PLACE-NAMES OF FIJI 25: Qamea, land of surprises.

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In this series of articles, we have looked at etymologies of the seven larger islands of Fiji and are now examining the next rank: those under 100 square kilometres. We have already considered Rabe (67 sq km), Muala (65), Lakeba (60), Vanuabalavu (57), Beqa (37.5), Naviti (35) in the Yasawa Group of far western Fiji, and Cicia (34.6) in northern Lau in far eastern Fiji.

For the next in line we head north to the island of Qamea (34.5), to the north-east of Taveuni and west of the much smaller Laucala. The even smaller island of Matagi lies broadside to the north. For readers who are not familiar with Fijian spelling, note that ‘q’ is a prenasalised velar stop, that is, pronounced like English ‘ng’ in ‘finger’ (but not as in ‘singer’). On some older maps and other publications intended for non-Fijian speakers, it is spelt ‘Nggamea’.

Qamea is a heavily indented island of volcanic origin, situated about 2.5 km east of Naveitalācagi (Thurston Point) in Boumā, the nearest part of Taveuni. It is about 10 km long, varying greatly in width, due to the many bays and inlets. A number of steep hills reach some 300 m in height. It is covered mainly in forest, with areas of grass and reeds.

Qamea was one of a small number of islands seen by the Dutchman Abel Tasman in February 1643 as he sailed from Tonga to the Solomon Islands skirting the north-east of Fiji, hence becoming the first European to see any island in Fiji. He recorded no names, since he had no contact with any inhabitant. He named the islands Prins Wyllems Eylanden (Prince William’s Islands), in honour of William II, Prince of Orange, but because of the secretiveness of Tasman’s employer, the Dutch East India Company, the first map bearing this name Tasman bestowed was not published until the next century, in 1726. A painstaking study by Australian historian GC Henderson has identified the other islands he sighted in Fiji, roughly in chronological order, as Nukubasaga, Nukupareti (sometimes spelt Nukubalate), Nukusimanu, Laucala, Taveuni, Yanuca, Rabe, Kioa, Vanualevu and Cikobia.

It will be noted that the first three in this list all begin with *Nuku*, and this is for the simple reason that *nuku* is generic for ‘atoll’ or ‘cay’. There are relatively few atolls in Fiji, and as far as is known none has been permanently inhabited, unlike the many in other Pacific nations such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, but the majority have names beginning with *nuku*, even those in the Yasawa group in far western Fiji. If *nuku* had been the word for ‘atoll’ in the Proto Central Pacific language spoken in Fiji some three thousand years ago, then the fact that many Polynesian languages have a word *nuku* meanng ‘earth’ or ‘land’ may mean that Polynesians originated from a place where people normally lived on atolls.

One of the consequences of this voyage was that the passage between Taveuni and Qamea has been named ‘Tasman Strait’, parallel to the somewhat larger Tasman Sea most readers will be familiar with. Tasman never actually sailed through this strait, but he did see it and judged it to be too risky to tackle, so headed north instead to exit the group.

The next visitor to record seeing Qamea was Captain James Wilson, who had been transporting missionaries of the London Missionary Society to various locations in the Pacific in the ship *Duff* in 1797. Although he saw “vast numbers of natives assembled upon the beach” he did not land (it was not his intention to land anywhere at this point, since he had delivered all the missionaries) so he did not discover the native name of the island. The name he conferred, Ross’s Island, has not survived.

The first visitor to record the name of the island was the London Missionary Society missionary John Davies – not one of Wilson’s passengers - who passed through northern Fiji after fleeing Tahiti in 1809. He did not see Qamea, but recorded ‘Kamea’ – its Tongan pronunciation - as the name of one of the Fiji islands. Finally, in 1827, the French explorer Dumont d’Urville both saw the island and recorded its name, as ‘Ongomea’ (misanalysing the article ‘o’ as part of the name), though he did not set foot on it; indeed, he didn’t set foot on any of the many islands of Fiji that he saw, since he had no anchor.

Qamea is remarkable in a number of respects for its flora and fauna. It is one of the few islands in Fiji where *Gnetum gnemon* flourishes, a medium-sized tree we have met previously on the island of Koro. Its leaves are highly prized as a green vegetable, usually boiled in coconut milk. In Koro and Ovalau it goes by the name of *sukau* or *belesukau* (*bele* meaning ‘tender leaves’), but on Qamea it is *sikau*, locally pronounced *siɂau*. Qamea is the eastern extremity of its distribution.

Also like Koro, Qamea is one of the few Fiji islands where jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*, locally *toa ni cōcō*) are abundant. Indeed, they are so prominent that there is a well-known proverbial expression *veikilai na toa ni Qamea*, literally ‘jungle fowl of Qamea know each other’, applied to a group of people who are ‘thick as thieves’. At least ten varieties of jungle fowl are recognised, and they are trapped and brought back to villages for cock-fighting (*vakavala toa*).

Qamea is also one of only three islands in Fiji where the Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*, **mekepai**) is found. It was introduced, around 1900, in an effort to control pests of coconuts, in particular stick insects. The other islands where it was introduced are nearby Taveuni and Cicia.

Rather less to Qamea’s credit is the presence of the American Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) which was deliberately introduced by a thoughtless tourist in 2000 and is now found on Taveuni, Qamea and Matagi. It is larger than the indigenous iguana and is a declared pest because of the damage it causes to crops and competition with indigenous fauna.

Sadly, we seem to have run out of space again, so for the next instalment we will continue with surprises on Qamea, including the story of the king of the land-crabs, and the reason why of the ten or so villages and settlements on the island, only one is occupied by the original inhabitants of the island.