Reconceptualisation of *Girmit* Memory: Fiji's Response to the Re-evaluation of the Colonial Past

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Critically re-evaluating major events in the national past, such as colonialism, is a global trend. The recent developments in Fijian colonial memory follow this trend. Theories of cosmopolitan memory and the subsequent theoretical development of a relationship between cosmopolitan memory with internationalised norms and the local and national reaction to it suggest that memory scholars examine local contexts to understand the adoption (or lack of adaptation) of a cosmopolitan memory. This study considers the memory of *girmit*, the indentured labour system, one of the most visible colonial legacies in Fiji. The paper examines why Fijians re-evaluated their colonial legacies in the 2010s. Through an analysis of collective memory, this study argues that Fiji did not simply follow the global trend of the re-evaluation of colonial history, but reconceptualises the cosmopolitan memory into a social and political agenda.
Keywords: Colonial Past, Cosmopolitan Memory, Fiji, Girmit.

A reconceptualização da memória do *girmit*: A resposta das Fiji à reavaliação do passado colonial

É hoje uma tendência global a reavaliação crítica de acontecimentos importantes no passado de cada país, como por exemplo o colonialismo. Os desenvolvimentos recentes na memória colonial das Ilhas Fiji seguem esta tendência. Teorias de memória cosmopolita e o subsequente desenvolvimento teórico de uma relação entre memória com normas internacionalizadas e uma reação local e nacional a esta sugerem que os investigadores da memória investigam contextos locais para compreender a adoção (ou falta de adaptação) de uma memória cosmopolita. Este estudo debruça-se sobre a memória do *girmit*, o sistema de trabalho forçado que é um dos legados coloniais mais visíveis nas Fiji. O artigo examina as razões pelas quais os habitantes deste país reavaliaram a sua memória colonial nos anos de 2010. Através de uma análise da memória coletiva, este estudo defende que as Fiji não seguiram simplesmente a tendência global de reavaliação da história colonial, mas reconceptualizam a memória colonial para uma agenda social e política.
Palavras-chave: Passado colonial, memória cosmopolita, Fiji, Girmit.

Reconceptualisation of *Girmit* Memory: Fiji's Response to the Re-evaluation of the Colonial Past

Masaki Kataoka*

Introduction

Fiji is a multi-ethnic country with a population composed of indigenous Fijians, Fijians of Indian origin (Indo-Fijian), Europeans, Chinese and other Pacific Islanders citizens. During the colonial period, the British colonial government introduced the indentured labour system, *girmit*, which brought Indians to Fiji as a plantation labour force. This system drastically changed the Fijian demography and shaped its subsequent social structure.

Fijians' interpretation of the colonial era varies depending on the actors, periods and other social factors. On the one hand, Indo-Fijians often depict the colonial period in a negative light, since their ancestors who worked in sugarcane plantations under the indenture system, suffered in slave-like living and working conditions. Thus, they tend to see the British colonial government as the cause of their ethnic tragedy. On the other hand, many indigenous Fijians viewed the colonial period positively, since they, especially the chiefs entitled to govern indigenous communities, had a close relationship with the colonial government and retained their ethnic, political, and indigenous benefits. However, in recent years, indigenous Fijians have paid more attention to the plight of Indian workers under British rule, which indigenous Fijians rarely

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recollected during the twentieth century. Consequently, Fiji's colonial memory has refocused on the brutal nature of British control and its inhumane policies toward Indian workers. Indigenous Fijians have also shifted their attention from having a good relationship with the colonial government to focus on their relationship with the Indo-Fijians.

Fijians' narratives about *girmit* have also changed. One feature of the newly developed *girmit*-related discourse is the re-evaluation of the colonial past. This is consistent with the global trend of critically re-evaluating colonialism. The twenty-first century has witnessed politicians, especially European politicians, critically re-evaluating European nations' past wrongdoings, such as the Atlantic slave trade, oppression of colonised peoples, and mass murder in wartime, and sometimes expressing sorrow for the acts of their predecessors. What is the relationship between the global trend of the re-evaluation of unfortunate pasts and this Fijian confrontation of colonial legacies? Is Fiji simply following the global trend, or are there national and local contexts at play? To explore the relationship between the re-evaluation of the colonial past at the transnational level and the Fijian local context, this study analyses some Fijian cases of the re-evaluation of colonial memories by various actors, especially politicians and activists, attempting to construct different versions of memory. It then examines the Fijian motivations and purposes for critically re-evaluating the colonial past.

The first section of this article looks at the brief history of Fiji to present a broad picture of the Fijian context, especially the ethnic relations in the colonial period and colonial legacies still haunting Fijian society. The second section of this study reviews the theoretical explanations of the recent global trend of the re-evaluation of past wrongdoings and outlines the theoretical and analytical framework of this study. The final and third section examines some cases of memory reconstruction in Fiji and argues that the country witnessed a substantial shift in its social framework of memory in the 2010s. After discussing one of the major examples of the re-interpretation of colonial history— the memory of the *Syria* shipwreck—the study concludes that Fijians have reconceptualised the global trend of the re-evaluation

of the colonial past according to the local contexts for the sake of their social and political goals.

Historical Context of Colonial Legacies

The re-evaluation of colonial history in Fiji began under the prime ministership of Voreqe Bainimarama, who seized administrative power by force in 2006. Bainimarama justified his coup by arguing that the corruption and nepotism of the Qarase administration had reached an unacceptable level, and his coup was to "clean up" the corrupt government.[1] Bainimarama tried to discredit his political opponents, especially those who joined the Qarase's SDL party, by arguing that they utilised a race-card to divide the nation for their political benefits.[2] While he criticised major political parties, which support-base was either indigenous Fijian or Indo-Fijian, Bainimarama framed his FijiFirst government as a truly multi-ethnic political party acting to overcome the ethnic division and intolerance created by previous governments. Since his coup, Bainimarama produced a series of policies that, according to him, aimed to promote ethnic harmony, national unity and the realisation of a fairer and democratic society. Political attempts to achieve ethnic harmony have not been very common in Fijian history. Even Kamisese Mara, the first Prime Minister of Fiji who introduced the principle of multiracialism in the newly independent state in the 1970s, acted, though in very subtle ways, to maintain indigenous rights at the expense of the Indo-Fijians.[3]

The Bainimarama's attempts to "promote" ethnic harmonisation sound new or radical to Fijian experts, who are aware of the ethnic context in Fijian history. Specifically, Fijian ethnic relations cannot be dis-

1 Jon Fraenkel and Stewart Firth, "The Enigmas of Fiji's Good Governance Coup," in *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A Coup to End All Coups?*, ed. Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal (Canberra: ANU Press, 2009), 6.

2 See The United Nations, "Address by Mr. Josaia V. Bainimarama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji and Commander of the Fiji Military Forces," 2013, http://undocs.org/en/A/62/PV.10; and Jyoti Pratibha, "PM: We Will Keep You Safe, Secure," *Fiji Sun*, 31 January 2018.

3 Auckland Fiji Association, *Auckland Fiji Association Educational Booklet: Fiji: The 1987 Coup* (Auckland: Auckland Fiji Association, 1988), 3-4.

cussed without considering the colonial legacies. The Deed of Cession, signed in 1874 by thirteen chiefs and Sir Hercules Robinson, a British representative acting on behalf of the Empire, declared Britain's exclusive right to make laws applicable to all territories in Fiji. However, it also promised to respect "the rights of the property of the inhabitants."[4] Thus, the colonial government adopted a series of indigenous policies that guaranteed indigenous rights and preserved indigenous customs. Sir Arthur Gordon, the first Governor-General of the colony of Fiji, was particularly interested in preserving the interests of indigenous Fijians. Gordon believed that Western capitalism would result in the destruction of indigenous culture and, in the worst-case scenario, might end with the extinction of indigenous Fijians. Thus, his native policy was to 'protect' indigenous Fijians from the pressure of modernisation and let them administer themselves under the chiefs' leadership.[5] Fijian tradition, social system and customs varied depending on region. For example, the eastern side of Fiji was more hierarchical similar to Polynesian tradition such as Tonga and Samoa, while the western side of Viti Levu, the largest island in Fiji, had a more egalitarian social system similar to Melanesian societies. However, Gordon considered the eastern tradition to be a model of Fijian tradition, and applied it to the rest of the colony. Consequently, the communal system based on the supervision of the chiefs became a model of Fijian tradition. To implement this model effectively, he established the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), which handled all native affairs and represented the people's voice regarding indigenous interests.[6]

One of the most significant watershed moments in Fijian history was the introduction of the indenture system, or *girmit*, which brought Indians to Fiji as a labour force. This policy was closely related to

4 Joeli Baledrokadroka, "The Fijian Understanding of the Deed of Cession Treaty of 1874", paper presented at the Traditional Lands in the Pacific Region: Indigenous Common Property Resources in Convulsion or Cohesion, Brisbane, 7-9 September 2003, 6.

5 Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 14-15.

6 Raymond Frederick Watters, *Koro: Economic Development and Social Change in Fiji* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 27-28.

the indigenous preservation policy. Plantation owners faced a labour shortage, as Gordon prohibited them from recruiting indigenous Fijians. Gordon's solution was to adopt the indenture system he had used as the governor of Trinidad and Mauritius.[7] The system began in 1879 and brought 60,639 Indians to Fiji as contract workers.[8] Most contract workers, or *girmitiyas*, were sent to work in sugarcane plantations for five years. After five years, they could either return to India at their own expense or extend the contract for another five years. Those who worked for ten years were entitled to return to India at the government's expense.[9] However, many chose to stay in Fiji as "free men."[10] Thus, many Fijians of Indian origin are descendants of the *girmitiyas*.

However, the *girmit* system was not friendly to Indian workers, as European employers tried to maximise profits and minimise labour costs. They overworked the workers, and used whips and sticks to coerce them to complete tasks. If the workers failed to complete the tasks, they were not paid the full wage. Thus, life in *girmit* was often described as *narak* (hell).[11] As noted in later sections, many narratives, testimonies, records and interview transcripts point to the inhumane nature of the system, and these historical memories have been shared among the Indo-Fijian population since the colonial period.

Meanwhile, the ethnic relationship between the indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians is complex. Both feared the other because of their different appearances, customs and cultures. Some Indians saw indigenous Fijians as *rachaks*, meaning cannibals in their tradition, or *jungalees*, meaning someone with a barbaric character. Indians formed a group of five to six men with sticks when they went out because of their fear of

7 Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: The Journal of Pacific History, 1983), 9.

8 Lal, *Broken Waves*, 14.

9 Lal, *Broken Waves*, 38-39.

10 Adrian C. Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific: A Study of Fiji Indian Rural Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 6-7.

11 Ahmed Ali, *Girmit: Indian Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum and Ministry of National Reconciliation and Multi-Ethnic Affairs, 2004), 7.

indigenous Fijians.[12] Meanwhile, indigenous Fijians also feared Indians. As many Indians chose to stay in Fiji, demand for agricultural land increased. These demands were a threat to the indigenous Fijians, as the native land inherited from their ancestors had special meaning for them. The meaning of the Fijian word for land, *vanua*, includes not only a physical place, but also the people of the territory and customs practiced there. *Vanua* is one of the most prominent ideologies shaping indigenous Fijian identity.[13] As losing *vanua* was considered synonymous with losing identity, Fijians felt threatened by the Indian demand for land, which enhanced ethnic tension between the two races.

However, many testimonies and studies suggest that although they feared each other, some of them constructed good ethnic relationships. Ahmed Ali's collection of *girmitiyas*' interviews showed that they regularly communicated with the indigenous population without conflict.[14] Thus, their relationship was not necessarily as bad as suggested. However, the indigenous chiefs did not support regular communication with Indian workers. Furthermore, the chiefs asked the colonial government to regulate the entry of Indian workers into indigenous villages.[15] Thus, the racial division was partly formed through colonial decisions in collaboration with the chiefs.

Preserving indigenous traditions, maintaining an indigenous paramount status and regulations on gaining native land by Indians were colonial legacies that were central to the national debate on Fiji's independence from Britain in the 1960s. Indo-Fijians wanted immediate independence and demanded equal treatment for all Fijian citizens, re-

12 Ali, *Girmit*, 4.

13 For more details on the notion of *vanua* and the relationship with land, see Volker Boege et al., *Voices of the People: Perceptions and Preconditions for Democratic Development in Fiji*, ed. Manfred Ernst and Felicity Szesnat (Suva: Institute for Research and Social Analysis, Pacific Theological College, 2013); Jacqueline Ryle, "Roots of Land and Church: The Christian State Debate in Fiji," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 5, no. 1 (2005): 58-78, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250500078071.

14 Ali collected many testimonies from former indentured workers to show what the lives of *girmitiyas* looked like, see Ali, *Girmit*. For testimonies mentioning a good ethnic relationship during the *girmit*, see interviews by Bhujiawan, Jagan and Mahabir in Ali, *Girmit*.

15 Ali, *Girmit*, 4.

gardless of their ethnic background.[16] However, Europeans and some indigenous Fijians, especially the chiefs in the east, resisted the independence movement. The Indo-Fijian demand for equality, dominance in the economy and a growing population tied indigenous Fijians with Europeans in resisting the Indian demand and preserving colonial legacies.[17]

Fiji achieved independence in 1970; however, debates regarding the colonial legacies remained a heated topic in Fijian politics. For instance, the country experienced many racial issues after independence. One of the most significant political events affecting Fijian ethnic relations were the coups. In 1987, The National Federation Party (NFP) and Fijian Labour Party (FLP) agreed to electoral cooperation to fight the Alliance Party, which had formed the government since its independence for seventeen years with support from indigenous Fijians. When the coalition won the 1987 election, many indigenous Fijians feared that Fiji would be controlled by Indians, as the support base for the NFP was the Indo-Fijians. Subsequently, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka forcibly ousted the newly elected government. A similar coup occurred in 2000. After these coups, indigenous-led political parties formed the government and introduced a series of affirmative action policies. As indigenous Fijians believed that Indo-Fijians dominated the economy, they justified affirmative action policies to boost the indigenous economy and catch up with Indo-Fijians. Since the coups in 1987 and 2000 were ethnically motivated, and indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians had become economic rivals due to affirmative action policies, Fijian society in these periods witnessed deep ethnic cleavages.

Voreqe Bainimarama first appeared in politics in the 2000s. He removed the Qarase government by force with military power. Bainimarama's coup was different from previous coups, because it was not racially motivated. Bainimarama justified his coup by arguing that the Qarase administration was not capable of democratically governing the country.[18]

16 Ali, *Girmit*, 24.

17 Alexander Mamak, *Colour, Culture & Conflict: A Study of Pluralism in Fiji* (Rushcutters Bay: Pergamon Press, 1978), 144.

18 The United Nations, "Address by Commodore Josaia V. Bainimarama, Prime Minister and Commander of the Military Forces of the Republic of Fiji," 2007, http://undocs.org/en/A/62/PV.10.

Since he took office, he introduced a series of reforms about ethnic relations. For example, Bainimarama changed the definition of the term "Fijian." In Fiji, the term "Fijian" was used solely for indigenous Fijians. Fijians of Indian origin were not called Fijians; instead, they were called Indo-Fijians or Indians. Bainimarama insisted that not calling the country's citizens Fijians could not be justified and did not make any sense. Although there was (and still is) harsh criticism by conservative indigenous Fijians arguing that calling non-indigenous Fijians as Fijians would undermine indigenous identity, Bainimarama successfully put the new definition into the Constitution promulgated in 2013.[19]

Bainimarama also banned government officials from disclosing ethnic and religious data to the public.[20] The government insisted that ethnic data in the census would remind people of racial divisions, because such data would show which ethnic group is wealthier or more educated. Arguing that such data had created and deepened ethnic cleavages, Bainimarama ordered the Bureau of Statistics to not produce any data relating to ethnicity.[21]

Bainimarama also denied colonial legacies. One of the examples is the abolishment of the GCC. He pointed out that "it is part of the country's colonial past" and "perpetuated elitism and created divisive politics."[22] He explained that was a colonial residue which hindered national unity, as GCC members utilised their communal power to prioritise indigenous interests rather than national interests. Thus, he abolished the GCC.[23]

19 The Constitution of Fiji (2013).

20 Wadan Narsey, "Lack of Integrity - Shooting the Expert Messenger," *Fiji Times*, 18 September 2021, https://www.fijitimes.com/lack-of-integrity-shooting-the-expert-messenger/.

21 Kemueli Naiqama, the then Chief Executive of the Bureau of Statistics, was sacked after the Bureau released the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) with ethnic data. The Attorney-General explained that the government sacked him, because he did not act "in line with government policy". For more details, see Mere Nailatikau, "The Promise and Peril of Statistics in Fiji," *The Interpreter*, 2021, accessed 28 October, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/promise-peril-statistics-fiji.

22 Michael Field, "Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs Abolished," *Stuff*, 14 March 2012, https://www.stuff.co.nz/world/6573396/Fijis-Great-Council-of-Chiefs-abolished.

23 Rabuka, a 1987 coup leader, who won the 2022 election and formed a new government, declared that his government would re-establish the GCC.

The justification for such policies of denying colonial legacies is based on Bainimarama's belief that the racial divisions in Fijian society was rooted in colonial policies. Bainimarama argued that the ethnic relationship between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians was not as bad as suggested, as they lived cooperatively.[24] Instead, he argued that it was the colonial government and some conservative chiefs who banned indigenous Fijians from sheltering Indo-Fijians from escaping violence on the plantation.[25]

Thus, the political discourse on colonial history produced by Bainimarama were always negative. He identified British colonisation as the cause of the ethnic division that Fiji had been struggling to overcome since independence. He shed a negative light on colonial history to make people aware that colonial residues were still haunting Fijian societies. Thus, Bainimarama's stance on the colonial past contradicts that of the indigenous politicians and influential chiefs, considering their positive expression of colonial rule.[26]

To analyse the relationship between Bainimarama's anti-colonial position and the recent global trend of confronting colonialism, the next section develops a theoretical framework for the re-evaluation of colonial history and the shape of the universal understanding of colonialism with globally shared international norms.

The Global Trend of Re-evaluating Past Wrongdoings

The twenty-first century is often called "the age of apology," as the post-Cold War period has witnessed several cases of political apologies for the past wrongdoings of states.[27]Examples include Emmanuel Ma-

24 For example, see The Fijian Government, "Hon. PM's Remarks at Fiji's 140th Girmit Remembrance Day Commemorations," 2019, accessed 14 May 2019, https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Speeches/HON--PM%E2%80%99S-REMARKS-AT-FIJI%E2%80%99S-140TH-GIRMIT-REMEMBRAN.aspx.

25 The Fijian Government, "Hon. PM's Remarks."

26 For example, Mara nostalgically recalled the British rule prior to independence. See Kamisese Mara, *The Pacific Way: A Memoir* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

27 See Roy L. Brooks, *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). See also Marieke

cron's apology to the Algerians for French colonial policies, which he described as a "crime against humanity."[28] It also includes Germany's apology for the mass murder in Namibia that occurred more than a hundred years ago.[29] Kampf explains this trend as "... the multicultural condition and the politics of recognition, which enabled former peripheral, marginalized, and silenced groups to manifest their voices and to demand symbolic restitution for past wrongs, also contributed to the emergence of the apology trend."[30]

The age of the apology requires politicians to acknowledge past wrongdoings, even though the current governments have played no role in them. Furthermore, present governments are encouraged to admit the state's responsibility to apologise on behalf of former governments. This new trend has spread worldwide and resulted in the internationalisation of colonial and slave history, urging each country to face its unfortunate past.

Memory scholars have examined internationalised memory and developed several concepts to analyse the phenomenon. Levy and Sznaider argue that the process of shaping collective memory has changed from a monolithic top-down approach within state or social borders to the sharing of a cosmopolitan memory under globalisation and the digital age.[31]As cosmopolitan memory was developed through debates over the understanding and interpretation of the Holocaust, it brought universalised ethical norms into national and local contexts. In this sense, the age of apology can be interpreted as a product of the in-

Zoodsma and Juliette Schaafsma, "Examining the 'Age of Apology': Insights from the Political Apology Database," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 3 (2021), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211024696.

28 Manu Saadia, "France Should Apologize for Colonialism in Algeria," *The Washington Post*, 23 February 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/02/23/france-should-apologize-for-colonialism-in-algeria/.

29 Lynsey Chutel, "Germany Finally Apologizes for Its Other Genocide - More Than a Century Later," *Quartz Africa*, 16 July 2016, https://qz.com/africa/733463/germany-finally-apologizes-for-its-other-genocide-more-than-a-century-later/.

30 Zohar Kampf, "The Age of Apology: Evidence from the Israeli Public Discourse," *Social Semiotics* 19, no. 3 (2009): 260, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330903072649.

31 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431002005001002.

ternationally transcendent memory shared by many countries and the internationalised norms attached to it. This is because today, nation states are under the unspoken pressure to acknowledge their responsibility for their wrongs, such as colonialism.

However, universalised norms cannot simply replace local collective memory with cosmopolitan memory. Ryan argues that national memory, which may lack an ethical perspective, can draw on universal norms and enrich the national collective memory.[32] However, Ryan also argues that national memory does not necessarily adhere to the cosmopolitan memory and its ethical norms, because cosmopolitan memory has "polyvalency" and is open for interpretation by "national memory consumers."[33] Thus, Ryan suggests that memory scholars consider the relationship between cosmopolitan and national memories.[34] Cosmopolitan memory is nationalised according to a country's historical context, national interests, and position in international relations. Thus, cosmopolitan memory may be distorted, manipulated, and utilised for current local interests, which is why, memory scholars should explore how individual nations engage cosmopolitan memory and the diffusion of the norms attached to it.

Several studies have analysed the treatment and consumption of internationalised memory in non-Western countries. Kampf examined the Israeli case of political apologies in the local context by considering "the importing of the global trend into the local arena."[35] Drayton explored how Barbados reacted to the global trend of removing and toppling statues of colonial officers and slave traders, which became global during and after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the 2010s.[36] Drayton noted that the social claims in Barbados for the

32 Lorraine Ryan, "Cosmopolitan Memory and National Memory Conflicts: On the Dynamics of Their Interaction," *Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 4 (2014): 504, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783312467097.

33 Ryan, "Cosmopolitan Memory," 511.

34 Ryan, "Cosmopolitan Memory," 511.

35 Kampf, "The Age of Apology," 258-259.

36 Richard Drayton, "Rhodes Must Not Fall? Statues, Postcolonial 'Heritage' and Temporality," *Third Text* 33, no. 4-5 (2019), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1653073.

removal of Horatio Nelson's statue, a British Admiral Lord, seemed to follow the global trend. However, the decision to remove or keep the statue also happened in context of the potential negative impacts of the removal on British tourists coming into the country.

In particular, this study analyses how the Fijian case can be placed in this global trend of the re-evaluation of the colonial past. The negative perception of colonial memory in contemporary Fiji resembles the global trend. This study seeks to examine how Fiji contextualises its colonial past in this age of the re-evaluation of colonialism with the universally shared norm of human rights. In the Fijian case, one of the most obvious examples of the re-evaluation of colonial history is the memory of indentured Indian workers. The following sections examine how Fijians have reconstructed their colonial memories and analyse this reconstruction from a Fijian perspective.

Girmit Memories in the Past

To understand the recent re-evaluation of the colonial past, we also need to understand the historical representations in earlier years. Over the years, Indo-Fijian communities have narrated the suffering of their ancestors. The first-hand narratives of the *girmitiyas* collected by Ali suggest that *girmit* life was *narak*.[37] One of the causes of this *narak*-like life of the *girmitiyas* was violence by the overseers. Plantation life was hierarchical. At the top were planters or managers of sugar companies; below them were European overseers, followed by *sardars* (Indian supervisors promoted from amongst indentured workers). All other Indian workers were at the bottom of the hierarchy.[38] Naidu's investigation of violence in indentures also revealed testimonies of ex-*girmitiyas* about European overseers and Indian *sardars* often using whips and

37 See Ali, *Girmit*. Ali's work has many statements illustrating this: "We were all herded into a punt like pigs and taken to Nukulau where we stayed for a fortnight. We were given rice that was full of worms. We were kept and fed like animals"; and "By the time I had completed my work, it was nearly 1 am and when I got home and had cooked and eaten, it was 4 am. And at 5 am I was to go back to work for another day. That day I felt bad. And by the time I went to bed it was morning again".

38 Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva: World University Service, 1980), 43-44.

sticks to coerce them into working, suggesting that the abuse of power was normal in plantation life.[39]

Former indentured workers and historians have written and published stories of violence and miserable lives.[40] These writings often compare the *girmit* system with slavery to emphasise the suffering experienced by Indian workers and highlight that the *girmit* system was invented as an alternative to the slave system. In academia, Tinker was the among the first to link the *girmit* system with the slave trade.[41] Ali also followed Tinker's argument and linked *girmit* to slavery.[42] Gounder argued that the "academic master narratives" in the 1970s emphasised the immoralisation of the indenture system, which is why Tinker and Ali "painted girmit as another name for slavery."[43] The description of the *girmit* past as slavery is also observed in Indo-Fijian narratives. For example, Totaram Sanadhya's unpublished scripts, which historians translated from Hindi into English, equalised *girmit* with slavery.[44]

In the 1970s and 1980s, these *girmit* narratives were prevalent in Indo-Fijian communities. Gounder analysed a radio programme, called *Girmit Gāthā*, which started broadcasting in 1979 in Hindi as a commemorative centenary programme for the arrival of the *girmitiyas* in 1879.[45] The radio programme introduced oral *girmitiya* narratives. Since its first broadcast in 1979, *Girmit Gāthā* was replayed annually

39 Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture*.

40 Sanadhya was a former indentured worker who published a book about his *girmit* life in Hindi, which significantly impacted the Indo-Fijian community. See Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and the Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva: Quality Print Ltd, 2003). For historians' works, see Subramani, ed., *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979); Lal, *Girmitiyas*; Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture*; and Kenneth L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962).

41 Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

42 Ahmed Ali, "Indians in Fiji: An Interpretation," in *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, ed. Subramani (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979).

43 Farzana Gounder, "Restorying Girmit: Commemorative Journalism, Collective Consciousness and the Imagined Community," *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji* 15, no. 1 (2017): 50.

44 Brij V. Lal and Barry Shineberg, "The Story of the Haunted Line: Totaram Sanadhya Recalls the Labour Lines in Fiji," *The Journal of Pacific History* 26, no. 1 (1991): 109, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00223349108572653.

45 Gounder, "Restorying Girmit."

when Fijians celebrated *Girmit* Day on 14 May, the day *girmitiyas* first arrived in Fiji. According to Gounder, the radio programme functioned to stabilise *girmit* narratives in the public sphere and helped establish a common *girmit* history, which the Indo-Fijians shared with other members of the Indo-Fijian community. Gounder argued that the collective memory of *girmit* shaped a "pan Fiji Indian history."[46]

Notably, the contents of historical narratives about *girmitiyas* were predominantly focused on slave-like living conditions, overwork, violence and *narak*. However, there was limited criticism of the British government for taking Indians away from India or devastating Indian culture, such as the disappearance of the caste system. For the Indo-Fijians of the second and third generations, leaving India or losing their caste did not bring about any traumatic sense of ethnic history. Rather, they are proud of being Fijians and of Fiji being the origin of their cultural identity. Certainly, they did not nostalgically recollect Indian villages as the origins of their identity.[47] Thus, although they blamed the harsh treatment under British colonialism, they rarely blamed it for taking their ancestors from India to Fiji. This has shaped the social framework of memory in the Indo-Fijian community. Maurice Halbwachs theorises that people recall the past only through the lens of the society to which they belong.[48] In the Indo-Fijian social framework of memory, the historical fact that the British Empire took Indians away from their ancestral land does not seem to provide any social goals nor enhance their collective identity. Rather, recalling this may have the opposite effect of consolidating their collective identity of Fijians.

What is the social aim of recalling slave-like living conditions, violence in the sugarcane field and inhumane treatment by the colonial

46 Gounder, "Restorying Girmit," 48.

47 See Nemani Delaibatiki, "Fijian Spirit still Strong as Ever for Girmit Descendants Depite Painful Political Events," *Fiji Sun*, 21 May 2021; and Lincoln Tan, "The Battle for Identity: Fijian-Indians Fight to Be Recognised as Pasifika, not Asians," *New Zealand Herald*, 16 March 2021, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/the-battle-for-identity-fijian-indians-fight-to-be-recognised-as-pasifika-not-asians/SFBBKZBC4ADFK3Y7LY7JAUZ3OY/.

48 See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Maurice Halbwachs, *Kioku no Shakaiteki Wakugumi [Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire]*, trans. Tomoyuki Suzuki (Tokyo: Seikyusha, 2018).

government among Indo-Fijians? Scholars of Indo-Fijian literature and identity have revealed that Indo-Fijians have attempted to overcome the insecurity that they have faced since the arrival of their ancestors in Fiji.[49] They were treated like slaves during the indenture period. Even after they became 'free', their social and political rights were regulated under colonial rule based on the native preservation policies. Thus, they demanded a fairer social and political system amid heated debates for independence in the 1950s and 1960s. However, their call for the one-person, one-vote principle and the abolishment of the communal voting system were rejected by both indigenous Fijians and Europeans. Although they won some democratic elections, their supporting governments were forcefully removed. Affirmative action policies prioritising indigenous Fijians undoubtedly affected the formation of the Indo-Fijians' sense of victimisation.

They have produced and reproduced the *girmit* memory, because the victimised sense helped unite the Indo-Fijian community firmly and gave it the moral ground to pursue a fairer and more equal society. This was the social framework of memory among Indo-Fijians. Thus, to overcome the insecurity that they and their ancestors had faced since the *girmit* days, Indo-Fijians focused on the brutal nature of colonialism.

The Change in the Social Framework of Memory

Notably, the *girmit* stories were shared only within the Indo-Fijian community. The radio programme and some writings mentioned above did not reach other communities and ethnic groups, because the radio programme was broadcast in Hindi and some writings were written in Hindi, although some were translated into English later. This is because their social aim in producing the memory of victimisation was to consolidate their Indo-Fijian identity and achieve their ethnic, social and political goals to overcome the insecurity they had experienced.

49 See for example Markus Pangerl, "Notions of Insecurity among Contemporary Indo-Fijian Communities," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (2007); Maebh Long, "Girmit, Postmemory, and Subramani," *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 2, no. 2 (2018); Khemendra K Kumar and Subashni Lata Kumar, "Roots and Routes: Tracing the Trends of Indo-Fijian Fiction," *Journal of Migration Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2022).

However, Bainimarama's political intervention in ethnic relations created a different social norm that both ethnic groups are expected to share and obey. Bainimarama's political behaviour was criticised because of its draconian nature and faced substantial backlash mainly from indigenous Fijians. However, his invention of a new level playing field required politicians, social groups and even ordinary Fijians to act, at least at the public level, as promoters of ethnic harmonisation by handling the colonial past.

Under this new social and political norm, the reconstruction of *girmit* memory in the 2010s happened by those who wished to refocus, re-interpret and reconstruct *girmit* history to promote harmonious and reconciliatory ethnic relations. These actors are referred to as "memory activists" in this study. Memory activism can be defined as social practices, apart from political endeavours, to enhance collective acts by reconstructing collective memory to realise public goods, such as reconciliation and democratisation.[50] Memory activists often challenge the dominant collective memories established through state-led commemoration and memory construction. In Fiji, memory activists reconstructed the *girmit* past by looking at those aspects of history to which both indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians paid little attention. They disseminated a new version of colonial memory to the wider public, and encouraged both Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians to learn and recognise how the two ethnic groups co-existed under colonial rule.

One of the most obvious examples of the reconstruction of *girmit* history in contemporary Fiji is the 1884 maritime accident. The ship *Syria*, carrying indentured Indian workers from India to Fiji, ran aground at Nasilai Reef on 11 May 1884. The accident claimed fifty-nine lives, making it the worst maritime accident in Fijian history. William McGregor, a chief medical officer of the colony, reported on the details of the accident and the rescue operation that he led.[51]

50 Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017), 1-2.

51 William McGregor, "The McGregor Report (On the Syria Rescue Operation [1884])," review of Nilima Prasad, *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji* 14, no. 1 (2016).

McGregor received a distress call from the crew at 9 pm on 12 May 1884. He immediately organised a rescue team and headed for Nasilai Reef. The scene there was devastating. The hull of the ship had separated into two, and several parts of the ship, including the masts, spars, and sails, were already in the water. Survivors either stayed on the ship or were in the water. McGregor detailed the work of his rescue team, which saved many Indian lives, calling attention to their courage to enter the water to save hundreds of Indians. Brij Lal, a prominent Indo-Fijian historian, wrote an article in 1979 detailing the maritime accident based on archival documents, including The McGregor Report.[52] Lal argued that "The loss of life would have been much greater but for the perserverance and courage of the rescue crew, especially its leader, Dr William MacGregor."[53]

The *Syria* accident has been highlighted since the 2010s by academia and memory activists working to promote ethnic harmonisation. They critically re-evaluated the *Syria* memory constructed based on The McGregor Report. They argued that the report was written from a coloniser's perspective to emphasise European contributions to the rescue operation while ignoring and minimising the contributions of other actors.

Chand investigated archival materials related to the *Syria* incident and argued that the official *Syria* history, which was circulated in the 20th century, relied chiefly on The McGregor Report.[54] Archival research has shown that McGregor's rescue team was not the sole party that saved the Indians. Chand argued that indigenous Fijians from nearby villages arrived at the scene before McGregor's team arrived and saved the Indians from drowning.[55] Chand continued that McGre-

52 Brij V. Lal, "The Wreck of the Syria, 1884," in *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, ed. Subramani (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979).

53 Lal, "The Wreck of the Syria," 35.

54 See Ganesh Chand, "'Defactualization': A Brief Note on the Making of Syria Wreck Rescue Record," *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji* 14, no. 1 (2016); and Ganesh Chand, "Whose Story Is It? Colonialism, *Syria* Ship Wreck, and Texting Race Relations in Fiji," *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji* 15, no. 1 (2017).

55 Chand, "Whose Story Is It?," 76.

gor ignored claims that highlighted the role of other actors in operations.[56] Thus, according to Chand, The McGregor Report was filled with heroic stories of the rescue operation he led, giving readers the impression that a greater number of Indians would have died without his leadership.[57]

Chand also noted that McGregor degraded the contribution of indigenous Fijians to the operation. Indigenous Fijians participated in his team, but in his report, McGregor described them as "at best passive participants."[58] On the contrary, he unnecessarily emphasised that indigenous Fijians from the village of Noco came to the wrecked ship to loot, while Indians were drowning around them. McGregor said that he "can speak [about it] only in terms of disgust and reparation."[59]

Chand questioned the credibility of McGregor's report by arguing that McGregor ignored another report indicating that Noco villagers could not be at the wrecked scene at the time McGregor claimed to have witnessed the looting. Chand also noted McGregor's ignorance of a report about Europeans who stole items from the wrecked ship.[60] Thus, historical narratives based on The McGregor Report, such as Lal's, are "certainly far from the full picture."[61]

Memory activists reconstructed the *Syria* memory in another way. Isoa Damudamu, the chief of the Noco district, was among the memory activists leading the movement for ethnic reconciliation and harmonisation based on the new version of the *Syria* memory. He focused on the kindness of indigenous villagers towards the shipwreck survivors and the good ethnic relationships built by their ancestors with Indo-Fijians. Participating in a symposium on the "End of Indenture" held on 28 June 2016 at the University of the South Pacific, Damudamu narrated the stories of *Syria*, which were passed down to him

56 Chand, "Defactualization," 142.
57 Chand, "Whose Story Is It?," 71.
58 Chand, "Whose Story Is It?," 77.
59 McGregor, "The McGregor Report," 152.
60 Chand, "Whose Story Is It?," 90.
61 Chand, "Whose Story Is It?," 77.

by his great-grandfather. He argued that the survivors were saved by indigenous Fijians from ten villages in the nearby district and treated hospitably.[62] He particularly emphasised that the dead were respectfully buried in Noco soil in a traditional manner, and the kindness his ancestors showed to the Indians led to a close relationship between them. He said "[t]he bodies of our dear beloved Indo-Fijian relatives who were buried in those special burial sites for 132 years turned into soil and have become seeds of everlasting relationship, establishing that they belong to [N]oco.[63] He then continued by stating:

> Our ancestors buried those who met their fate on that day in Noco soil. By giving dignity to the dead and the decision to keep them on Noco soil our ancestors have ascertained their place with the people of Noco. No one can take that relationship away. You belong to Noco and that means you belong to Rewa[64] and that you belong to Fiji.[65]

This message from the indigenous chief was very meaningful in the Fijian context. Due to the colonial legacy, Indo-Fijians felt marginalised in Fijian society, as they did not enjoy the same equal rights as indigenous Fijians. Indo-Fijians were often regarded as *vulagi* (visitor). Some chiefs in the GCC insisted on maintaining the vested indigenous rights that the colonial government had preserved. Thus, the fact that a chief acknowledged that the descendants of *girmitiyas* belong to the indigenous community suggests that Indo-Fijians had equal rights as indigenous Fijians. When an indigenous community declared on 9 July 2016 that the descendants of *Syria* survivors were members of Rewa,

62 The University of the South Pacific, "Indentured Labourers Were 'Well Looked after'," 2016, accessed 21 January 2021, http://www.geo.fio.usp.ac.fj/news/story.php?id=2152.

63 The University of the South Pacific, "Indentured Labourers."

64 Noco belongs to Rewa province.

65 Reverend James Bhagwan, "Belong to Each Other," *Fiji Times*, July 6 2016, https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/belong-to-each-other/.

an Indo-Fijian said that they were "no longer a 'vulagi'" and "now had a homeland."[66]

Since this historic event, the *Syria* memory have been repeatedly reproduced throughout Fiji. *Syria* is no longer a colonial history; it has become a symbol of friendly ethnic relations, highlighting the kindness and generosity of indigenous villagers, which attracted little attention in the twentieth century.

Another significant development was that the previous versions of the *Syria* narrative became the subject of criticism, as they were regarded as a remnant of colonialism, which must be denied in a post-colonial society. Sashi Kiran, the founder of an active NGO for social development, argued that The McGregor Report must be corrected, as it was motivated to highlight white supremacy and degrade the role of indigenous Fijians. She said:

> It is evident from the accounts that colonial administrators intentionally paid little attention to accurately naming people and places and did not understand the Fijian structure, titles or logistics giving very confusing reports on which we have been heavily relying on. Dr McGregor's accounts shows that he intended on (1) claiming the heroic rescue operations to himself and his European team (2) [e] nsure that the local Fijian people are not able to nullify his claims (3) protect the interests of the European Captain, Chief mate and Officers of the Syria ship by diverting the investigative attention away from their mistake (shipwreck) to the claimed "non- participation" of locals in the rescue efforts and their focus on theft.[67]

66 Maika Bolatiki, "Girmitiyas Accepted as Rewans," *Fiji Sun*, July 10 2016, https://fijisun.com.fj/2016/07/10/girmitiyas-accepted-as-rewans/.

67 Sashi Kiran, "I am a Gone ni Noco," n.d., accessed 21 January, 2021, http://friendfiji.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NocoArticle-1.pdf.

The reconstruction of the *Syria* memory shows that memory activists denied the previously dominant memory as a residue of colonialism which was still haunting Fijian society. Instead, they highlighted a cooperative ethnic relationship, which was not focused upon in the twentieth century.

Memory Analysis on the Reconstruction of *Girmit* Memory

The emergence of different interpretations of the historical past indicates that a new social framework of memory is available. In the past, *girmit* history focused on the brutal nature of colonialism, which was shared only among Indo-Fijians, as the collective memory was meant to consolidate the Indo-Fijian identity to deal with the insecurities they had encountered for generations. However, the *Syria* memory in the 2010s focused on cooperative relations with indigenous Fijians during the colonial period, and a new version of the memory was shared by both Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians.

As discussed, Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians have been rivals in many aspects of Fijian society. They have established ethnicity-based political parties and competed in elections. Coups intensified ethnic tensions and even caused violence against the Indo-Fijians from the indigenous Fijians. Affirmative action policies introduced by indigenous-led governments further emphasised the rivalry. Therefore, the social situation of the 20th century divided the nation along ethnic lines. In such a social situation, the past of the ethnic friendship was difficult to recall. Rather, actors tended to recall how their ethnic group was victimised by the other group and how their ancestors fought against the other group to gain, maintain and claim their ethnic interests. This was the social framework of memory in Fiji during the twentieth century.

Such ethnic tensions still exist in contemporary Fiji. However, the social pressure to be tolerant to other ethnic groups is much stronger than before, as the international norms of human rights have widely

been prevailed in the world in the 21st century. An interview survey conducted by the author asked Fijian interviewees who had contributed the most to the nation's development.[68] According to the theory of ethnic and national narcissism, people tend to overestimate achievements of the society they belong to.[69] Thus, one would typically expect indigenous Fijians to name indigenous politicians or legendary chiefs, and Indo-Fijians to name Indo-Fijian politicians or activists working for bettering Indo-Fijians' social status. However, the results show a different picture. Although many Fijians still named politicians from their own ethnic group, some interviewees named politicians from different ethnic groups. For example, some Indo-Fijians named Kamisese Mara, the first Prime Minister of Fiji, who was an indigenous Fijian and a charismatic chief.[70]

Furthermore, some Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians acknowledged the contributions of the other ethnic group. This was not so common in the 20th century. One of the indigenous Fijian interviewees said that she attended the event for the 100th anniversary of the arrival of *girmitiyas* held in 1979, where it was the first time she learned that Indo-Fijians were brought into Fiji to sustain the country and that they were suffering from slave-like living conditions. This story indicates that she did not have the opportunity to learn about the history of Indo-Fijians until the event.

In contrast, contemporary Fiji allows Fijians to share their *girmit* memories with other ethnic groups. With his political strategy to gain popularity, Bainimarama played a pivotal role in disseminating Indo-Fijian *girmit* memories in non-Indo-Fijian communities. Bainimarama recognised that *girmit* was a new form of slavery. In his speeches on

68 The survey was conducted for his PhD thesis in 2020 and 2021.

69 For example, see Luke Churchill, Jeremy K Yamashiro, and Henry L Roediger III, "Moralized Memory: Binding Values Predict Inflated Estimates of the Group's Historical Influence," *Memory* (2019).; Henry L Roediger et al., "Competing National Memories of World War II," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 34 (2019); Adam L. Putnam et al., "Collective Narcissism: Americans Exaggerate the Role of Their Home State in Appraising U.S. History," *Psychological Science* 29, no. 9 (2018).

70 In the interview survey, four out of eight Indo-Fijian interviewees named Mara as the person who contributed the most to the development of the nation in Fijian history.

Girmit Day every year, he emphasised the slave-like living conditions that *girmitiyas* had to endure. For example, Bainimarama said the following on *Girmit* Day in 2022: "Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and abolished all slavery in their empire in 1833. Sadly, that change proved to be in name only. British colonies still demanded cheap labour. In place of the slave trade, they turned to the practice of indentured servitude."[71]

Juxtaposing the *girmit* with the slave trade was an effective strategy for Bainimarama, because no one in the world could provide a moral ground for the slave trade. If *girmit* was equal to slavery, it had to be fully condemned, just as people all over the world condemn slavery.

Bainimarama found merit in condemning the colonial legacies. As noted above, the GCC spurned Indian workers from entering indigenous villages because of the fear that their culture and character might harm traditional indigenous customs and ways of life. Thus, the indigenous locals and Indian workers lost the opportunity to communicate with and know each other. Bainimarama argued that this separation policy was the root cause of the ethnic division that Fiji experienced throughout history. He noted:

> When the colonisers found out, they quickly put an end to it, making it illegal to harbour those who had escaped. This instilled fear among the villagers that they would be punished, it forced them to change their perspective; instead of looking at the girmit[i]ya as fellow humans who deserved help, after the crackdown, they were seen as "outsiders". The colonisers created and enforced a divide between the girmit[i]ya and indigenous populations – the consequences of which are still in some corners of Fijian politics today.[72]

71 The Fijian Government, "Prime Minister Hon. Voreqe Bainimarama's Speech on the 143rd Anniversary of the "Leonidas"," 2022, accessed 15 May 2022, https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/English/PRIME-MINISTER-HON-VOREQE-BAINIMARAMA-S-SPEECH-ON-.2022,https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/English/PRIME-MINISTER-HON-VOREQE-BAINIMARAMA-S-SPEECH-ON-.

72 The Fijian Government, "Hon. PM's Remarks."

Thus, Bainimarama introduced stories of certain indigenous Fijians kindly saving the Indian workers, who escaped the plantations due to overwork and violations.[73] He reiterated that it was the colonial government that broke good ethnic relations and divided the nation by ethnicity. Bainimarama argued that the country needed to remove colonial residues to unite Fijians regardless of ethnicity.

Thus, putting the colonial past in a negative light was part of Bainimarama's political strategy. Some chiefs and those close to them joined a previous indigenous-led political party, such as the SDL, which was deposed by Bainimarama in 2006. Meanwhile, some of them were members of opposition parties in the 2010s and 2020s, such as the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), renamed the SDL, or the People's Alliance Party, whose leader is a former chairman of the GCC and a former leader of SODELPA. In this sense, Bainimarama blamed not only colonialism but also the chiefs and indigenous politicians in the opposition, because they previously supported and praised colonial policies and legacies.

Bainimarama's strategy certainly changed the political behaviour of opposition parties. When competing with Bainimarama's interim government in the 2014 election, the first national election since Bainimarama's 2006 coup, SODELPA maintained its traditional appeal to indigenous Fijians, with policies prioritising indigenous Fijians. However, after being defeated by the FijiFirst Party in the 2014 election, SODELPA changed its strategy to fight against Bainimarama. It accepted the political battlefield Bainimarama had created, where pursuing ethnic harmony rather than ethnic interests was considered just. Since then, Rabuka, the then leader of SODELPA and a leader of the 1987 coup, repeatedly showed his regret for the 1987 coup and apologised to the Indo-Fijians for what he did in 1987. After he resigned as the leader of SODELPA, Rabuka formed a new political party called the People's Alliance. The party won the 2022 election, and Rabuka became the Prime Minister of Fiji. He certainly took care of the interests of indig-

73 The Fijian Government, "Hon. PM's Remarks."

enous Fijians; for example, he declared to re-establish GCC, which was abolished by Bainimarama. However, he also attempts to take an ethnic balance. For example, when he decided to return Sukuna Day as a public holiday,[74] he also declared to make Girmit Day a public holiday. He keeps to show his tolerance to Indo-Fijians.

The NFP, another major political party in contemporary Fijian politics, which is mainly supported by Indo-Fijians, also seems to have accepted this new political reality. One of the interviewees conducted by the author during a field survey revealed that the NFP's election strategy in 2014 was to visit indigenous villages and tell the villagers that one of the party's founders included an indigenous chief. This campaign intended to let indigenous voters know that the NFP is not an Indo-Fijian party, but multiracial party. In the 20th century, Fijian society was deeply divided because of coups, affirmative action policies and ethnically divided political contestations. In this context, political parties had little motivation to appeal their policies to ethnic groups which did not support them. Yet, in 2014, the NFP decided to gain support from the indigenous Fijians. They thought that otherwise, they could not compete with the FijiFirst Party.

Consequently, since the 2010s, many political narratives have highlighted ethnic harmonisation, friendly relationships and the importance of achieving national unity. The social atmosphere has become one where people are not allowed to seek ethnic interests at the expense of other ethnic groups. Although some opposing movements can be observed in more private spaces, such as social media, it is not easy, especially at the public level, to ignore the new social standards regarding ethnic relations.

The re-evaluation of the *Syria* history can be interpreted in this social setting. This re-evaluation rejects McGregor's version of the *Syria*'s history, as it was written from a colonial perspective to affirm white supremacy by degrading the credibility of the colonised people.

74 Sukuna is a legendary chief many indigenous Fijians respected. Indigenous Fijians used to celebrate Sukuna Day, but Bainimarama abolished it. In February 2023, Rabuka decided to get Sukuna Day back and declared to make it a public holiday.

Instead, memory activists featured stories of indigenous Fijians saving Indians. In this sense, the re-interpretation of the *Syria* memory was not solely aimed at denouncing the colonial past but at disseminating an image of good ethnic relation, as it is the new social norm in contemporary Fijian society.

Another interesting example is how memory activists represent the colonial era. Gounder is an Indo-Fijian residing in New Zealand. *The Fiji Sun* interviewed her and asked about Indo-Fijian identity in New Zealand.[75] She explained that Indo-Fijians have not felt affection for India, but they identify themselves as Fijians and their homeland is still Fiji, even though they currently live abroad. She argued that Fijian education has not paid enough attention to teaching children about Indian indentured workers and lacked consideration of how they place the *girmit* history in a Pacific context. She criticised that *girmit* "has never been situated within the chronology of Pacific historiography." Interestingly, she argued that blackbirding had also been not situated in the Pacific historiography. Blackbirding was the forceful or deceitful recruitment of Melanesian people[76] by colonisers for plantation work. Gounder equalises Melanesians with *girmitiyas* as victims of colonial exploitation. This is an attempt to make the two ethnic groups considered as the same victims of colonialism. Importantly, it helps people to have a shared imagined community, which includes both indigenous Fijians (Melanesians) and Indo-Fijians.

Reconceptualising the Colonial History in the Local Context

We have seen the historical contexts of Fijian ethnic relations and how and why various Fijian actors, including politicians and memory activists, re-evaluated the colonial past. First, Bainimarama created a new political battleground where politicians publicly pursued ethnic harmon-

75 Delaibatiki, "Fijian Spirit."

76 Oceania is divided by three sub-regional areas: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Fiji is one of the Melanesian countries. Other Melanesian countries and regions include the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

isation. The new political norm was based on the historical recognition that the colonial government separated the nation along a racial line. Bainimarama also linked the colonial image to his political opponents, arguing that they were the colonial remnants which kept Fijian society divided. The opposition's reaction to Bainimarama's strategy was to appeal their multiracial-ness and show that Bainimarama's claim was invalid. That is, their aim to re-evaluate the colonial past was not solely to follow the global trend of re-evaluation of the colonial past. Rather, it was to utilise colonial history for their political strategy to either attack political opponents or gain popularity from the public. Clearly, Fijian politicians were conscious of global trends and the universally shared human rights norms behind them. This is why they calculated that their citizens would accept their re-evaluation of colonial history.

Second, memory activists criticised The McGregor Report as a prejudiced interpretation of history from a European perspective. However, merely criticising colonial history was not their primary aim. Rather, it was to promote ethnic harmonisation. They introduced heart-warming stories during the *Syria* accident, indicating that the different ethnic groups had built friendly ethnic relationships. The renewed attention on the new perspective facilitated the historic decision by indigenous chiefs to accept Indo-Fijians as formal members of the indigenous community. Again, the memory activists did not simply follow the global trends. Rather, they had their own specific aims when revisiting colonial history.

Conclusion

Discourses that critically evaluate colonialism and its legacies have existed among Indo-Fijians since Fiji became independent in 1970. However, recent developments in the reconstruction of the *girmit* memory highlight that different actors have different motivations for doing this. This study's memory analysis reveals that the colonial pasts reconstructed by various actors are the products of memory strategies to achieve their own social and political goals. Thus, Fiji's example of the

re-evaluation of the colonial past and legacies is not a simple duplication of the global trend of the re-evaluation of colonialism. Fijians are not passive recipients of a cosmopolitan memory, but instead active participants who localise cosmopolitan memory by fitting it into their social contexts, goals and beliefs. They can reconceptualise the globally shared and constructed collective memory into their local context.

At first glance, it may seem as if the cosmopolitan memory or critical re-evaluation of the colonial past in Fiji has been simply formed by and disseminated from Western countries. However, an in-depth examination of the Fijian case in this study suggests that memory scholars carefully examine how cosmopolitan memory is localised in the developing world. Otherwise, we may overlook the diversity of local contexts and dynamics of the memory construction process. The diversity and dynamics at a local level are a critical component in shaping a collective response to a cosmopolitan memory and the universalised norms attached to it.

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