

## *Cartooning History: Lai's Fiji and the Misadventures of a Scrawny Black Cat*

Sudesh Mishra

The modern political cartoon brings into convergence two types of pictorial art. It fuses the cartoon art of the mid-nineteenth century, which originally referred to a “preparatory design for a large drawing or painting” (Coupe 1969, 84), with that of portrait caricature, which developed in the late sixteenth century. Portrait caricature was turned into a significant art form by Annibale Carracci, who saw in the deformation of likeness a more accurate rendition of personality (Kris and Gombrich 1938, 320). The cartoonists who drew for the London-based *Punch* in the 1840s, such as John Leech and John Tenniel, employed the raw, sketchy strokes of the cartoon to create deformed renditions of real people through line exaggeration and distortion. In *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Ernst Gombrich argued that cartoon caricatures are based fundamentally on the noncoincidence of likeness and equivalence. The point is not to capture likenesses but rather equivalences so that we begin “to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality” (Gombrich 1960, 276). Image does not ape reality or reality image; rather, image invites us to respond to reality *as if* it were an image and image *as if* it were reality. A structure of disjunction, of dissimilarity, is signaled by “as if,” which, paradoxically, also signals a conjunction, a sudden equivalence of unlikely terms, contributing to a startling sense of recognition. The art of the political cartoon thrives on this fundamental distinction between similitudes and equivalences.

The basis of the political cartoon is graphic irony that distills editorial opinion into a minimal unit of expression, exemplified by the single panel, with the aim of exerting maximum influence on the public imagination. The exemplary case is that of Thomas Nast, credited with bringing down the corrupt “Boss” Tweed ring that controlled New York City in the

1860s. Symbolic analogies between public personalities and animals, fruit, and inanimate objects are a feature of the cartoon's efficacy. They work to, as Donald Dewey suggested, simplify "polemics through appeal to a higher order" predicated on profound cultural assumptions (2007, 11). Nast, for instance, represented Tweed and his cohorts as vultures nesting on a crag littered with the remains of justice and liberty, waiting for the political storm to blow over before resuming their predatory ways (Dewey 2007, 201). The savage analogy is intended, as Steven Ratuva pointed out in another context, to make the cartoon itself "a site of power" by erasing the distinction between the medium and the message (2001, 123). Gombrich, for his part, cited the example of Charles Philippon, who notoriously transformed an image of the king of France into a pear or French *poire*, meaning "fathead" (Gombrich 1960, 276–277).

Such analogies are, of course, not always caustic or derogatory. Henri Guignon's wartime cartoon of Winston Churchill as a bulldog obviously pays homage to his iron resolve in the face of a momentous crisis. The political cartoon is, by its very nature, context-dependent. Robert Phiddian and Haydon Manning are correct in describing it as "a parochial art" in that audience response has to take cognizance of localized politics and insider knowledge (2013, 7). Thomas Kemnitz made the same point when he observed that "political cartoons are specific: they depend on the viewer's recognition of the characters, subjects, and events depicted" (1973, 83). Thinking in a similar vein, Ratuva remarked that the cartoon's humor has to be "collective" since it is predicated on the "collective identification among a mass audience of strangers" (2001, 120).

Editorial cartoons did not appear in Fiji until after 1969, when Laisenia Naulumatua (or Lai as he was fondly known) started drawing caricatures for *Na Tovata* or *The Nation*. Lai was born in the province of Cakaudrove and attended Queen Victoria School, where his peers were Fiji's future Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and economist Savenaca Siwatibau, who went on to become the vice chancellor of the University of the South Pacific. After obtaining a New Zealand University Entrance Certificate in 1959, Lai found employment as a technician with the Fiji Broadcasting Commission (FBC) and remained there until his retirement in 1995. Self-schooled in the craft, Lai was recruited in 1969 by Alliance Party stalwart Ratu David Toganivalu to propagandize for *Na Tovata* in preparation for the postindependence elections of 1970. Lai's early period is, consequently, characterized by a partisanship he later jettisoned in favor of mediating public opinion.

Lai's cartooning skills came to the notice of the editor of the *Fiji Times*, Vijendra Kumar, and, in 1975, he won a commission from the newspaper to draw cartoons on matters of political interest to the country. Prior to him, the newspaper had intermittently employed the services of Hayes, whose wit was not all that dissimilar to Lai's. When petrol prices shot up in 1975, Hayes drew a cartoon of a gas station flogging carrots to a motorist whose car ran on horsepower—literally. Kumar, in any event, recalled coming across Lai's work in *Na Tovata* and then calling on him at FBC, where he persuaded Lai to submit a cartoon "every week for publication in our Saturday edition" (Kumar 2014, 14). According to the editor, Lai had "complete freedom to choose the subject he wished to comment upon . . . although occasionally I would make a few suggestions" (Kumar 2014, 14).

When the *Fiji Sun* was launched around this period, Lai was joined by four other practitioners—Bill Bates, Lorrie Garret, Lyndon Lyons, and Patrick Fong—all of whom contributed intermittently to the rival newspaper. Of the quartet, Bates, an American, was easily the most brilliant in terms of the intricacy of his cross-hatching, an eye for quotidian minutiae, and a nose for situational incongruity. His most famous cartoon is a double panel wherein the first, dated 1835, has two clothed missionaries imploring half-clad Fijians to "cover up," while the second, dated 1978, has clothed Fijians adopting the same attitude toward half-clad Europeans. Another, which appeared while the construction company DWG was laying down the highway linking Nadi to Suva, shows a mechanical digger parked next to a *bure* (thatched house) in the midst of dense forests. The caption reads, "Moses . . . we've got to stop meeting this way!" to frame the conversation, or the lack thereof, between tradition and modernity.

Lyons was perhaps the least ideologically pugnacious, preferring to concentrate on social and personal idiosyncrasies. A panel that appeared in the *Fiji Sun* of 28 December 1986, for instance, has two secretaries discussing weeklong parties and the possibility of deleting their pimples with correcting fluid. Another pictures a woman with her hair bound in chains, bricks, and metal grills in preparation for the onslaught of the cyclone season. She declares, rather fatuously, that "it's the latest thing" and prevents "having my crop damaged and I can get personal insurance as well." When he did comment on politically inspired events, such as the burning down of the deputy prime minister's law chambers in the days leading up to the 14 May 1987 coup d'état, Lyons was skittish, lacked audacity, and preferred indirection. A Lyons cartoon of 10 May 1987

has a brood of children setting a bed alight in a bid to give their mother “breakfast in bed.”

Although his views were not always aligned to editorial opinion, Garret was far less diffident about his politics. When his editor, in the issue of 5 January 1986, lambasted the Fijian administration for making Fiji “a ‘client’ of the American Government” by welcoming the nuclear-powered (and possibly nuclear-armed) submarine USS *Portsmouth* into the port of Suva, Garret responded with a cartoon in which two boys use the vessel as an angling platform. The caption reads: “I don’t mind these nuclear subs—they can be good for fishing.”

Like Bates, Fong paid attention to detail and was remarkable for the complexity of his pen strokes. He was also politically unequivocal and drew some memorable cartoons. Three from 1986 are worthy of mention. When it became known that Bhagwan Rajneesh was planning to set up a commune of his Orange People in Fiji, the country’s major religious organizations, including Hindu ones, published an open letter to the prime minister requesting him to bar Rajneesh and his acolytes from the islands. A cheeky Fong cartoon dated 12 January 1986 has a burly Fijian man spurn his Indian wife’s kin because of his resemblance to Rajneesh. Around this period, the newly formed Fiji Labour Party (FLP) was again raising the idea of Fijian as a common name for all. This suggestion provoked an angry reaction from Sakeasi Butadroka of the Fijian Nationalist Party (FNP), who argued that the name was exclusive to the iTaukei community. Fong responded with a cartoon of an interracial household where an outspoken Indian spouse declares to a host of kava addicts that marrying a Fijian makes her Fijian. The third cartoon, which appeared on 26 January, takes up the subject of purported Communist designs on the South Pacific in the light of Soviet military activity in the region. A swarthy Fijian provides solace to a bespectacled Indian trader whose customers have departed on the ship *Oriana*. He tells the startled capitalist not to “worry, Bhai, the Russians will be here soon!”

In the 1990s, Lai and his rivals inspired a young cartoonist by the name of Steven Ratuva. Formally trained as a political scientist, Ratuva contributed to the *Review* and *Pacific Islands Monthly* and drew panels that acerbically underscored the hiatus between real acts of bigotry and feel-good truisms about the Pacific Way. Two bold cartoons on the alliance between nationalist politics and religious extremism spring readily to mind. Both were published in the *Review* in 1995. When the Reverend Manasa Lasaro, who sympathized with the racially blinkered Butadroka, lobbied



for a universal work-play ban on Sundays, Ratuva produced a panel in which the reverend features in St Peter's inventory of those destined for hell. Shortly thereafter, the liberal-minded Laitia Tuwere won control of the leadership of the Methodist Church, but Ratuva could not suppress a last jab at Lasaro. In the second cartoon, asked to comment on the switch in leadership, a lay interlocutor responds: "Terrible Reverend . . . . Terrible . . . . They don't seem to be the type who can inflame religious bigotry and stage nice little Sunday roadblocks against these heathens!"

Fiji's cartoonists were not the only ones to comment on the ethical and cultural anachronisms embedded in the Pacific Way. The illustrator for the Papua New Guinea-based *Post-Courier*, Ace, was mordantly cognizant of the tension between modern jurisprudence and patriarchy's customary manner of resolving serious disputes. In May 1996, when money, pigs, and a young girl were bestowed on the kin of two men killed in the village of Minj, Ace published a blistering panel in which a muzzled girl is placed inside patriarchy's exchange economy, which equates her with a precise quantity of dead pigs and money.

Unlike Fong, Garret, Lyons, and Ratuva, all of whom published sporadically or briefly, Lai's work spans some four decades and constitutes a graphic archive of the events and figures that shaped postindependence Fiji. Lai may be described as a wry chronicler of the passing instant, which shows up in his treatment of an event, detail, or figure or takes the form of pictorial allegory. Lai's attitude toward the passing instant (which is often a moment in the political life of the nation) is wry or lopsided because the genre demands it. The modern political cartoon, as has already been noted, arose from the practice of caricature, defined as the distorted representation—more often than not in pictorial form—of human traits, values, and foibles in the service of irony, comic relief, moral revelation, public instruction, and satire. Caricature works by drawing attention to the wry judgment inherent in the overblown aspects of an overfamiliar representation: think of Barack Obama's floppy ears, Margaret Thatcher's rapier nose, or Bashar Assad's gooseneck. Caricaturists do not draw on economies of understatement or misrecognition. Rather, they focus on axiomatic truths lodged in magnified details that are unique and yet surplus to the figure and comprise, therefore, an exceedingly accurate signature of personality. It is worth noting that the noun *caricature* is derived from the Italian verb *caricare* and conveys the sense of "loading" or "charging" with a surplus dimension.

Lai might have begun his career in 1969 as a skilled party-political cari-

caturist for *Na Tovata*, but he matured into a subtle—and less dogmatic—cartoonist over the course of the next three decades. The drift away from political dogma may be attributed to the gradual noncoincidence of his (and sometimes his editor's) perspective—perhaps as a result of a maturing ideological standpoint—with that of various political coteries and actors. His memorable cartoon of the first 1987 coup, for instance, depicts a slanted tombstone bearing the inscription: RIP FIJI THE WAY IT USED TO BE MAY 14 1987 (figure 1). During his visit to the archipelago one year previously, Pope John Paul II was said—erroneously it turned out—to have described Fiji as “the way the world should be.” Lai's epitaph treats with introspective, tragic, and formidable irony the veracity of that observation in the aftermath of Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka's racially motivated seizure of power. Here the past tense is not used in the service of a rousing political complaint; rather, it quietly references the death and interment of the idea of Fiji as an exemplar of the world's potentiality. Lai's panel speaks *for* multiculturalism, togetherness, and democracy. It marks—and tombstones are fatal markers—the passing away of Fiji's potential as an exemplary nation for the rest of the world. Lai's signature cat, ensconced next to the gravestone, positionally sanctions these sentiments.



FIGURE 1 “Fiji RIP 1987.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 23 May 1987; reproduced with the editor's permission.

Lai's homage to a dead but beautiful idea is worlds away from the polemical cartoons of his youth. "The Three Monkeys," which featured in *Na Tovata* in 1969, is an example of the latter (figure 2). In this panel, Lai's standpoint coincides with that of the Alliance Party, which regarded iTaukei members of the National Federation Party (NFP) as deaf, blind, and dumb lackeys. This same tendentiousness extends to his unpublished facial caricatures of the two most riveting political figures of the era: Ratu Kamisese Mara and A D Patel (figure 3). The portrait of the former is warm, disclosing an artless, affable, and intelligent man. The latter, while not devoid of perspicacity, is treated less sanguinely. A pinched, calculating sneer plays over Patel's lips; he is assigned an eavesdropper's ear, and the placement of his beady, bespectacled pupils, just below the balding moon of his forehead, betokens a devious, foreboding character. There is a hint of the fox around the nose and mouth. It is an accomplished but savage portrait.

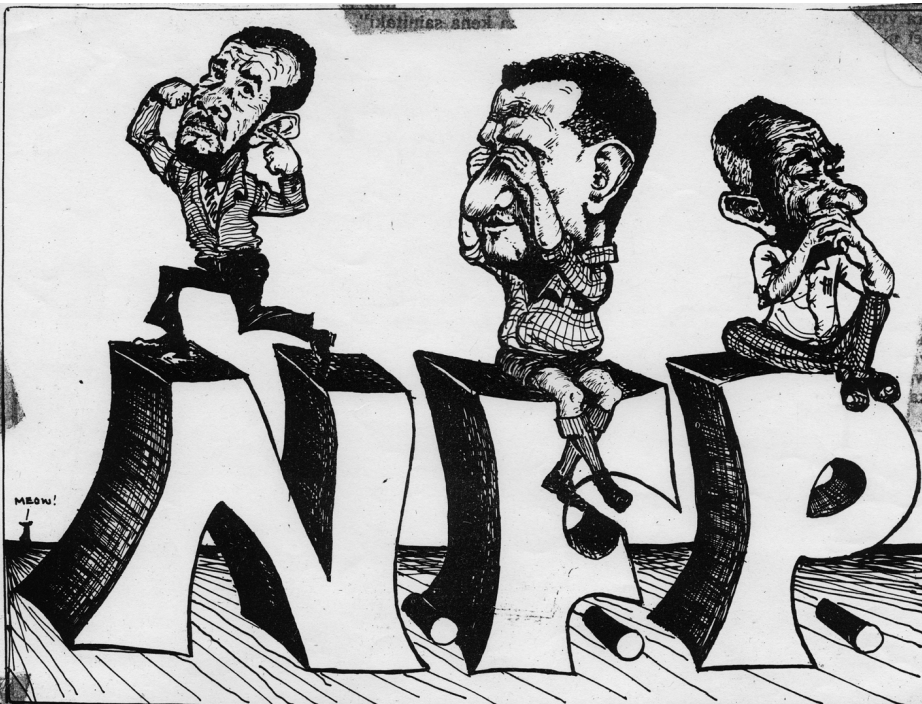


FIGURE 2 "The Three Monkeys." Originally published in *Na Tovata* 1 (2), 1969.

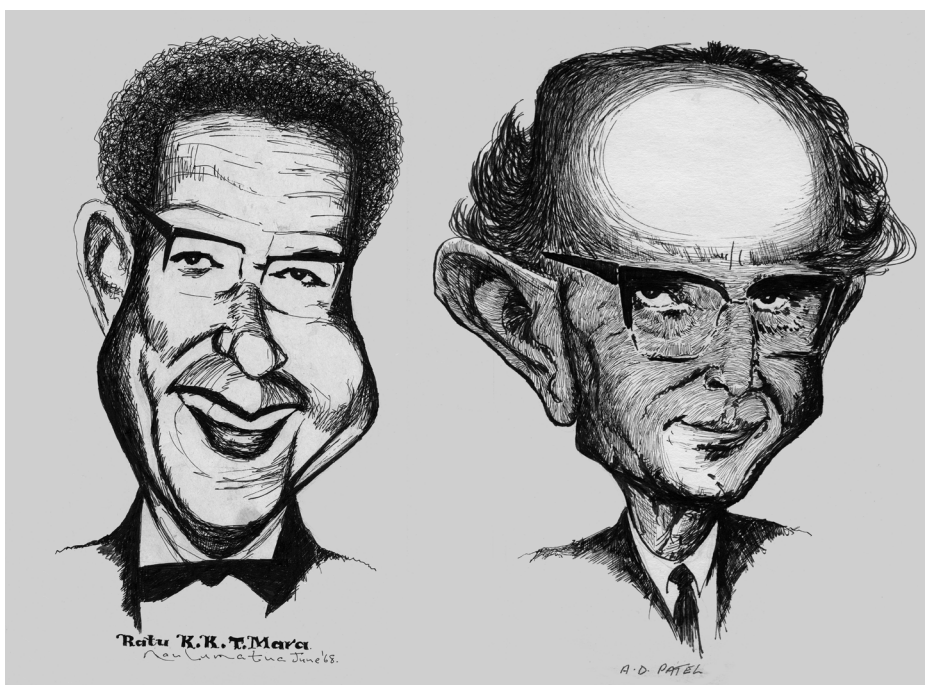


FIGURE 3 “Ratu Mara and A D Patel.” Unpublished portraitures; reproduced with the artist’s permission.

Barring the election of 1977, in which the NFP won power but imploded over the question of leadership, the Alliance Party dominated the country’s political life from 1970 to 1987. During this era of relative if uneasy calm, Lai grew into a keen analyst of the relationship between governments, political actors, policies (domestic as well as international), democratic values, and power. When Fiji’s Minister for Information Jone Naisara traveled to India in the midst of the Indian Emergency (1975–1977), Lai used the occasion to reflect on the heavy-handed tactics employed by Indira Gandhi to terrify opponents, curtail civil liberties, and muzzle the press. In this remarkable 1976 cartoon (figure 4), India is a boat rowed by barebacked slaves. It is kept from listing by the twin weights of a shackled press and a drowned opposition. A grim, witchlike disciplinarian, Gandhi cuts a malevolent figure. She has one hand on the helm and another, portentously, on a coiled whip. History tells us that Prime Minister Gandhi invoked article 352 of her country’s constitution on the grounds that national security was being compromised by strikes, protests, and general instability. She used this ruse to suspend basic rights and governed by





FIGURE 4 “Naisara in India.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 17 September 1976; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

decrees. Lai’s cartoon is steadfast in its defense of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens.

In the mid-1970s, Australia and New Zealand were beginning to express concern about communist Russia’s intentions in the South Pacific. One hypothesis was that the Island nations would flirt with Russia as a strategy to push for greater financial aid from their affluent and jittery neighbors. Lai captured this three-pronged encounter in a panel dated 7 August 1976 (figure 5). A guitar-wielding, lei-festooned bear, its coat emblazoned with the hammer-and-sickle insignia, serenades the prime ministers of Sāmoa, Tonga, and Fiji. The three leaders smile encouragingly at the bear while a kiwi and a kangaroo, resembling prime ministers Muldoon and Frazer, fret and fume on the sidelines.

Lai’s fascination with the enormously fraught relations between power and democratic ideals is also to be found in cartoons that comment on domestic political affairs. The cartoonist was intuitively aware that democracy is an autoimmune political arrangement in that those elected by the system are capable of using the same system to undermine it. In

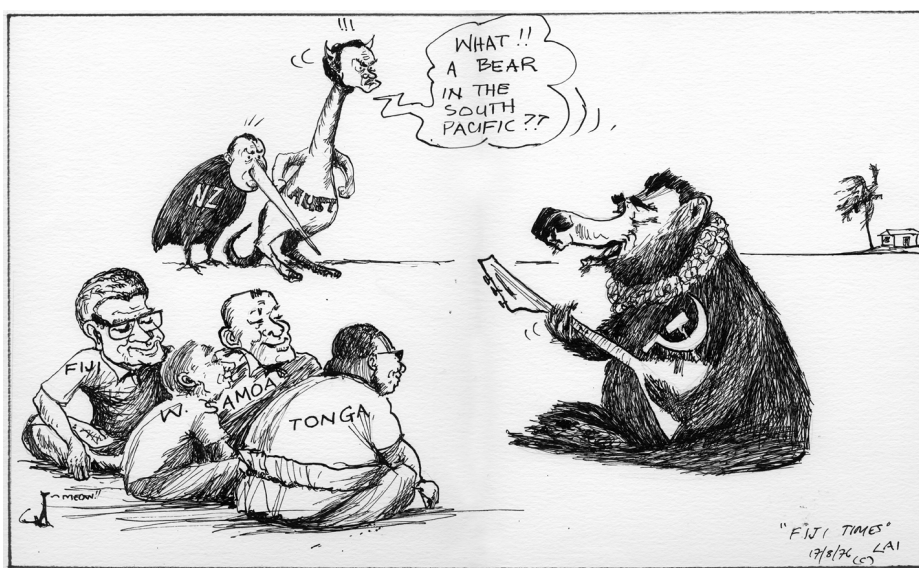


FIGURE 5 “Russian Bear in the Pacific.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 7 August 1976; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

1976, when Senator Inoke Tabua of the Alliance government called for the deportation of Fiji’s Indian settlers, most likely as a political gambit to accentuate Mara’s aura of reasonableness, Lai responded with a light-hearted cartoon that remarked on the discrepancy between ethno-nationalist anxiety and democracy. The panel has an immigration officer accepting a long-distance call from an unnamed Fijian senator requesting Prime Minister Muldoon’s telephone number and fifty thousand visa forms for entry into New Zealand.

Around this time, which might be described as his middle period, Lai began to draw regularly on his signature mascot, a scrawny black cat, as a recurrent motif for framing the general public response—which, incidentally, more often than not dovetailed with his own—to significant political events. (Fong and Lyons also included mascots in their work: the latter chose a dandy mongoose in dark glasses, while the former opted for a grim toddler with a swastika tattooed on the forehead.) Lai’s choice of a cat, in any case, is revealing in that cats possess the polar attributes of aloofness and curiosity. The cat, a common stray, is a marginal onlooker caught up in events beyond its control. In this respect it serves exactly the same purpose as the unvoiced yet forever curious “common man” in the

political cartoons of India's R K Laxman. Since Lai's cat can only react to situations without participating in them, its aloofness is a sign of estrangement rather than agency. Time and again, we see it exposed to events that it cannot influence or capping its lack of comprehension with a lugubrious yet meaningful meow.

The position the cat occupies within the panel reveals a great deal about Lai's political stance and his mediation of public opinion from the standpoint of the newspaper. Positional placement, after all, attests to ethical and political modes of interpellation: position *is* opinion. In the Indian Emergency cartoon cited earlier (see figure 4), the cat is a fortunate cast-away adrift on a scrap of flotsam. It meows helplessly at the dismal situation aboard the Ship of the Indian State. In a later panel devoted to the bitter spats that rocked the NFP in the mid-seventies, culminating in its fragmentation, the cat scrambles for dear life as the stalwarts of the party fight it out. There are several cartoons depicting politicians so caught up in their inane and egotistical squabbles that they forget all about their constituents—and the cat's situation, by and large, is analogous to that of the constituents.

Lai's work of the middle period confronts many of the divisive issues facing the young nation-state. Take the case of leasing arrangements for iTaukei land—a profoundly contentious issue at every point in Fiji's history. A Lai cartoon of October 1976 reflects on the political row that erupted following the tabling of the amendments to the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Ordinance (ALTO). The minister responsible was Ratu Josua Toganivalu. The stray cat sits in a corner among voiceless farmers, who are pictured as the uncomprehending victims of political brinkmanship and horse-trading. The ALTO cartoon is unequivocal with respect to the deep differences existing among various political parties and actors. While the powerless farmers populate one secluded corner, members of the FNP accuse the ruling Alliance of selling out on iTaukei interests. Meanwhile, to the right, a group of NFP stalwarts have gathered together in a huddle. They whisper conspiratorially behind their leader's back as beneath-the-table deals—there is, indeed, a table atop which sits a boxful of ALTO amendments—are being thrashed out. Cutting a dapper figure in his suit and tie, Ratu Josua stands insouciantly in the foreground, legs crossed, hands behind his back, clearly unmoved by all the hullabaloo.

The rifts and fractures registered in the ALTO cartoon set the mood for the triptych Lai produced in the wake of the NFP's narrow victory over the ruling Alliance in the 1977 general elections. The first of these cartoons



has NFP Leader Siddiq Koya, his right foot planted superciliously on the bonnet of the “Car of State,” demanding the keys from a vanquished Mara (figure 6). A stone-faced Mara is pictured in the driver’s seat together with three passengers—his principal cabinet ministers. Led by Irene Jai Narayan and Karam Ramrakha, a breakaway faction of the NFP has convened behind Koya’s back. They sing, “Sid’s a jolly good fellow,” but with the sly proviso “and so says most of us.” Having won on an NFP ticket, a vacillating, cigar-puffing Apisai Tora fixes an opportunistic eye on Mara. At the other end, the independent Osea Gavidi, a thoughtful forefinger on his lip, weighs up the windfalls and pitfalls of joining a Koya-led government. Near the boot end of the car looms Butadroka of the right-wing FNP. He is reminding David Toganivalu either of his preelection threat to wean iTaukei voters away from the Alliance Party or of his scaremonger’s prediction of an Indian takeover of the country. The FNP attracted more than 24 percent of the vote, contributing directly to the defeat of the Mara government. Lai’s cat, ever prescient, wants to have no part in the brewing political storm and votes with all four paws.

The second panel in the triptych covers Fiji’s first major political crisis in the wake of the 1977 election results (figure 7). The figure at the core of



FIGURE 6 “NFP and the 1977 General Elections.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 28 May 1977; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

this crisis was the governor general, Ratu George Cakobau. Acting ostensibly on the news of an internecine rift among NFP powerbrokers, Cakobau shocked the nation by appointing an interim minority government headed by Mara. The governor's decision was constitutionally unlawful, even disingenuous, but Lai put the blame squarely on NFP's dillydallying tactics. His cartoon has Koya flying down a wooden pier, wildly remonstrating with Mara, "Hey! Hey! I'm the Skipper," but to no avail. The ship has already sailed under Captain Kamisese. The cat meows plaintively at the departing vessel, caught doubtless between two equally improbable options. Since Mara led an interim minority government, new elections were held in September, which the Alliance Party won handsomely. In the meantime, NFP had self-destructed by splitting up into two factions: Dove and Flower. The third cartoon focuses on the key divisive figures of Koya and Ramrakha, each calling the other a troublemaker, as they rip apart the letters representing the party's name. Caught up in the mayhem, the sagacious cat scatters in mortal terror.

Lai did not shy away from casting a critical eye on the shenanigans within the Alliance government. When in 1979 the attorney general, Vijay Singh, was sacked by members of his own cabinet over an affair linked



FIGURE 7 "Captain Kamisese." Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 11 April 1977; reproduced with the editor's permission.

to the Flour Mills of Fiji, Lai depicted the incident as one man's mock-heroic struggle to hang on at all costs. In this cartoon, Sir Vijay, riding a broken shard of the wheel (which was his party's symbol), clings desperately to a bent spoke as the rope holding up the wheel of his political destiny starts to fray. The cat, somewhat injudiciously, lies directly in the path of the collapsing wheel. Fractured symbols and objects, and images of things breaking or falling apart, fascinated Lai, and he drew on them liberally. One panel represents a *tanoa* (kava bowl), emblematic of iTaukei ceremonial culture and "traditional" unity, being shattered by the club of Western concepts. While Lai never scrutinized his own ideological assumptions (since iTaukei tradition and unity are partly a Western fabrication), the intriguing feature to this cartoon is that the implement used to break the *tanoa* is the *iwau* or indigenous war club. Subconsciously if not wittingly, Lai seemed to be conceding that Western concepts are projections internal to the iTaukei imaginary. Since Western concepts are bound up with the traditional *iwau*, tradition itself has to be, by implication, a Western projection.

The postcoup decade of the 1990s was a particularly tumultuous one for Fiji. A racially weighted constitution had been imposed on the country in 1990, and ethno-nationalism among the iTaukei was at its peak. The perpetrator of the 1987 coups, Sitiveni Rabuka, was in power, and the coalition partners in the deposed Bavadra government had fallen out. The NFP, led by a near-visionary Jai Ram Reddy, was attempting to find a noncombative way out of the political impasse, while Mahendra Chaudhry, the enigmatic and charismatic leader of the FLP, alternatively courted and combated the Rabuka administration. By the mid-nineties Reddy had aligned himself with Rabuka, and work had commenced on a new constitution, which was promulgated in 1997. As chair of the joint parliamentary select committee on the constitution, Rabuka had to negotiate a slippery slope between the general demand for a just constitution and his power base among iTaukei ethno-nationalists. Lai, who was now cartooning for the *Daily Post*, represented Rabuka's quandary in a panel published in April 1997 (figure 8). Rabuka is seen stepping gingerly across a loosening tightrope held by two powerful hands: one belonging to the province of Cakaudrove and the other to the province of Tailevu.

Roughly around the same period, Lai became intrigued by the alliances being forged between unlikely partners. In a cartoon that predated Josefata Kamikamica's untimely death in 1998, he has the leader of the Fijian Association Party tangoing with FLP's Chaudhry while Rabuka

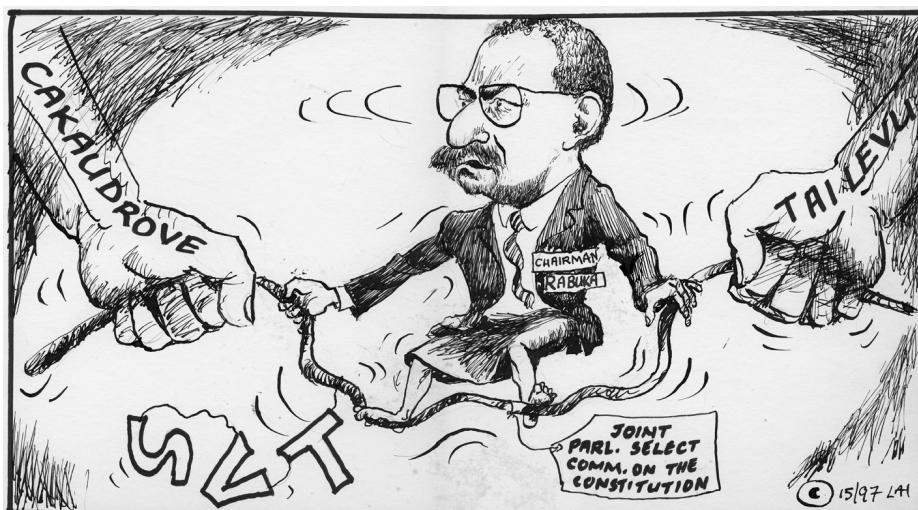


FIGURE 8 “Rabuka’s Dilemma.” Originally published in the *Daily Post* (*Sunday Post*) on 13 April 1997; reproduced with the artist’s permission.

and Reddy, representing the partnership between the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) and the NFP, regard them with bemusement from the exalted cushion of a high-drifting cloud. Cynical alliances aside, the postcoup years were characterized by a brand of high-stress politics that took its toll on politicians, big and small. The careers of many a politician, including the ethical Timoci Bavadra and the sensible Josefata Kamikamica, were cut short by illness. Like the rest of the country, Lai was concerned with the loss of major political players. He represented this concern in a panel that is nothing less than a surreal masterpiece (figure 9). The cartoon pictures death as a terrifying aleatoric visitation. Severed winged hands hanging from the sky by threads select random persons in what is a grim game of dice. Three heads have already rolled, while a fourth fellow, hands uplifted, flees for dear life. A fleshless skull, perhaps in response to the existential meowing of the cat, asks from the placeless place of death: “Who’s next?”

An intermittent experimentalist at the best of times, Lai did occasionally address the grand themes, whether they pertained to the environment, war, gender, or death. When the Law of the Sea came into effect in the 1970s (Fiji was the first signatory, in 1982, to the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention) and Fiji gained jurisdiction over a two-hundred-mile economic zone covering large tracts of the ocean, Lai saw the event from





FIGURE 9 “Surreal Deaths.” Originally published in the *Daily Post* on 21 December 1997; reproduced with the artist’s permission.

a nonhuman perspective. He surmised that the citizens of the sea would take exception to the gratuitous annexation of their home and habitat. Lai’s panel has assorted sea creatures (starfish, eel, squid, fish, and lobster) conferring among themselves (figure 10). The outspoken octopus, acting as their collective mouthpiece, blurts out in disgust: “Why don’t people mind their own business.” Afloat on a wooden plank, the cat apostrophizes at the capacity of marine life to point out the flaws of a pernicious anthropocentrism.

Although less keen on the subject of war, Lai did not shrink from it completely. Fijian battalions had a distinguished history as peacekeepers attached to the United Nations, and Lai acknowledged their service in his own inimitable fashion. A panel composed in 1978 depicts soldiers keeping peace Pacific-style: they lounge inside their tent, drink kava, and sing songs to a strummed guitar (figure 11). The cat, forever the party animal, has somehow managed to gate-crash. Spying on them from behind desert rocks are two Arabs, one exclaiming to the other: “By the Prophet’s beard . . . ’Tis the Pacific Way, Ahmed!”

If war is not quite Lai’s forte, gender is a conspicuous blind spot. Given that power differentials in gender relations in Fiji have contributed to seri-

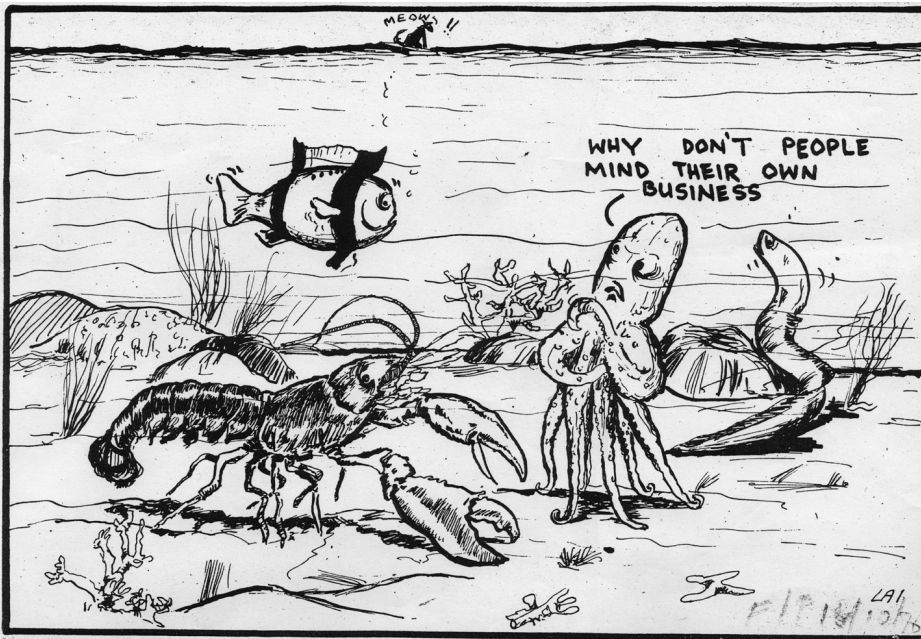


FIGURE 10 “Conference of the Sea.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 16 October 1976; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

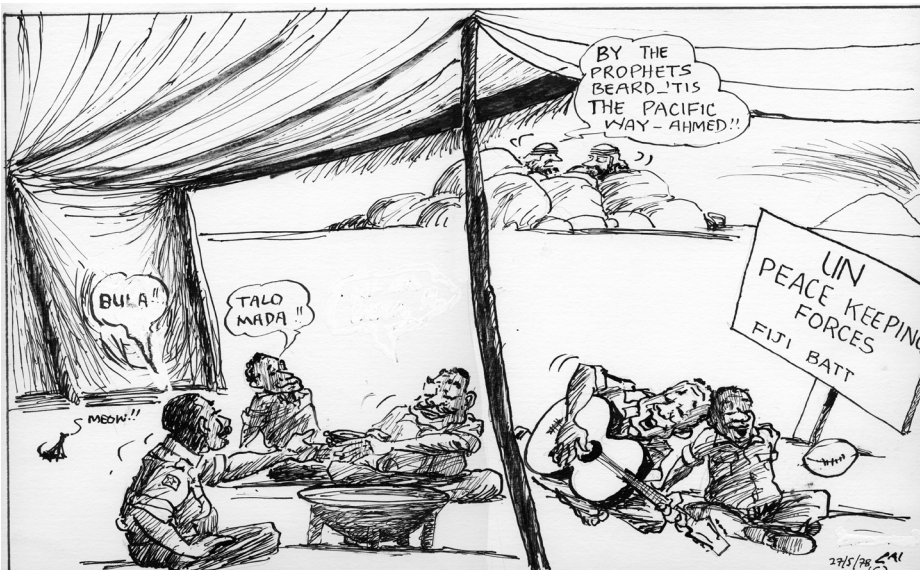


FIGURE 11 “Fijian Peacekeepers.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 27 May 1978; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

ous forms of violence and social discord, this is a serious shortcoming. Still, Lai drew at least one cartoon that touches on the subject. When the Bureau of Statistics released figures indicating that women were living longer than men, Lai contributed a cartoon to the general speculation on why this might be so. Two male idlers are discussing the statistical findings in earshot of two women. One offers a glib, stereotypical, and thoroughly sexist explanation for the statistical anomaly: “‘Tis not what you eat, ‘Tis your life style—do the housekeeping—make sure you know everybody else’s affairs and gossip about them—that’s how!” To his credit, Lai does not let the sexist opinion pass without a tactical rebuttal. The women, who are engaged in domestic work, gaze furiously at the provocative do-nothings.

On the theme of death, Lai was less ambivalent. He produced a remarkable cartoon in response to the perceived lack of space in cemeteries around Suva. There was a suggestion by the commissioner of prisons that plots might have to be reused if no solution was found. This was, of course, grist to Lai’s mill. He responded with a cartoon in which ghosts haunting the grounds of the Old Cemetery come across a real estate hoarding (figure 12). The “No Vacancies” sign has been crossed out and an invita-



FIGURE 12 “Of Ghosts and Graveyards.” Originally published in the *Daily Post* on 1 June 1997; reproduced with the artist’s permission.



tion extended to potential lessees. As understanding dawns on one of the spirits, it turns and remarks to its spectral companion: "That explains why there's been so many new faces around." This cartoon treats the cemetery as a heterotopia; it constitutes a real space within the culture but presents an inverted, comic, and contested view of actual real estate spaces and practices.

The early postcoup years were characterized by a commingling of politics and piety. The Methodist Church, in particular, evinced a tendency to conflate religious dogma with iTaukei ethno-nationalism. Since Rabuka was a Methodist lay preacher, he acceded to the demands of the religious right and imposed the shibboleths governing one system of beliefs on the rest of the country. Like Ratuva, Lai was not amused. He responded with a panel in which a bilious, beetle-browed God enthroned on billowy clouds is being briefed by a telephone-wielding angel (figure 13). The angel explains to God that the Methodists of Fiji are demanding "exclusive rights for the use of the Sabbath . . . and intend to go political about it." Interrupted in his study of human follies and woes, God is outraged and points to their hypocrisy. "What!" he exclaims, "Have they stopped drinking kava? What happened to their Pacific Way, eh? . . . Maybe Lasaro needs a Revelation." Banning alcohol while consuming kava, practicing religious bigotry while mouthing platitudes about the inclusiveness of the Pacific Way—Lai's God does not suffer gainsayers gladly. Heedless to the wisdom of Lai's God, Lasaro continued to lobby vigorously for the work-play ban on Sundays and went so far as to organize roadblocks to protest any move to rescind the law. Another of Lai's panels depicts a slab of rock denoting the Sunday Ban. When lifted, it liberates some citizens from the stifling imposition. Others, however, see a seductive serpent crawling out from beneath the slab. One flees in terror. Perspective is an important element in this cartoon: the liberated citizens are situated behind the rock while the fearful ones are in front.

On economic affairs, and possibly in line with his newspaper's position, Lai showed himself a moderate and espoused the middle ground. In a 1997 cartoon replete with swirling lines, he allegorized Fiji's economy as a doomed swimmer caught between the unionized sharks of the left and the mounting tsunami of deregulated market forces. When a crisis erupted at the Emperor Gold Mines in 1977, and economist Savenaca Siwatibau was put in charge of a committee to investigate the cause, Lai came up with a cartoon that attempted to capture the multifaceted nature of the problem. Emperor is a ship going down in the treacherous seas of



FIGURE 13 “God and Politics.” Originally published in the *Daily Post* on 4 March 1995; reproduced with the artist’s permission.

local politics, poor industrial relations, excessive union demands, and low world prices for gold. Siwatibau’s committee, together with Ratu David Toganivalu, has abandoned ship in a dinghy, and the cat is giving chase on a little wooden raft. In a follow-up cartoon on the same topic, Ratu David is serving Siwatibau’s soupy remedy to worker and employer alike. Shattered glassware under the negotiating table suggests that the soup is not going down well with either party.

The all-important sugar industry, too, went through several crises because of its politicized character. Representatives of the various *sanghs* or units that made up the Federation of Cane Growers are, in one panel, pulling at cane stalks in a fractious tug-of-war (figure 14). An upended farmer is crying for help as his head vanishes inside the disheveled stalks. The sole representative of the Kisan Sangh, Vijay Singh, is seen walking off with an armful of cane. The cat, meanwhile, flies through the air to the amazement of one bird, while another tweets “sugar ain’t sweet no more.” The sugar industry was by no means immune to the politics governing foreign aid. When Fiji decided to purchase the Airbus instead of the Boeing,

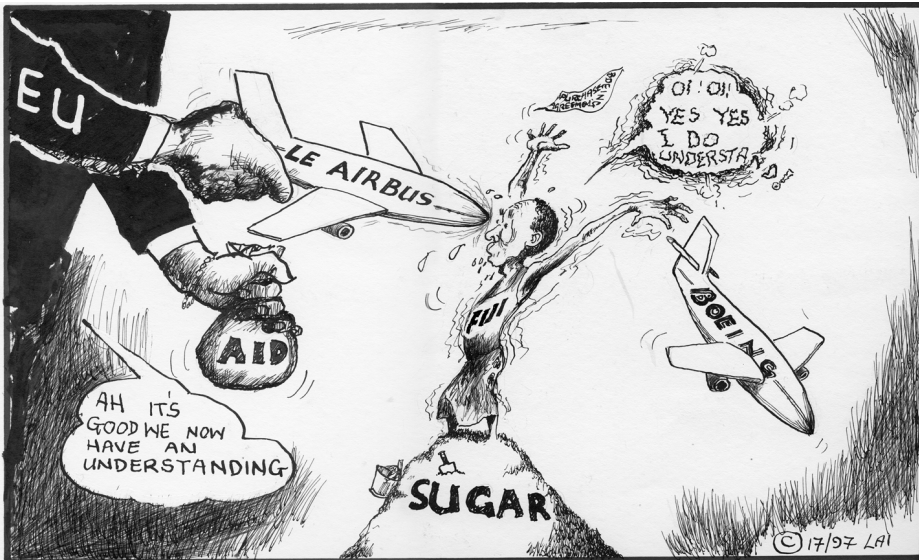


FIGURE 14 “Sugar, Aid and Le Airbus.” Originally published in the *Daily Post* on 27 April 1997; reproduced with the artist’s permission.

Lai drew attention to how the European Union (EU) used the preferential rating for Fiji’s sugar as a bargaining chip. A gigantic EU man clutches a moneybag in one hand and an Airbus in the other. The Airbus is trained like a pistol at a worried Fijian atop a hill of sugar, forcing him to let go of the Boeing. The pleased EU man says, “Ah! It’s good we now have an understanding.”

Whenever large companies made massive profits at the expense of the masses, Lai’s sense of indignation intensified. In 1997 the chief executive officer of the Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA), Lionel Yee, announced that they had made a profit of 17 percent. The hydroelectric plant that generated the electricity was located in the interior of Viti Levu at Monasavu. The landowners of Monasavu had not been compensated for the alienation of their land, and, even more outrageously, had no access to electricity. Lai depicted the FEA as Yee’s pet ogre, hairy and horned, haunting the dam at Monasavu and feasting insatiably on consumers (figure 15).

Hikes in water rates also drew Lai’s attention. When the cost of water went up by an astonishing 170 percent in 1978, Lai drew an analogy between the exorbitant levy and global oil prices. An oil sheik in caftan leans smugly on a dripping faucet while two locals discuss his identity



FIGURE 15 “The Ogre of Monasavu.” Originally published in the *Daily Post* on 19 October 1997; reproduced with the artist’s permission.

(figure 16). One attempts to disabuse the other of his error, observing that the man is not an Arab oil sheikh but an officer from the Water Rates Office. In one corner a froglike creature informs the meowing cat that it is off “to the Middle East for a swim.” Lai revisited the water issue in 1997 when the government corporatized the Water Authority with a grant of US\$600,000 from the Asian Development Bank. The cost, naturally, was passed on to the consumer. The cartoonist pictured the 40 percent hike as a deluge unleashed by the company on a drowning public.

Lai was keenly interested in the battles waged between various trade unions and governments and in the internal politics of the unions themselves. He produced two notable cartoons on the Oil Workers Union strike of 1979. The first has union leader Micky Columbus tactfully apologizing to a consumer even as he garrotes him with a petroleum hose. The union boss explains that he has to demonstrate to the oil companies and to the government that he is completely in earnest about his demands. The second cartoon is cheekier (figure 17). Columbus is now an expert snake charmer sitting cross-legged atop a petroleum pump. He pipes a tune on





FIGURE 16 “The Water Sheik.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 21 April 1978; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

his flute, which serves to rouse the hose. Transformed into a cobra, the hose is poised to strike at a customer who has his arms uplifted in a show of anxious capitulation. On the outskirts to the right, representatives from the government and the oil industry scrutinize regulations and labor laws. There is no resolution in sight.

Lai enjoyed taking the mickey out of union bosses, but he also poked fun at the outlandish demands put forth by various interest groups on their trade unions. One panel depicts three farmers gathered around a *tanoa*, drawing up a list of demands they want to put to James Raman of the Fiji Trades Union Congress. Included on the wish list are shares in the Native Land Trust Board, a weekly sex allowance, and leave to study in China. The cartoonist was never partial to aggressive unionism, but self-seeking politicians raised his hackles the most. An acerbic cartoon on the subject of salary increment for sitting parliamentarians has the bespectacled chair



FIGURE 17 “Snake Charmer.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 12 May 1979; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

of the salary review committee, seated comfortably behind a desk, asking the general public for their views on the proposed raise (figure 18). The ghastly irony is that the general public is made up of the unemployed, the destitute, and the underfed. Sitting amidst them, forepaws extended for alms, is the black cat. The cartoonist’s ideological standpoint could not be any clearer.

When dealing with petty crimes and minor traffic violations, Lai maintained a disarming lightness of touch. He came up with an in-joke cartoon to comment on the introduction of random Breathalyzer tests for motorists (figure 19). A drunkard leaning against a streetlamp is being tested by a uniformed officer, while another remarks to a stern-faced superior that he “can’t read the meter” because “it’s jammed with kosa [kava dregs].” The gag is that the man is intoxicated on kava, which, being a soporific, foils the science of the instrument. The perspicacious cat sides with the clever sot.

This is not to say that Lai was oblivious to the darker side of law infringement. Of particular concern was the high number of fatalities on Fiji’s roads caused by dangerous drivers. In a cartoon on the subject,

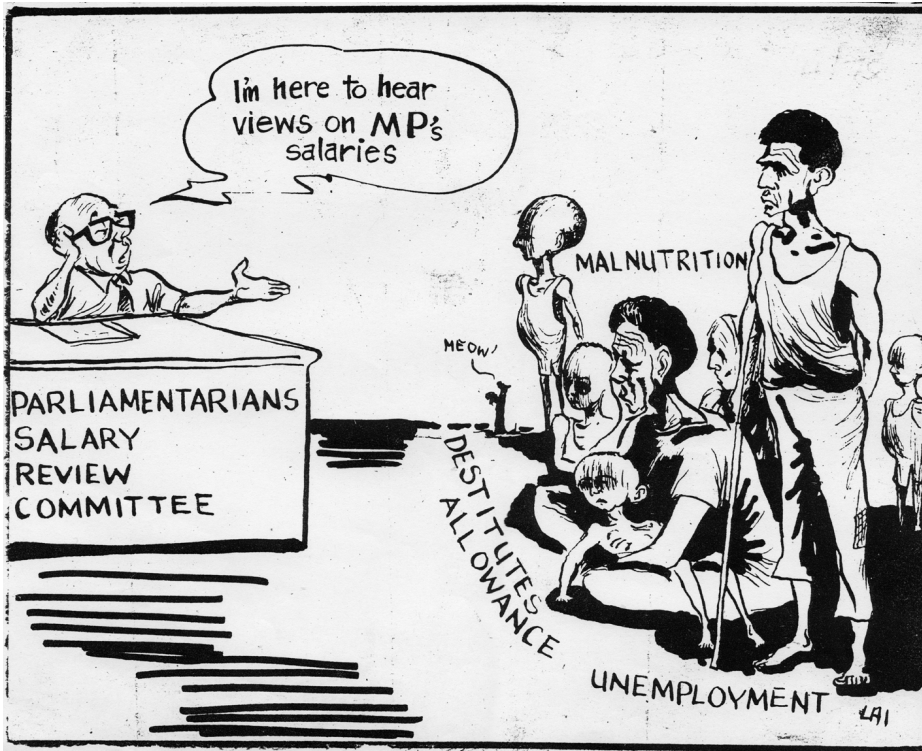


FIGURE 18 “Salary Review Committee.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 15 April 1978; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

he drew two sets of speeding cars and buses approaching from opposite directions, overtaking on a hairpin bend, while a cow ambles casually across the highway. Telltale crucifixes multiply along the road. The tour guide aboard one of the buses explains that the crucifixes “are not shrines but . . . markers for fatal road accidents,” ominously adding that the bus is running behind schedule but “we’ll try and get you there on time.”

An aficionado of rugby, Lai paid regular and passionate homage to his beloved sport. Ranging from outright euphoria to gut-wrenching disappointment, Lai’s rugby cartoons, some ten in number, capture Fiji’s fluctuating fortunes in both forms of the game. When the national Fifteens side toured Australia in 1976, losing all three test matches, with the last marred by a brawl and a walkout, Lai seized on the overriding mood of national disillusionment. Although Fiji did not fare badly and won games in several states, the fans at home were frustrated by the team’s lack of discipline



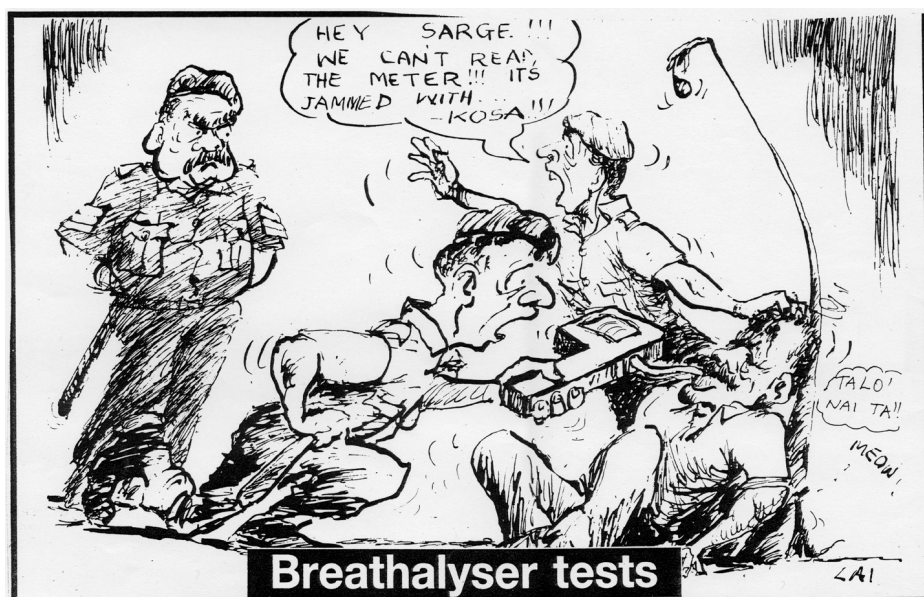


FIGURE 19 “Breathalyser Test.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 5 July 1986; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

and professionalism. Lai came up with a panel depicting a Fijian player spread-eagled on the football pitch while an anxious Australian wonders if he is dead. Fiji’s manager, Mesake Biumaiwai, is seen striding off the pitch, muttering, “It was hard work.” The coach, too, has walked off in despair. No one seems to be overly concerned that the team’s mascot, the cat, is being pursued by a couple of gigantic wasps. Lai knew when the fans were profoundly stung. Successive losses in 1979 to the visiting Māori, English, and French sides drew an equally cheerless rebuke from Lai. He composed a cartoon showing a tombstone in Buckhurst Park marking the death of Fijian rugby. Funeral wreaths placed on the heaped mound by the victors recall the great Fijian sides of 1939, 1948, and 1951. The coach, selectors, and players, all downcast and clueless, make up the motley crew of mourners. In the background, another major national sport—soccer—has been hijacked by a brawling mob and is equally in dire shape.

Fijian rugby fared much better in the abbreviated version of Sevens. Fans were, consequently, even less forgiving of their heroes when the team did badly. In 1998 the first four legs of the International Rugby Board (IRB) Sevens had been won by New Zealand, and Fiji Rugby Union had still not finalized its funding allocation for the two codes. Lai produced



FIGURE 20 “Maestro Serevi and the Dream Team.” Originally published in the *Fiji Times* on 18 April 1992; reproduced with the editor’s permission.

a cartoon that showed the disastrous effect that financial squabbles and lack of resources had on Fiji’s performance on the international circuit. A kiwi bird, fresh from its triumph in Chile, Uruguay, Dubai, and Argentina, rides a pogo stick shaped in the form of a dollar sign while two Fijians, representing the two codes, scuffle needlessly on the ground. Behind them, as if to reinforce the general point, locals haggle over the bus fare. The distressed cat, sensible as always, calls for the referee’s intervention.

Lai and the country exulted whenever Fiji triumphed. Despite the financial hiccups that rocked the Fiji Rugby Union, Fiji managed to put together a dream squad in the 1990s. The team, managed by Saukawa, consisted of Serevi, Rasari, Cama, Dere, Ratu Kiti, Noa, Vesi, and Pauliasi. When Fiji defeated archrival New Zealand in the grand final of the Hong Kong Sevens, Lai celebrated with a rousing portrait of the victors. Slung over a crossbar between uprights is the vanquished kiwi, while the cat, standing on hindquarters with forelegs thrown up in delight, emits a triumphant meow. Lai produced a similar cartoon in 1992 when Fiji defeated New Zealand to win its third Hong Kong Sevens in succession (figure 20). An angelic Ratu Kiti is seen entering the immortal names of his teammates

on a celestial ledger. Lashed to a pole slung over Rasari's shoulder are a kangaroo and a kiwi. Maestro Serevi stands inside the winner's cup held aloft by his teammates. The black cat bounces jubilantly on a crossbar between uprights.

It may be argued, and with some justification, that Lai's work lacks a clear political agenda and that his wit is devoid of the excoriating satirical edge we find in truly great cartoonists such as Thomas Nast, Joseph Keppler, Herbert Block, and Patrick Oliphant. Certainly Lai's art is neither of the reactionary nor of the revolutionary variety; it does not settle for social stasis nor does it press for radical political or ethical transformation. Lai's work would have never stoked the murderous rage of religious zealots who gunned down the satirists of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015. In its espousal of the attributes of restraint, equanimity, and moderation, and in its preference for surface levity over deep gravity, Lai's work promotes the middle path of slight and cautious adjustments to daily political and social ills. It invites the old and the new, as exemplified by contending opinions, cultures, and ideologies, to engage in a conversation that, ever so minutely, modifies both. When the common man and the black cat are happy, so is Lai. Big events and ambitions that shatter or shake up the known world seldom receive sympathetic treatment. Whether the incident was momentous or momentary, Lai preferred being the bemused onlooker on the periphery: he seldom passed judgment, and when he did, it was never dogmatic, damning, or absolute. Like the scrawny black cat caught up in a multitude of misadventures and triumphs, Lai's view of the world was small-scale, modest, and guarded. He did not advance a vision of a nation summoned by destiny or of a nation aspiring to draw a portrait of its own potentiality. Lai's country, full of wise cats, panicky politicians, musical bears, striking workers, prescient ghosts, fly-by-nighters, severed hands, and rugby gods, discovers its own face as it forms, warts and all.

Laisenia Naulumatua died in Suva on the 21st of January, 2014.

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I OWE A DEBT OF GRATITUDE to Lai's friend, the late Kishor Chetty, who suggested that I write this article; to Seona Smiles, who identified the stories that complemented the cartoons; to the librarians at the University of the South Pacific's Pacific Collection, who swiftly prescribed the right medication for a bad case of archive fever; to the present editor of the *Fiji Times*, Fred Wesley, for granting permission to reproduce the cartoons; and, finally, to Laisenia Naulumatua, who

*shared a beer with the author and read an earlier version of the paper several months before he died.*

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## Abstract

For four decades after the country's independence from Britain in 1970, Laisenia Naulumatua, known as Lai, was Fiji's preeminent political cartoonist, capturing the volatile history of the nation in panels he sketched for the Saturday edition of the *Fiji Times* and the Sunday edition of the *Daily Post*. Lai's cartoons afford an idiosyncratic overview of the events and agents, large and small, lighthearted and serious, that shaped the nation's character in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Seldom driven by the livid savagery of the firebrand cartoonist, Lai

adopted the casual bystander's wry approach to representing public events and personalities and included in many of his panels a scrawny black cat to convey the sentiments of the hoi polloi. He tackled social and political ills certainly, but without ill will. In its espousal of the attributes of restraint, equanimity, and moderation, and in its preference for surface levity over piercing gravity, Lai's oeuvre promotes the middle path of slight and cautious adjustments to daily political and social ructions. This essay discusses Lai's work in relation to that of his peers and antecedents, locally as well as internationally, and in the context of established theories of the political cartoon.

KEYWORDS: political cartoon, caricature, Fijian history, Pacific Way, religion