

Vale Robert Robertson, a 'son of Fiji and the Pacific'

Abstract: While most University of the South Pacific academics were united in their opposition to the 1987 and 2000 coups in Fiji—and many of them suffered in various ways from the 1987 coup—the 2006 coup was divisive in that quite a few senior USP academics and former academics (mostly Indo-Fijian) gave tacit and active support to it, believing in coup leader Voreqe Bainimarama's rhetoric of anti-corruption and racial equality for all in Fiji as his justification. Historian and prolific author and writer Professor Robert Robertson highlighted through his books, scholarship and academic activism the injustices inflicted by the coups and globalisation on academics, journalists and the marginalised, beginning with *Fiji: Shattered Coups* (1988), co-authored with his journalist partner Akosita Tamanisau. This essay profiles an academic who 'planted deep roots, metaphorically and literally, in the DNA of Fiji and the Pacific.'

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WADAN NARSEY

Independent Researcher, Melbourne

ON JUNE 10, 2021, many in the international community mourned the death in Melbourne, Victoria, of a former University of the South Pacific academic in history and politics, Professor Robbie Robertson, whose life's work focused on many painful themes that are relevant still for Fiji and for the region. While he was a citizen of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, he could legitimately also be called a 'son of Fiji and the Pacific,' judging by the quantity and quality of academic work he did on Fiji and the Pacific, all imbued with a deep passionate commitment to ordinary working people, regardless of race, class or creed.

With USP having gone through the throes of Fiji's expulsion of an 'expatriate' vice-chancellor who was exposing skeletons left behind by the previous administration, it is no coincidence that 40 years ago, Robertson was also denied a work visa by the Fiji government because he and his partner Akosita Tamanisau (then a journalist at a very different *Fiji Sun*) were researching the hidden side of the Rabuka coup.



Figure 1: Professor and prolific historian Robert (Robbie) Robertson: A critic of media, uneven Pacific development and globalisation. Pictured in the coup year 1987 with Akosita Tamanisau by David Robie (insets by DevPolicyBlog, 2021) with their book *Fiji: Shattered Coups* and some other Robertson titles.

With so many of our people’s contorted preoccupations with who is local, Fijian, or Pacific Islander, USP and the Fiji public can ponder on the great contributions made by this ‘expatriate’ academic, Robbie Robertson, to the intellectual life of Pacific students, staff and the wider regional community.

Robertson also brought international academic experience to USP, having worked for Australasian universities like Otago University, La Trobe, ANU, James

Cook University and Swinburne University of Technology. He was also on the editorial board and a contributor to *Pacific Journalism Review*.

As many of his former USP friends and academic colleagues recall with great nostalgia, Robertson also loved living life to the fullest, socialising merrily with family and friends at USP and in the drinking holes of Suva. Robertson also planted deep roots, metaphorically and literally, in the DNA of Fiji and the Pacific with his decades of joyful partnership with Akosita (Jita) Tamanisau, whose own commitment to community in Fiji and Bendigo not only helped steer Robbie's ship of life, but also provided the greatest of care during his last months.

A quality academic

Robertson was a graduate of Otago University, also my alma mater, but just a couple of years after me. From his earliest days he opposed senseless wars, rejecting the New Zealand military draft for service in Vietnam, much to his parents' chagrin.

As Vijay Naidu (head of the School of Development and Governance at USP) remembers, Robertson was recruited to USP in 1980 as a lecturer in history. Naidu introduced him to the sights of low-cost housing and squatter settlements that was the emerging evidence in Fiji, as elsewhere, of the uneven development of capitalism and globalisation that Robertson later wrote about.

Robertson became a close friend of William Sutherland, another USP lecturer in history and politics and a close adviser to the Bavadra Labour government which was brutally removed by the Rabuka coup in May 1987. Deemed an enemy by the post-coup government, Sutherland was forced to flee Fiji. Robertson and Tamanisau then began gathering the underbelly stories of the 1987 coup and soon came under the malign surveillance of the Rabuka authorities. Robertson's work permit was rescinded.

Getting married to Akosita in a rush, Robertson was forced to leave Fiji. He and Akosita were welcomed by *PJR* founding editor David Robie in Auckland, then Helen and William Sutherland in Canberra, before settling in Bendigo where he began teaching at a campus of La Trobe University (Robie, 1988).

A USP academic expelled

It is interesting how powerful dictatorial Fiji governments use the same language when illegally expelling dissident academics of whom they disapprove. Few at USP today will remember that in the early 1970s, there was a professor of mathematics, Theo MacDonald (then also supervising my own aborted Masters in Mathematics), who was a radical teacher inspiring students into social activism.

When a powerful politician's car, in a rush to get to Nausori Airport, mowed down a pedestrian, anonymous pamphlets were strewn around Suva documenting that terrible breach of human rights of an ordinary citizen. Professor MacDonald,

who had to fly to Australia with his sick daughter, was held responsible for inciting the pamphlets and banned by the Alliance government from returning to Fiji. The massive protests by USP students and some staff were ignored by the then USP management.

Vijay Naidu recalls that, similarly, when Robertson's work permit was revoked by the Rabuka government in 1988 on the grounds that he was a security risk, they also had to flee to Australia. Attempts to relocate Robertson to Vanuatu proved futile.

However, it is worth noting that when the current vice-chancellor, Professor Pal Ahluwalia was expelled by the Fiji government in February 2021, it was also on the grounds that he was a security risk to Fiji, but really for exposing the skeletons left behind by the previous VC. This time the reactions of the other Pacific member countries of USP were different. At the invitation of the USP chancellor, Nauru President Lionel Rouwen Aingimea, Ahluwalia relocated to Nauru and the USP Council has now relocated him to Samoa. This is some progress of sorts, but the expulsion need not have happened in the first place.

Perhaps Fiji and USP can take heart that Robertson was eventually allowed to return to Fiji and USP where he worked for several more years as Professor of Development Studies contributing to teaching, researching, writing and publishing in the 2000s.

Books on the Fiji coups

One of Robertson's lasting legacies to Fiji was his thorough examination of the military coups of 1987, 2000 and 2006, generating much academic debate among supporters and opponents of each of the coups. Robbie and Akosita Tamanisau co-authored *Fiji: Shattered Coups* (1988) about the 1987 Rabuka-led coups and their hidden underbelly with much evidence contrary to the alleged objectives of the ethno-nationalists which were espoused even by some senior USP academics.

Robertson and Sutherland then co-authored the readable *Government by the Gun: the unfinished business of Fiji's 2000 Coup* (2002), again shedding more light on the behind-the-scenes events which gave the lie to the ethnonationalist propaganda. More recently in 2017 through ANU Press, Robertson published *The General's Goose: Fiji's contemporary tale of misadventure* (2017), trying to make sense of the 2006 coup in the context of the previous coups.

While most of we USP academics were united in our opposition to the 1987 and 2000 coups (and many of us suffered in various ways from the 1987 coup), the 2006 coup was also divisive in that quite a few senior USP academics and former academics (mostly Indo-Fijian) gave tacit and active support to it, believing in Bainimarama's rhetoric of anti-corruption and racial equality for all in Fiji as his justification.

Over the last three years, I discussed with Robertson at length my personal belief that his 2017 book *The General's Goose*, while a great source for students and academics, offered too generous a perspective on the fundamental causes of the so-called 'Bainimarama revolution' and 'Clean-up Campaign'.

I felt that in discussing the origins of the 2006 coup, it did not give sufficient weight to its genesis in the 2000 coup, and specifically Bainimarama's nonchalant disregard of military intelligence gathered by Colonel Vilame Seruvakoula giving details of the impending coup, his ambivalent policies regarding salaries and rations continuing to go to the CRW soldiers holding hostages in Parliament (the Evans Board of Inquiry Report), nor of the responsibility for the subsequent deaths in military custody of five CRW soldiers allegedly involved in the 2000 mutiny, but possibly innocent.

While they are well documented in Robertson's book, insufficient weight was given to the views of Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes, US Ambassador Larry Dinger and New Zealand High Commissioner Michael Green. Neither was sufficient weight given to the long years of brutal censorship after the 2006 coup which culminated in the rigidly managed elections of 2014 which used a rigged electoral system that only gave the appearance of racial equality (Robie, 2018). Robertson was not a slave to his ego or his views and we agreed to disagree, while respecting each other's views, as true academics ought to do.

I personally believe (and Akosita agrees) that if Robertson had had the time to do another book on where Fiji is today, his perspectives on the 'Clean-up Campaign' might also change, given what the Fiji public knows today about the massive corporate financing of a certain political party during the elections of 2014 and 2018, and the health and economic disaster that has been visited on Fiji through the COVID-19 pandemic by those still wielding power.

International works

It is important for USP students and staff who have just gone through the trauma of seeing their expatriate vice-chancellor expelled from Fiji, to appreciate what good expatriate academics bring to the USP community.

This is easily seen from the international books Robertson published over the years: *The Contemporary Era* (1984, USP); *The Making of the Modern World* (1986, Zed Books, London); and *The Three Waves of Globalization* (2003, Zed Books). He was working on another book of global interest (*Civilization or Globalization: how we became modern*) at the time of his death and it was close to completion. He also wrote chapters in books and academic articles about a whole range of issues affecting Fiji, Vanuatu, New Zealand, China and the Pacific.

USP students and staff today must ponder on their good fortune in being taught by excellent international academics like Robbie Robertson who could have worked for much higher salaries and perks in the metropolitan universities

where he later became a professor and a head of departments and faculties.

Robertson was Associate Professor of History and Development Studies at La Trobe University and also served at ANU and the University of Otago. His last two posts were at James Cook University (JCU) in Townsville and Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. At James Cook he was professor and head of the School of Arts and Social Sciences. It was my good fortune that with his assistance and that of the then head of the Cairns Institute, Professor Hurriyet Babajan, I was granted a visiting professorship after I was been pushed out of USP in 2011. Both Biman Prasad and I are still adjunct professors at the Cairns Institute, giving us a scholarly link to higher education in Australia.

When informed of Robertson's death, the Office of the Vice Chancellor at JCU (professor Sandra Harding) promptly replied:

Robbie Robertson provided significant leadership at James Cook University during his time as Professor and Head of the School of Arts and Social Sciences ... [He wanted] education to be inclusive, conscientiously promoting the democratisation of higher education ... a potentially liberating force that should be available to all who could benefit. Those who knew and worked with him at JCU have stories of his tenacity, strength of character, support for others and dignified approach in all matters, a man of great integrity ... a very genuine and kind human being. His professional and academic colleagues are saddened by the news of his passing.

On learning of his death, the Vice-Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology praised his contribution as Dean of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities from 2014-2019. Professor Pascale Quester said his leadership was valued by staff and students:

Robbie was known for his reflective and measured demeanour. He was admired at Swinburne for his scholarship and sustained advocacy for academics across teaching, research and leadership in the School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. He offered myriad large and small career opportunities for school staff, both academic and professional, during his time as dean. [We] acknowledge Robbie's significant contribution to the university and thank him for his dedication.

Contemporaries at USP

Robertson's USP and regional contemporaries also had similar views to the two Australian VCs. Professor Biman Prasad (former dean of FBE at USP and current MP and leader of the National Federation Party) wrote: 'Robbie will be missed by all his academic colleagues, friends and students. His writings on Fiji will remain his legacy and will remind all of us of his concerns about Fiji and its future.'

Dr Jacqueline Leckie, a former lecturer at USP, fondly remembers Robertson as her tutor at Otago University when she was a student. She recollects that he was instrumental in her first lecturing job at USP. She recollects, ‘I learned so much from him as a colleague and he was so supportive professionally... [he] shared a sense of political outrage—and also hope—and how to pass on that passion in an academic way to our students.’

Former USP lecturer in history and politics Dr Claire Slatter accurately observed that ‘Robbie was one of those rare, warm, unpretentious, open-hearted, amiable scholars, who enjoyed teaching, researching and writing . . . Although a historian, he delved into analysing Fiji politics, especially coup politics.’

Dr Ganesh Chand, an economics lecturer and contemporary of Robertson and later Vice-Chancellor of Fiji National University and currently VC of Solomon Islands National University, recalls that Robertson was a good friend and adviser on many things, academic and non-academic. He appreciated that Robertson contributed articles to the nascent *Journal of Fijian Studies*, edited by Dr Ganesh Chand and also published a book with his Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.

Dr David Robie, formerly of USP and founding director of the Pacific Media Centre, recalls Robertson’s ‘tremendously inspiring, creative and well-lived life . . . [He] opened the door to an academic career while I could retain my links to independent journalism.’

Professor Stuart Firth remembers Robertson’s ‘endless curiosity and background knowledge’ for all his tasks. Professor Yvonne Underhill-Sem of Auckland University remembers a ‘beloved Pacific scholar’ whose writings remain to ‘enrich new generations of Pacific scholars.’

Akosita Tamanisau

Robertson was supported enormously by his soulmate Akosita (Jita) Tamanisau, daughter of the great Fijian musician, Eremasi Tamanisau. Akosita felt equally strongly about defending democracy and freedom as about music and the arts. After her days as a USP student, Jita wrote for the *Fiji Sun*, was a stringer for *South Magazine* and Gemini News wire service and co-authored *Fiji: Shattered coups* (1988) with Robertson. She recollects attending the ‘dinner parties at the Sutherlands, the Naidus or at Jacqui’s, attending political meetings and public lectures and very often unwinding at the Golden Dragon night club or at Traps.’

She loved Robertson’s profound thirst for knowledge and his quintessential ability to share his insights with respect and wit. She said that not just academics but journalists were also the targets of the military government.

Akosita began a long period of community involvement in Bendigo, working with issues surrounding family violence, drugs and alcohol and homelessness. She began a women’s musical group, the *Wahine*, supporting each other through their trials and tribulations.

Last words

The last words belong to Robbie Robertson himself, who with considerable humour put together words and images for his own end, *Vale Robbie*, that was later played at his wake. Robbie recorded:

Fiji has changed me in ways that I think would never have been possible had I only lived in NZ or Australia ... aside from a host of dismal unempathetic politicians who cannot accept change and have no vision for a better future, my only other disappointment is in the apparent conservatism of my own supposedly once radical generation. A big thank you to all who gave me such a wonderful life ... and [quoting Gorbachev] nothing trumps the meaning of life than to love a woman and to be loved by her ... I am so glad I experienced this love and the love of my sons Julian and Nemani.

Vale Robbie Robertson!

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Dr Wadan Narsey is adjunct professor at James Cook University's The Cairns Institute and a former professor of economics at the University of the South Pacific. An earlier version was first published in The Fiji Times on 19 June 2021. He publishes the research blog Narsey on Fiji at <https://narseyonfiji.wordpress.com/wadan.narsey@gmail.com>