

## A report on “Marist Photos, Fiji 1890 – 1930”<sup>1</sup>

Marie Katherine Foi

### Introduction

To imagine what the early European missionaries must have dreamt, anticipated and experienced during their premiere voyage from their countries to the unknown islands of Oceania,<sup>2</sup> one can infer that these young and not-so-young men, and later women, of God must have had a lot of plans and dreams of the work that they were going to undertake. Their fears were of the unknown, of the lands and the peoples whose cultures and beliefs were considered barbaric and uncouth. Maintaining a record of their experience in these islands was important. This was accomplished through their letters to their superiors, confreres and families and their journals, reports, sketches and later through photographs. The photographs were proof of their lives and work here; it was a way of accountability and a medium to educate their people about Oceania.

This report will discuss a collection titled “Marist photos, Fiji 1890-1930” consisting of 237 photographs and postcards that were collected by the early Marist missionaries of their work and mission in Fiji.<sup>3</sup> These pictures were randomly selected by the Marist archivist in Rome, Fr. Carlo-Maria Schianchi sm and according to Fr. Alois Greiler sm, this collection is part of a huge collection of the photos, postcards, old slides that they have stored in their general archives.<sup>4</sup> The pictures in this collection depict different mission aspects in Fiji and other places and people such as Rotuma<sup>5</sup>. The main aim of this paper is to analyse this photo collection; to study the pictures and determine why they were taken and what effect would they have had on the viewers. Moreover, this discussion will also try to capture what these pictures would mean to the present day people of Fiji and Rotuma. I have divided these photos into four categories: Missionaries, Ethnographic, Topography, and Miscellaneous. The earliest photo recorded in this collection, according to the captions, was taken 1890 – almost 56 years after the first arrival.<sup>6</sup> 36% of the total were taken in Rotuma. The picture captions are in French.

### The Fiji Mission

The French Marist Fathers were the first Catholic missionaries to arrive in Oceania and they arrived in Fiji on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1844 in Namuka, Lau.<sup>7</sup> Education was important to the Marists to spread their mission so they went about establishing schools, built churches and taught the people about their faith and labour skills such as carpentry and masonry work. The first sisters arrived in 1882.<sup>8</sup>

### Missionaries

Approximately 49% of the pictures in this collection reflect the work of the missionaries. 22% are of churches and buildings – presbyteries and schools; more than half of the church and building pictures were taken in Rotuma. There are pictures of large stone or crushed coral

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<sup>1</sup> Assignment at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, June 2010; Lecturer: Dr Alan Maxwell Quanchi.

<sup>2</sup> Oceania was commonly used by the early Marist missionaries for the Pacific.

<sup>3</sup> A CD copy of this collection was brought to Fiji by Fr Alois Greiler sm for the Marist Colloquium held at the Pacific Regional Seminary (PRS), Suva in August 2007. Most of these pictures can be found in the different Marist archives as well as the Archdiocesan archives in Suva. A. Greiler (ed.), *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania. Marist Missionary Perspectives*, Adelaide, atf, 2009, offers the talks of the colloquium, an introduction to the Marists as congregation and to the Catholic mission in Western Oceania.

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence via email from Rome on Tuesday, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Rotuma is located approximately 300 miles to the north of Vanua Levu, Fiji’s 2<sup>nd</sup> largest island. Rotuma was ceded to Great Britain on May 13, 1881 and has since come under the Fiji protectorate and Government. The Marist Fathers arrived in Rotuma in 1846.

<sup>6</sup> Photo titled “Eglise de Wairki en 1890.”

<sup>7</sup> Knox, M., 1977, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46. The sisters belonged to the Third Order Regular of Mary (TORM). After 1931 the TORM sisters were better known as the Sisters of the Society of Mary smsm.

churches which replaced the first thatched or wooden structures.<sup>9</sup> Most of the church pictures are labelled but there are no dates given for many. The craftsmanship of the churches, the marble altar and decor in Rotuma is impressive, considering the time when they were constructed as well the island's isolation. There are also pictures of the priests and sisters in the different mission stations with their students, trainee catechists, or *vukevukes*<sup>10</sup> ; often these group pictures feature the priests or sisters sitting in the middle or at a level higher than the locals or otherwise standing, always look prominent just like Quanchi's observation of the group photos of the pastors in Papua.<sup>11</sup> 18% of the pictures are in groups featuring the priests and/or sisters



Eglise du S. Coeur à Levuka.



Eglise de Naiserelagi



St Michel, Upu, Rotuma



Makogai



Loreto. 1898. The clergy, nuns, school children and adult Fijian laity.

<sup>9</sup> Churches shown include: Levuka, Rewa, Naiserelagi, Rotuma (Upu n Sumi), Makogai, Cawaci, Wairiki.

<sup>10</sup> Fijian name given to the indigenous women who assisted the sisters to look after the priests and their charges.

<sup>11</sup> Quanchi, M., 1997, p. 82.

Also evident in most of these group photos is the way the local people sit according to their age, gender and status. The children and women sit on the ground or on one side while the men would sit or stand at the back, in a separate section away from the women. There are a few with the men sitting and the women standing. In many group photos the locals are immaculately dressed and sitting in a respectful manner with almost stiff postures; these pictures may have been taken during a special occasion such as a celebrations or perhaps when someone visits from Europe . The more candid pictures show that some people wearing their normal daily dress and seem more natural; some were comfortable in a more crouching position, something that is now considered peculiar or disrespectful today.



Eglise de Ste Therese à Yasawo en 1899      Kadavu 1909. The two men in the middle are probably Chiefs (fine mat and tapa wrapped)



Lahaye et les catechistes de Cawaci

Not all of the missionary pictures in this collection are group pictures, 12% of the total are portraits of which 8% have a studio background.

### Ethnography

The ethnographic pictures make up 40% of this collection and show the different aspects of the people and culture of the Fijians, Rotumans, Indians and Solomon Islanders. There are individual and group photos, for example showing the Fijian men in their traditional dance attire, performing the kava ritual, re-enacting a cannibalism experience, women mending fishing nets and making pottery. What is interesting is the inclusion of a number of John Water's postcards.<sup>12</sup> There is a good variety showing men and women, the young and old. Of the total ethnographic pictures, 70% were taken in Fiji and 30% in Rotuma. The Rotuma set includes women sorting fish, mending nets, the men preparing for a traditional feast, *koua ceremony*<sup>13</sup>, showing off their yam harvest, a dance group, funeral scene and the mission students returning from the plantation with their dalo.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Photo ref Fiji 1,1,13.

<sup>13</sup> Cooking in an earth oven, similar to the Fijian *lovo* or Maori *hangi*. This picture shows the Rotuman men performing the "koua puha" a lovo that is done on very special occasions, maybe once in 2-3 decades. Pic ref # "Ceremonie du Kuah" (Koua).

<sup>14</sup> Rootcrop, also known as taro.

## Foi



Re-enacting a cannibal scene



village life



Koua puha



meke

Not all of the pictures were taken by the missionaries, others were taken by other photographers like John Water and Dufty Studio. 12% of the collection are portraits, many probably taken in a studio setting. Most of the portrait pictures are of chiefs, especially the Catholic ones, or commoner males, either wearing traditional attire and their unique hairstyles or those 'modern' leaders wearing western fashioned clothes and short hair. Other portrait pictures feature beautiful young girls and even a topless photo of Ratu Seru Cakobau's principal wife, Adi Samanunu.

