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Visual Language A 19th Century Comet in Fiji

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Historians are fond of saying that Fiji and other similar indigenous cultures have no written history prior to European contact, but depend entirely on their oral traditions. However, on closer examination, the Fijian people offer a visual language that may have been used in the past to record, albeit metaphorically, historical events. Among the Fijian masi (barkcloth) designs, there is one, like the Tongan fetu'u fuka (Leonard & Terrell 1980:30), that appears to represent a comet mentioned in historical accounts of Fiji.



At left: This masikesa from the 1840s may be telling the story of the three-tailed comet and the "wasting sickness" that accompanied a shipwreck in the early 19th Century.

The "exploding star" design appears in a masikesa (printed barkcloth) originating in Cakaudrove province and believed to date to around 1840s or earlier (pc Sagale Buadromo, Fiji Museum registrar). The star appears to have its centre unpainted while many large points come out from the circumference of the blank inner circle. Then three "tails" (in one instance, a fourth "tail" appears) seem to come out from between the larger star points. As has been reported in various accounts, a particularly dark period in Fiji's early European contact began with the wreck of a ship called the *Argo*, on Bukatatanoa Reef (which thence became known as *Argo Reef* in English) near Oneata and Lakeba in the Lau islands. Thought to have occurred some time around 1800 to 1806, the shipwreck is associated with numerous other disasters. The *Argo* brought with its survivors the "wasting sickness" called *lilabalavu*, believed to be Asian Cholera,

that killed a large portion of the population of Fiji. It has been said that in that same year a comet was seen with "three trails". In historical texts, the shipwreck and ensuing sickness have also been associated with a total eclipse of the sun, a hurricane, and a tidal wave. In researching the history of this mysterious shipwreck and the related comet, I discovered many conflicting reports on the

type and origin of the ship involved, as well as dates for the possible comet and solar eclipse. On the following pages is a summary of the various historical accounts, followed by my own conclusions on the matter.

One account by Sir Basil Thomson (1908:25-27) suggests that the comet may have been "Encke's comet of November 21, 1805, or the famous comet of 1807." He also gives the dates as being around 1802 or 1803, referring only to a "vessel" named Argo that was wrecked on Bukatatanoa Reef. Regarding the solar eclipse associated with the shipwreck and comet, he mentions only one possibility: "The only total eclipse of the sun visible in Fiji about this period was that which occurred at 9:20 am on February 21, 1803." Beauclerc (1911) referred to the ship as a "man-of-war" but gave no nation of origin.

In another more recent account, Derrick (1946:37) refers to a ship named Argo which is said to have cleared Port Jackson (now Sydney) in Australia on September 20, 1805, nineteen months after the date of Sir Thompson's comet of 1803. It was recorded as being a whaling ship with general cargo, and registered in London. Wilkes (1845, 3:170-172), refers to the Argo as being an English brig that was lost on the same reef in the year 1806. Taylor (1982:189) gives this account: "a small American schooner called the Argo arrived on a private trading voyage and her cargo, which included the inevitable supply of spirits, found a ready market" in what is now called Sydney Harbour. That was in the year 1798. These conflicting reports may have little bearing on whether or not the masikesa in discussion is displaying a story of the three-tailed comet. However, it was in an effort to authenticate the existence of such a comet that these discrepancies were discovered. Beauclerc (1911) describes the related comet clearly enough to conclude that it must have been a very bright comet:

"The comet appeared just before dawn after the first sign of light began to appear in the east, and it was three-tailed. The centre tail was the largest and shone with an appearance like the rainbows. The right and left tails were equal in size but smaller than the middle one, and their appearance was white. It was visible for 37 nights and was then lost sight of. It was said that it appeared as the precursor of the death of a chief."

There are also accounts that the dea of the vunivalu (a chiefly status) of that period, Banuve, is not only associated with the appearance of a comet but also an illness that came from a foreign vessel. Prior to this research, I requested information via the internet's world-wide-web from the Lake Afton Public Observatory in Wichita, Kansas. With the standardisation of known data on eclipses and comets, scientists from the observator answered a basic question put to them:

From about 10 years before to 30 years after 1800, what bright comets and total solar eclipses would have been visible in the southern hemisphere, especially Fiji?

The answer soon came back from the observatory with the following "great" comets as likely candidates: September 1807, September 1811, and June 1819. They made no reference to "Encke's comet" of 1805 mentioned by Basil Thomson. They did, however, allude to a shortage of "astronomers" in the southern hemisphere during the period in question. They also confirmed that a "three-tailed" comet is quite a likely phenomenon due to the changing nature of comets in their orbits.

In addition, using mathematical equations that have been refined since Thomson's day, the scientists at the observatory concluded that a near total eclipse would have been visible in Suva (now Fiji's capital on the island of Viti Levu) on 19 November 1817 from 2:42 to 5:31 pm local time, but would have been total in various places around the islands of Fiji. The next total eclipse they mention did not occur until 1893.

It appears from these various accounts that:

- 1) At least one foreign vessel, one named Argo, was wrecked on Bukatatanoa Reef in the early years of the 19th century.
- 2) A wreck on that reef is associated with the onslaught of Asian Cholera, or lilabalavua, the "wasting sickness."
- 3) A wreck and the sickness are associated with a three-tailed comet.
- 4) Some time after the cholera epidemic began, a total solar eclipse of the sun occurred.

It is the conclusion of this writer that the various tragedies associated with the wreck, cholera, comet and eclipse (among other disasters), were combined as part of the oral tradition, with the story passed down from one generation to another. The Cakaudrove masikesa, showing the variations in the comet, the central blank circle, and the heavy chevron patterns, may have been a visual record of these various dark events in Fiji's history. A strong cross-disciplinary study could be made to determine further relationships between historical and/or celestial events and designs used in traditional handicrafts.

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