zealand Maori Battalion. Emphasising the personal face of the exhibition, amateur historian Michael Thoms provided materials from his own considerable historical collection on Fiji’s history, featuring photographs and documents of his own family’s involvement in the war. A highlight of the exhibition was a large wooden hotel bar, several metres in length, recovered fortuitously from a London hotel, on which soldiers from Fiji had carved their names while out on the town on leave in 1914–18. This museum object made the exhibition come alive for many through the materialised action of carving of a name – far more than the formal framed photographs of servicemen, medals and certificates.

The exhibition was partially focussed on Ratu Lala Sukuna: his role fighting in the French Foreign Legion, his return to Fiji when he helped organise the war effort and his subsequent return to France, where he worked in the labour corps in Marseilles and elsewhere. Sukuna’s role in the war was a focus in the three-day lecture series jointly hosted by the French embassy and the history discipline of the University of the South Pacific after the exhibition closed in March 2015. Attesting to the popular interest in World War I, the evening lecture series on the USP campus was exceptionally well attended by hundreds from the general public and the diplomatic corps, and by school children and USP students. The new French ambassador, Michel Djokovic, noted the success of the lecture series and indicated how much the French value memories of the war. Demonstrating this commitment, the French embassy had flown in French historians of the war, Sylvette Boubin-Boyer and Helene Gioran from New Caledonia, as well as the author of the first monograph on Fijians in World War I, Christine Liavaʻa from New Zealand. They were joined by local speakers, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi on Ratu Sukuna, Max Quanchi on memorialisation of the war across the Pacific, and Mike Thoms on his family connections to the war. The speakers presented a huge quantity of visual material, including old family photographs, war records, official war photography, medals and personal letters, and the lecture series became a visual history of ordinary involvement in war as much as a series of solid arguments for greater acknowledgement of the Pacific’s role in the Great War. The response from the audience was critical, appreciative and sustained, with questions being asked about many specific facts as well as the veracity of broader historiographical approaches taken by the speakers. The French embassy, based on the success of the three evenings, has embarked on a publication based on the papers in the lecture series.

A four-year project in France looking at the role of the South Pacific in World War I declared that ‘figures, signs, symbols and representations of the commitment of the South Pacific in the conflict are often overlooked, scattered or lost in the midst of other implications, other consequences, other signs’. The success of the Fiji Museum’s World War I exhibition and the subsequent public lecture series suggests this will not happen in Fiji.

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