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The potential of Fiji Islander sociality: a comparison of inter-ethnic relations in three ethnographic settings

Anthropologists working with Fiji Islanders have been focusing almost exclusively on only one of the various ethnic groups that constitute Fiji’s society (indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians [of South Asian ancestry], Rotumans etc.). At the same time, most ethnographers working in this Pacific Island state and its diaspora have paid scant attention to social aspects that are not necessarily demarcated by ethnicity, but fuelled, for example, by class or social and geographical mobility. In this paper, I use my experiences of inter-ethnic relations in Fiji’s capital Suva as a vantage point from which to discuss cross-comparatively the potential and limitations of multi-ethnic Fiji Islander sociality in urban and transnational contexts. Drawing on the situational analysis of cultural events in which I took part while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo and London, I reflect on the fluid ways Fiji Islanders have interacted with each other. More specifically, I explore Fiji Islander inter-ethnic relations through the lenses of two social episodes that draw attention to the local contexts my interlocutors based in Japan and the UK have navigated. At the same time, I argue, with respect to the first generation of migrants on which I focus, that there are striking similarities that delineate Fiji Islander sociality more generally. These build on a complicated legacy of inter-ethnic relations that has fuelled much of Fiji’s colonial and postcolonial history. For the purpose of theoretically grounding my discussion, I borrow from more recent anthropological interventions into sociality, such as Long and Moore’s definition of sociality as a ‘dynamic and interactive relational matrix … within which subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, and continually plastic and malleable’ (2012:2,4).

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