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Yaqona/Yagoqu: Roots and Routes of a Displaced Native

Teresia K. Teiwa

"Notes towards a treatment for a film project": presented at
Contested ground: power and knowledge in Pacific islands studies
A conference sponsored by the Center for Pacific islands studies
The University of Hawai‘i at Manoa
December 1995

Mine land: An anthem (to the tune of "This land is my land")

Soundtrack:

This land is mine land
It used to be our land
From Tabang to Tabwera
From Bananikai to uma
Birds made this land for posterity

This land is mine land
It used to be our land
But then we leased it to greedy miners
Who only saw it as something called phosphate
And used it for their prosperity

This land is mine land
It used to be our land
But now ocean island fertilises their land

And though they gave us a bit of their money
They left us with other kinds of poverty
This land is mine land
It used to be our land
But now we’re living in the Fiji islands
And though we’ve had our fair share of problems
Our future’s full of possibilities

An abbreviated history

Scroll:

1804 A British vessel chance upon Banaba and charts it on Admiralty maps
1900 A subject of the British empire ascertains that Banaba is practically solid phosphates
1901 The island is annexed and included under the Colonial administration of the Gilberts islands. Leases negotiated by the mining company with the islanders provide mining rights to the Pacific islands company for 999 years and payment of 50 pounds sterling a year to the landowners
1928 After islanders demonstrate increasing tenacity to the land the British colonial government passes a mining ordinance to permit the company’s compulsory acquisition of the land. The government compensates the islanders by setting up trust funds for them.
1941 Japanese attack British colonial headquarters on Banaba; British flee and Japanese occupy the island, relocating most of the islanders to Tarawa in the Gilberts and Kosrae in the Carolines.
1945 British return. After convincing the scattered Babinians that their island was uninhabitable after the war, the British begin a project of resettling islanders. Money from the Babinian trust funds is used to purchase Rabi in Fiji. After two years, the islanders decide to stay on Rabi while maintaining their land rights on Banaba. Fiji’s banaban settlement act defines Babinians as “anyone of Micronesian or Polynesian descent inhabiting the island of Rabi”. The Babinians agree with this definition.
1970s Fiji receives independence from Great Britain, and the 1970 constitution provides for banaban inclusion on the indigenous Fijian electoral roll, which is distinct from the Indian and “general” electoral rolls. In the longest legal battle in British history, the Babinians sue the British phosphate commissioners for just compensations for the exploitation and destruction of their ancestral home. The matter is settled out of court and ten million Australian dollars are added to the islanders’ trust funds.
as the Gilbert Islands move to becoming the independent republic of Kiribati, Fijian leaders make demands for their own independence, proposing instead to have free association with Fiji, initially supported by Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, this proposal falls by the wayside when President Iremia Tabai states in no uncertain terms that there will be no violation of his nation's territorial sovereignty.

1987

Colonial officials staged a military coup to overthrow the democratically elected Labour/National Federation party coalition government, ostensibly to protect indigenous rights.

1990

After the abrogation of the 1970 constitution a new constitution is produced which entrenches indigenous Fijian supremacy. Under the 1990 constitution Fijians are removed from the Fijian electoral roll and relocated to the 'general' electoral roll.

1991

After more than a decade of mismanagement of funds by some of their own leaders, the banaban stage a coup of their own on 15 December 1991. In 1992 the Fijian government appoints a three member commission to administer the banana's affairs until things get better.

1995

As Fiji goes through a review of the 1990 constitution, the banaban make a submission to the review requesting reinstatement on the Fijian electoral roll, categorically stating their support of Fijians' indigenous rights, and swearing allegiance to the chieftain village of Somosomo which had paramountcy over rabi in precolonial times.

**kanikani**

The film opens with a shot of what appears to be parched earth - mud cracked from the heat of a burning sun and months without rain. It could be a desert anywhere - Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia...

The camera pulls away and it becomes apparent that this is not a geographical desert, but the skin on a man's leg. The leg and the skin are my grandfather's. His condition is commonly known in Fijian as 'kanikani' - dry skin - for men, often a result of drinking too much yaqona.

**guano**

The camera returns to the close up of my grandfather's skin, and the image melts into another image of dry, parched earth. But this new landscape is more ragged, rocky. Some have likened it to a moonscape. (Here we need stills of those British newspaper articles which describe banaba as a 'lunar landscape', and which describe the rabi council leaders suing the British phosphate commissioners as 'lunar islanders'.) I call it a moonscape. It's hard to describe in words. Perhaps the camera can help. It pulls away again, further. Much further this time. Up, in fact, now we have a frigate bird's view of what is evidently an island. But from the frigate bird's point of view it looks like an island graveyard. The rugged, rocky pillars in the close-up are now a dense field of gravestones.

The camera captures a projectile hurtling from the tail of the frigate bird to the island. I remember so clearly yet vaguely the many wryly and cruelly amused comments about 'islands made of bird shit', so little respect for the life cycle. So little respect for birds that can create islands. So little respect for birds that didn't just come here to shit. Frigate birds fly for miles and miles, thousands sometimes, to nest, mate and reproduce at the same place. Giving life to baby frigate birds, they gave life to an island. Giving life to an island they gave life to a people.

**contested ground**

lush. In an essay I wrote in 1991 I made the mistake of describing ocean island as 'lush'. I meant lush before the British started mining the hell out of it. But I guess I didn't make that explicit enough. I sent a copy of my essay to the great grandfathers of the history of the land, to the gatekeepers of scholarship on banaba, you want to talk about contested ground? Who's boy, maude wrote back to say among other things (which I won't mention yet) that banaba had never been 'lush'.

Ok, let's go and interview some people. Let's go to Kiribati, where are we going to get the money for the trip? Oh, I don't know, somewhere — maybe the rabi council will fund this film project... ha-ha! anyway, let's pretend we're in Kiribati and we're interviewing some people there. Close-ups would be best. Close-ups of their faces, but the camera has to be looking up at them from below, and the sun's got to be behind the camera. I want shots of those beautiful brown Gilbertese faces against a brilliant blue Gilbertese sky. Maybe with some green coconut fronds framing the shots. Got that? Of course, every interview subject gets their own shot, no group shots — for the final cut, anyway. Those Gilbertese just love group pictures, so we're probably going to have to humor them. We'll edit those out later. I just want close-ups of individual faces.

Ok, now we ask our interview subjects the question, 'E ura banaba?' I guarantee every answer or most of the answers anyway will be simple, 'e kamaia', some of the answers might be phrased as questions themselves, 'e kamaia, ke?' as if seeking confirmation.

It is generally believed by the stoll-dwelling Gilbertese that banana was and still is lush. I've never been to banaba. So I don't know for sure, but I have been to
Kiribati, and the Gilbertese say that banana is so lush that you can grow mangos there.

I've also been to Nauru. You had to go to Nauru to get to Kiribati from Fiji when air Nauru was the only carrier, and Nauru is pretty lush, man. It's so green! Green, so green. I know a lot of people who've described Nauru as the palm of the Pacific, but when we go there, I want to film the green. Okay? Nauru is surprisingly green. If it weren't for the frigate bird's view of the minuscule graveyards in the center of the island... if it weren't for the monstrosity of the phosphate processing plant on the coast... lush, yeah. I'd call it lush.

**Yaqona/Yagoqu**

Ok, take the camera back to the phosphate processing place. Do you think we could get permission to film what goes on inside the plant? Yeah, yeah. I know there's like awful conditions for the workers. You want shots from the ghost they live in? I think they call it 'the compound', but how does that work into our story-line? Ok, get footage of the compound. We'll figure how it fits in later.

Back to the plant. Ha-ha! What a contradiction. They call it a plant — and it's making the island barren.

Anyway, yeah. Let's go through the plant. Film how they bring in the rocks from the mines and crush 'em and sort 'em, or sort 'em and crush 'em. Now we gotta find out if they package the phosphate on the island... no? The phosphate goes straight onto the boat, huh? They do the packaging in Australia somewhere? Ok, let's go there. I gotta get footage of them packaging the phosphate. Yeah... some shots of the phosphate packages — sacks, I guess they'd be. Sacks on the shelf of some hardware store, right? That's where they sell the phosphate, isn't it? Or does it go straight to the farmers? Ugh! Whatever. Then we need shots of the phosphate being used as fertilizer. Then get some shots of all the 'lush' growth the fertilizer produces. Great. Oh, yeah — if there is a promotional or educational video from a phosphate company, we'll pirate, cut and mix from it. That'd save us a lot of trouble and traveling actually.

The next part is going to need serious research. What I want is a map which traces all the shipments, sales and consumption of the phosphate from banana. We know that most of the phosphate was used in Australia and New Zealand. We need to know what kind of phosphate was used in Fiji. Where did you hear that? Find out that senator's name. Check the Hansard reports. Get on it. We need details and evidence, bills of purchase, shipment logs, customs logs, all that stuff. Fiji, eh? That's excellent! I couldn't have asked for a more fortuitous coincidence. We'll explore it further later. But for now, plotting it on our phosphate 'resettlement' map will lead in nicely to the next bit.

Because what I want is to juxtapose the whole phosphate processing thing with this whole yaqona processing thing. You know, harvesting the roots, drying them, pounding them, packaging the powdered yaqona. I especially like the metallic ringing of the yaqona pounding. See if we can juxtapose some of that against the metallic grinding of the phosphate plant. And of course the powdered phosphate and the powdered yaqona, that should be really effective juxtaposed because you shouldn't be able to distinguish one from the other. Yeah, let's have the phosphate sifting or falling in slow motion from one corner of the top of the frame, and the yaqona falling in slow motion from the other corner of the top of the frame. The phosphate and the yaqona should fall into the same heap in the center of the frame. Got it? Slow motion, ok? powdered falling against a black background. Slow motion.

Now here comes the climax. How will we work this? One way would be to have a voice-over over the visual. Another way would be to have text-white on black. Maybe alternate between our phosphate/yaqona visual and the text. That sounds good. And still have the voice-over.

Text:


**Yaqona**: *n. kava (Piper methysticum)*


**Yago**: *n. body, trunk of a tree, or hull of a canoe; Yagoqu: My body, Yaqona: His or Her body*

Voice-over:

In the beginning was the word and the word was -----. In one group of Pacific Islands the white man spelled the word 'y-a-g-o'; it meant 'body'. It meant you were rooted, but you could also be made to move.

'Yagoqu' means 'my body'; Yaqona means 'his body'.

Here we must have a shot of my grandfather's kaini kaini again. You know it's really funny how Indo-Fijians can never pronounce yaqona quite right — they always say yaqona instead. I guess at a subconscious level they
really know what this is all about. end this segment with a shot of my
grandfather drinking a bilo of yaqona/yaqona. fade to black.

au iango

i a kan tuangko au iango. i want to share with you my thought, idea,
consideration, reflection, imagination, deliberation, plan, solution, fable,
fairy-tale. i want to share with you my fiction.

voice-over:
in the beginning was the word and the word was - - - - - - in one group
of pacific islands the white man spelled the word 'y-a-g-o-o' and it meant
'body, trunk of a tree or hull of a canoe'. it meant you were rooted but
you could be made to move. in another group of pacific islands the white
man went and spelled the word 'i-a-n-g-o', and it meant ...

text:

| te taktiniari n taeae ni kiribati ma n ingiriti/gilbertese-english dic-
| tionary, originally compiled in french by father e. sabatier, msc and
| translated by sister oliva, fnsc. published by south pacific commis-
| sion publications bureau, sydney 1971. |

| iango: n. thought, idea, consideration, reflection, imagination, |
| deliberation, plan, solution, fable, fairy-tale, fiction; au iango: |
| my idea |

i believe that the yago in fijian is the iango in Gilbertese. that the body in
fijian is the thought in Gilbertese. that the mind-body problem is a western
philosophical neurosis. i believe that the yago in fijian is the iango in
Gilbertese. that the trunk of a tree and the hull of a canoe in fijian are the
embodiments of my Gilbertese reflection, imagination, deliberation, plan
and solution.

solution to the problem.

the problem

1993. gotta get a copy of this tape. australia/new zealand 'sixty minutes'
sairs a feature on rabi. i'm watching this on t.v. in fiji. in my parents' house.
i'm like 10 months pregnant or something, so you can imagine i wasn't
in the mood for any bullshit. what? no, no there's no footage of my
pregnancy available—thank god! anyway, so, we're watching t.v. and not
looking forward to 'sixty minutes' 'cos it's like the worst journalism
imaginable. but we could tolerate it as long as joanna paul was the host.
she disappeared from the show in 1996, though. she went from high-pro-
file host to no-profile ghost. the only maori journalist on the show, now
all they have is a cast which gibly greets us with, 'hi, i'm genevieve
westcott', 'i'm cameron bennett', 'i'm jane doe', 'i'm joe blow', on and

on, they need to say and we're all 'white'. that maori sister, joanna paul
was 'sixty minutes' saving grace. without her it's just sixty minutes of
white noise.

but back to the feature on rabi. they introduced the segment by saying
'these are the most pleasantly relocated displaced people in the world'.
the most pleasantly relocated displaced people in the world. i wanted to
fly through the television and ram down that white man's throat the
pleasure of being relocated from an island you knew like the back of your
hand, having your hand amputated and having someone else's hand sewn
in its place. they make horror movies about shit like this, man. 'pleasantly
relocated displaced people' is an oxymoron. if you've been displaced
your relocation cannot be pleasant. especially when you've been relocated
from a hurricane-free latitude to a high-frequency hurricane latitude. man,
those first hurricanes the bananans experienced when they were unceremo-
niously dropped off on rabi by the british, those first hurricanes are
legend now.

my problem with the 'sixty minutes' story was that on one hand it was
saying 'hey, these islanders are in paradise so why would they complain?'
and on the other hand they were saying 'even though they've been here
for almost fifty years, they're still pining for their homeland'. what 'sixty
minutes' assumed was that bananans had not tried to integrate into fiji's
society in any way. the reporter was so proud of this one shot of a suitcase
in an otherwise bare living room. he said, 'here after almost fifty years,
the bananans are still living out of suitcases. they seem to think they can
still return to their homeland'. for 'sixty minutes', a little kid peeking
around the door to the living room completes the pathos of the shot.

15 december 1995 was the fiftieth anniversary of the bananans' arrival
in fiji. another australian/new zealand t.v. journalism show, 'foreign
correspondent' has plans underway for a feature on the bananans, they're
going to take it one step further, though, and give one of the elders a free
trip to ocean island so that they can film it. pathos is so teleogenic isn't it?

frankly i'm sick of all this romanticism about our displacement. ocean
island, shuocase island. that ain't the real story. the real story won't be
found on ocean island anymore. despite the 290 bananans who are there
as a result of a movement in the 1970s to reclaim the island and prevent
a Gilbertese squatting takeover. one of my uncles went there as part of that
movement. i've never met him, and they say he's strange because he
wears his hair long; i think he must be really cool. don't get me wrong. i
think it's important for the bananans to assert their claim to and never
forget their homeland. but the thing is it's not just us—the people—who've
been relocated, a big part of our homeland has been relocated, too. we
gotta start claiming our relocations.
te ununiki
the whole reason for banaban displacement is colonial agriculture. i like
to say ‘agriculture is not in our blood, but our blood is in agriculture’. in
his study of banaban culture, martin silberman found that banabans
equated blood and land. that kinship was constructed not simply on blood
or biological relations, but on the exchange of land which signified
adoption. these social relations then were no less meaningful and some-
times more meaningful than biological kinship. if banabans think of blood
and land as one and the same, it follows then that in losing their land, the
banabans also lost their blood. in losing their phosphate to agriculture,
they have spilled their blood in different lands. their essential roots on
ocean island are now essentially routes to other places. places like new
zealand, australia and fiji. let’s look at fiji. agriculture in fiji.

the road to my epiphany that ‘agriculture is not in our blood, but our blood
is in agriculture’, was paved by my father. when my father was appointed
permanent secretary in the fiji government’s ministry of agriculture,
fisheries and forests in 1991, he was the first and only banaban to achieve
such status in fiji’s civil service. my saying this in public would be
considered boastful by most banabans. but the fact is, my father got to
where he is without one ounce of support from his family, and without
one cent of aid from the rabi council which dispenses the phosphate
money.

at age ten my father decided he wanted to continue his education, his
parents bitterly opposed his aspirations, saying that as the eldest of their
nine children his obligation was to leave school and help with the family’s
subsistence fishing and farming. adamantly, my father found a sponsor in
a catholic priest and left rabi to go to school at st. john’s college, cawaci
on the island of ovalau. after eight years there, the catholic church sent
him to the teachers training college of corpus christi in suva. but this was
not his vocation, and he literally walked away from the college before his
first year was over. his real desire was to become a doctor and the reason
he’d had the guts to leave corpus christi was that he’d received a letter
from the rabi council saying they would give him a scholarship to study
medicine in new zealand. when he got back to rabi to talk over the
scholarship with the council, they denied ever having made him such an
offer. apparently my father had become the victim of a political reshuffle.
devastated, he resigned himself to fishing and cutting copra with his
father, and doing clerical work for the council, when he discovered that
the page in the minutes of the meeting which had resolved to provide him
with a medical scholarship had been torn out. disgusted, my father turned
to the fiji government, which at the time was emphasising tertiary
education in agriculture. my father received a government scholarship to
do a diploma at koronivia agricultural school, and after a couple of years

of service, was given the opportunity to do a degree in agriculture at the
university of hawaii through the east-west center. (he met my mother
there, they married, and i was born.) some years later, the fiji government
sent him to australia to pursue a postgraduate diploma in agriculture. even
though for many years he was the only banaban with a university degree,
his own people and family disparaged his achievements saying, ‘who
needs a degree in farming – te ununiki?’ ‘how worthless that degree is!’
my father worked in agriculture for thirty years and swore utter loyalty
to the fijian nation before the banaban people. he has supported and
developed agricultural projects nationwide – copra, ginger, vanilla, co-
coa, rice and sugar – of course. now that he has retired he plans to have
a farm of his own to grow fiji’s quickest earning cash-crop: yaqona.

‘agriculture is not in our blood, but our blood is in agriculture.’

rabe
ok. this scene opens with my grandfather sitting in front of his morning
basin of yaqona. yeah, yeah, have the morning rays of sunshine dancing
on the floor in front of him. then do that cool filmic thing that they do
speeding up the change in light and time ... so now it’s noon and my
grandfather’s still in front of the grog bowl. half a dozen people have
come and gone. ok, now it’s evening and there are another half dozen
people sitting with him, drinking and smoking. yeah, we could show a
clock or something indicating the passage of time. great. run that whole
series through a couple more times just to make sure our viewers get the
picture that this yaqona thing is an addiction.

what we’ve got to capture here is that while their drinking of yaqona is
somewhat ritualistic, especially with the aspect of my aunts and female
cousins running back and forth to shake out the grog cloth and bring more
water for a new mix, there is an informality about the ritual. well, that
will become apparent when we move into the fijian yaqona ceremony.
right. there’s probably tons of archival footage on yaqona ceremonies.
let’s check with the usp library, and with the fiji national video centre,
and fiji ltv, but what i want us to focus on is the ‘rabe’.

rabe: v. and n. to drink yaqona after the chief, the second cup
of yaqona drunk by the herald

details:

from a new fijian dictionary compiled by n. capell for the govern-
rabe, rabe. the solemnity of the fijian yaqona ceremony is all about social hierarchy, the chiefly system is supposedly what holds fijian society together, so the order in which people are served the yaqona indicates their status. the rabe is the second bilo served, and is drunk by the chief's herald to signify his loyalty and servitude to the chief. there is an art to serving the yaqona, too. in the ceremony then we can see the reciprocity of the social order. the people serve the chief, and the chief looks after his people.

mm-hmm.

the first time i heard of the 'rabe', however, gave me an almost blasphemous notion of the significance of the term. my best friend invited me to visit her grandmother's village for a tevatu - a sort of fijian bridal shower. i thought it should be interesting as i hadn't been to one before. nothing could have prepared me for the day, though. i couldn't have known when we stopped off at navua to buy a bundle of yaqona for our sevusevu that that would start off a chain of events which was almost infinite. our first bilo came at around ten o'clock when we stopped to pay our respects to the chief of the village. we had about four bilos in total there. we left the men there and then us women went to a sister of the bride's house. after about ten minutes of small talk there, one of the sisters yelled out, 'lose!' they brought out a basin and one of the husbands was dragged out of bed to talk. that's when i heard 'rabe' for the first time. at first i thought they were saying the bilo was for me — maybe they didn't know my name but could tell i was from rabi so they thought i should have the next bowl. but on closer observation it appeared that the elder sister was calling out 'rabe' every time a bilo was filled. what had happened was the elder women had been served first, but after they had been served there was no obvious hierarchy to follow. so when the sister of the bride called out 'rabe' you had to coto to indicate that you wanted to be the next one to drink. that's what it seemed like to me; this 'rabe' is a little more chaotic, more ... democratic ... ? blasphemous.

we drank so much yaqona that day. i never realised fijian women drank so much yaqona. what grog swipers! i felt like i was drowning in those muddy waters. drinking from ten a.m. to ten p.m., i should think so. the next day i had the worst hangover i've ever had. probably because we didn't 'washdown' with beer. frankly, i can't stand yaqona. me, i'm a beer drinker.

but because beer and other alcohol is more expensive, most banabans just go for the yaqona. in case you're wondering, most banaban women don't drink alcohol or yaqona. i figure, if i at a subconscious level my grandfather and all those banaban men are trying to put roots down on rabi and in fiji by drinking yaqona into oblivion, then by drinking and loving my bear i am reclaiming my roots—reclaiming the carlton brewery hops which were probably fertilized by phosphate from ocean island. that's how i think of it. that's how i justify my alcoholism. in terms of ritual and ceremony, however, beer drinking is quite impoverished. the closest thing to the rabe in beer drinking is the 'taki'. but the taki is closer to the blasphemous rabe than the solemn rabe.

maybe that's why they allowed the name of the island to be changed from rabe to rabi. maybe the chiefs of somosomo had once used the island of rabe as a sacred site for their solemn yaqona ceremonies. but then they let the island become profaned first as a coconut plantation and then as a refuge for displaced banabans. only people who know still call the island rabe. the rest of us call it rabi.

rabi

**text:**

*te tekitinari n taetae ni kiritabati mo n ingiritu/gilbertese-english dictionary, originally compiled in french by father e. sabatier, msc and translated by sister oliva, fnisc. published by south pacific commission publications bureau, sydney 1971.*

**rabi:** (p.) adj. forming curve, bend, coil, arch, falling in waves, undulating, concave, etc.

**voice-over:**

in the beginning was the word and the word was rabi. in one group of pacific islands the word was originally pronounced rainbe and meant to drink yaqona after the chief or the second cup of yaqona drunk by the herald. there was an island named after this crucial part of the yaqona ceremony ... but the white man misspelled the word 'r-a-i-b-i' and coincidentally, in another group of pacific islands there was a word which the white man spelled in exactly the same way — but the islanders there pronounced it rapi. this word meant falling in waves, undulating, a word full of poetry and beauty. people from one of these rabi islands were displaced to the rabi in the other group of pacific islands ... there, in between these semantics, these homonyms, this word play, these images, these semiotics lie the roots and routes of a displaced banaban.

**epilogue: my life as a camera**

this is first and foremost a paper that was written for a conference on knowledge and power in pacific islands studies, at the university of hawaii in december of 1995. it is not really the treatment for a film project.
when i was trying to write about banaban history, though, i found that more images came to my mind than words.

still, it was not clear to me why i'd been drawn to this visual approach until i returned to fiji from hawaii. my grandfather had been diagnosed with tuberculosis while i was away and he was convalescing at the towomey hospital in suva. the first time i visited him there was on a wednesday with my aunt - she went everyday to take him a home-cooked meal and freshly laundered clothes. my grandfather said to me in Gilbertese, "i was wondering when you were coming to see me. when did you get back?" i said, 'te manabong, ma i akua irom te mananga'. my aunt corrected me. 'i irom te mananga'. and i smiled sheepishly while the two of them chatted quickly because my aunt was in a rush.

the next time i visited the old man was with my father. this time we stayed much longer. my grandfather and father took their time talking (my father's visits were rare) about this and that, i didn't pay attention to most of it - trying to understand Gilbertese exhausts me, but i did catch snippets in spite of myself.

dad: i saw some of your peers at the tebewimanimauna celebrations.

kaka: they must have asked you where i was, how i am?

dad: no.

kaka: no?!

dad: i just saw them, i didn't speak to them.

kaka: oh.

(silence)

kaka: did you see nei bebe there?

dad: no, i didn't see anyone except rakommwa.

kaka: i miss bebe so! i remember when she came to see me here. she said, 'papa! kaka! are they looking after you here?' i was so happy to see her. i really love that child. i was sorry she had to go back to rabi for the school holidays.

(silence)

dad: are you going to the toilet alright?

kaka: oh, yes. most of the time, but sometimes the food here makes me go too much.

my father smiles and looks at me, but my grandfather has been studiously ignoring me ever since he said something to me which i didn't understand and couldn't respond to.

i don't feel hurt. i don't feel jealous that he's so keen on my cousin bebe. i'm not embarrassed that my father has asked him about his lower bodily functions. i don't feel anything except an occasional wave of grief swelling in my chest.

my incompetence in the Gilbertese language makes me rely more on my eyes than my ears. i read. i read lines on bodies. i study. i study each strand of hair of my grandfather's bad haircut. i study the spaces between bleached edges. follow the curves of forehead and cheekbones. discover that eyebrows are really bones. and that islanders' noses are not all that flat. marvel at the grace of a toothless mouth and a stubborn chin. i can't help myself and he doesn't pay me any mind. just keeps talking to my father. occasionally i turn my 'camera' on my father but the lines on my grandfather's body will me to record them, remember them. the loose skin on his arm is as furrowed as a tract of agricultural land, faded tattoos testify that his name is 'teawa tenamo'. in between his first and second name are two hands clasped ... reminding me of the labour union motto 'united we stand, divided we fall'. i read my grandfather's tattoo and then i raise my eyes to the identification card above his bed:

name: teawa tenamo
date of arrival: 12/11/95
race: banaban

i wonder if the doctors and nurses and other patients here read him like i do.

on his right arm, my grandmother's name, 'taveua'. i can't remember if she had her name tattooed on her body. we know he left his mark on her in other ways, and i wonder if she were still alive whether i'd focus so much on him. mmm.

his legs. i took my time getting there - gathering strength to face the harshness of the 'desert' i last saw in 1993. but it's not there. my father gives voice to the lines which have now formed on my brow, 'no more kanikani, eh?'

fade to black.

roron rabi (rabi national anthem)

soundtrack:
roron rabi ierake
nora tamaroan oti nta
anta ai wane man aorea
e na reke te kabala n tera

chorus/
baina te nana n naa ae ni

take beka rake aran rabi
tangrie kai abara
ni waiki nake te raaroi

ko na ba tei rabi ngkoe
kabongamako -bukini
References and further reading


H.C. and H.E. Maude (eds), The Book of Banaba from the Maude and Grimble Papers: and published works. (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, USP, 1994).


Martin Silverman, Disconcerning Issue: Meaning and Struggle in a Resettled Pacific Community. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971)


Note