

Tribes

Once a week, a Fiji Airlines airplane makes the connection between the airports of Nadi, Kiritimati, and Honolulu, completing a round trip between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. In the morning, it departs from Nadi, on the Fiji Islands, making a stop in Kiritimati—an atoll two hundred kilometers north of the equator, also known as Christmas Island—crossing the International Date Line, and arriving in Honolulu the previous day. An hour later, it makes the return flight to Nadi, arriving back the evening of the same day it departed. On the afternoon of January 1, 2014, **D** was on that airplane for the second time. He had already taken it the week before on the trip from Honolulu to Kiritimati, where he had arrived on Christmas Day, the same day on which Captain James Cook, 236 years earlier, had "discovered" the atoll.

Now **D** was bound for Nadi, and a few minutes after take-off he watched from the window as Kiritimati disappeared from sight. He observed its distinctive lagoon, the green of the coconut trees that grew smaller and smaller, swallowed by the intense blue of the ocean. The past week had been intense and engaging. A Russian journalist whom he had met on Kiritimati distracted him from his emotions by inviting him to join him in a toast. It was customary to celebrate in this way when crossing the equator, especially if it was for the first time. **D** toasted the changes of the last two centuries: a remote atoll in the Pacific Ocean, once reachable only to a few courageous Polynesian and European seafarers, was now in their reach as well. That toast was sincere, even if he had for some time wondered about the conveniences that industrial development had put at humanity's disposal. **D** vaguely feared that the resources now available to a significant part of humanity, obtained with relatively little money, without work, study, effort, risk, or courage, were in reality a poisoned gift.

During his stay on Kiritimati, **D** had had the opportunity to expand his knowledge of the history of the peoples of the Pacific Ocean, with the help of the Russian journalist. We Europeans are probably not able to distance ourselves enough from our own presumptions to comprehend how peoples from Southeast Asia were able to colonize the islands of the Pacific Ocean at a time when the Phoenicians were just beginning to explore the Mediterranean. Yet, with boats that were much less safe and without navigational equipment, four thousand years before now, peoples speaking Austronesian languages began to colonize these islands. When in 1768 James Cook began to explore the Pacific Ocean, they had populated an area that extended from the Hawaiian Islands to Samoa, from the Marquesas Islands to New Zealand, all the way to Easter Island. Archeological finds show that the island communities, separated by thousands of kilometers, maintained slow but regular contact. **D** was amazed by the enormous distances between those islands of the Pacific Ocean. He remained struck by an imaginary triangle, drawn by some archeologists to represent the area in which similar finds were discovered. The Polynesian Triangle has as vertices the Hawaiian Islands, New Zealand, and Easter Island, with sides more than seven thousand kilometers long, and an area comparable to that of Europe and Asia combined. **D** thought that those peoples had navigated the open sea in a manner much different from the experience of European seafaring, which had developed for centuries mainly hugging the coast.

D was bound for Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji. Its inhabitants had had the reputation of being ferocious cannibals among the first European sailors. William Bligh, the famous captain of the *Bounty*, avoided landing there, even though he was in dire need. In 1789, he had been banished on a flimsy launch by the sailors of the *Bounty*, who had mutinied. **D** had seen the film starring Marlon Brando as the rebel Fletcher Christian, and he was well aware of the story. Bligh could have found shelter and restocked on one of the nearby islands, but he had chosen to risk sailing six thousand kilometers of open sea to reach the safer island of Timor. He skirted Viti Levu without approaching. Two hundred

twenty-five years later, **D** disembarked without trepidation on the island that had been kept at a fearful distance by the Bligh's boat. He had already reserved a car at Nadi Airport, where Nanise was waiting for him. **D** had met her through a social networking site, and he had been drawn to the opportunity of getting to know, through her, the culture and lifestyle of the native inhabitants of the island.

In the car rental agency, a young Indo-Fijian girl tried to rent him a luxury SUV, parked right out front, at a price much higher than the one set online. In an attempt to persuade him, she repeatedly used the remote control to turn on the headlights of the car, which would be available immediately. However, **D** thought of himself as a traveler rather than a tourist, and he didn't intend to take on the same style as the masses of 600,000 tourists that flood the Fiji Islands every year. With the help of Nanise and her husband, he rented, for one week, at the agreed upon price (460 Fijian dollars, around 200 euros), an old Toyota Corolla.

D spent his first night on the island of Viti Levu near Nadi, with Nanise's large family. Right away, he was initiated into the rite of kava, a drink made by grinding the roots of the plant, which are then dissolved in water. **D** knew that kava, from its less than pleasant flavor, contains psychoactive substances, and he participated with caution in the abundant libations of the men of the house. It was immediately evident that the rite had a fundamental importance in the construction of the social relationships that govern the iTaukei families and clans. This is the name with which, several years ago, the native Fijians came to be called, those descendants of the "cannibals" so feared by the first European sailors.

Helped by his first experience with kava, **D** slept deeply, dreamt vividly, and woke alert and ready to begin his travels around the island. The main road along the coast—not by chance called on one side Kings and on the other side Queens Road—connects almost all the villages and cities in which live the 600,000 inhabitants of Viti Levu. The center of the island, made up of inactive volcanoes and a spectacular rain forest, is sparsely populated. **D**, driven by Nanise, made the entire loop of the island, 540 kilometers. Lautoka; Ba; Vatukoula; Tavau; Rakiraki; Viti Levu Bay; Wainibuka River; Korovou; the capital, Suva; Namatakula; Maui Bay; Vatukarasa; Sigatoka, with its tropical market and the sand dunes; Cuvu Beach; Malumalo; Natadola Beach; Momi Bay. In some of these places there are beaches internationally known as the home of famous resorts, in others marvelous, pristine places, in others still indigenous villages where **D** stayed, hosted by Nanise and her husband. The entrance of a foreigner into an indigenous village follows a precise ritual: the host presents the guest to the village chief and explains, in the iTaukei language, the reasons for his visit. The guest gives a small gift. The kava roots are grated. The village chief thanks the guest for the gift and recites the traditional welcome. The formality of the ceremony led **D** to think of the rite as a snapshot of a not-so-distant time in which the villages were sovereign territories.

During the trip, Nanise took **D** to visit her parents, who lived with grandchildren on a farm at the edge of the rainforest. Meeting these elderly farmers reminded **D** of his farmer grandparents in Val Padana. Even though they had lived almost at this place's antipodes, the welcoming of a stranger had the same rhythms: introduction of the guest, presentation of the family, starting with the eldest, hospitality in the courtyard, and the beginning of informal conversation. The main difference was the seats. In the summer, his grandparents had given their guests chairs placed in a circle in the shade. Nanise's parents had a large mat on which everyone squatted in a circle. As an exercise, **D** began to mentally compare the two farms. He well remembered when, at the end of the fifties, electricity arrived at his grandparents': the parties that they had and the changes in their lifestyle that soon followed. Nanise's parents still did not have electricity, but for their lifestyle it didn't seem such a necessity. The thick

walls that had protected **D**'s grandparents from the cold and the larders in which they preserved the harvest were not necessary here either. The outhouses were for the most part the same, though the Fijian ones benefitted from natural running water, something that **D**'s grandparents had only achieved with electricity. The main difference was the cultivation of the land, which was much less intensive. It seemed to him that only a part of their resources came from the farm. Most likely, the fruits of the neighboring forest supplemented the cultivated ones. During a nighttime dinner on that same mat, illuminated by torches, **D** was honored with songs and food that had been cooked over a fire before sunset. The foods had the wonders of ancient and unfamiliar flavors. The songs, however, seemed to him linked to modern culture, the result of the schooling of the younger generations. **D** thought that his elderly hosts were, like his grandparents, reluctant to pass on their ancient oral culture. Perhaps they too, confronted with the force of the scholastic culture and lit by electric energy, had given up on passing on those stories and songs generation to generation. To enjoy the party, **D** distanced himself from these thoughts. He forgot his regret, which had long accompanied him, at not having known how to access the great oral library possessed by his grandparents.

Towards the end of the party, Nanise recounted the story of her family to **D**. When *“the white man decided to plant sugarcane and they asked our chief then if he could find five strong men to be tested on the farm,”* her grandfather was one of those men, and she told him about his great labor. Often he had to drag for dozens of miles the mangrove wood that was needed to feed the boilers of the mills, *“the blood coming out from their shoulders but still they worked, having in mind that the future of all the Fijians lies in their hands.”* Nanise said that her grandfather and his four cousins *“were slaves, and we are proud to be the descendants of those strong men who actually won the heart of those white men. These were along with other Fijians from other provinces, the first Fijians to do sugarcane farming. With their hardworking, the white men gave those lands as a gift to them, including the one we are sitting on, for remembrance till this day.”* **D** was troubled by the story Nanise had told, and he thought of his grandparents, his parents. They too had suffered pain and tragedy during the war and the social struggles of the last century. But their suffering had a different character, being born of conflicts between similar cultures. He thought of the culpability of the white man, of the genocide of the Aztecs, of the Mayans, of the Native Americans, of the Tasmanians... He continued listening to Nanise without saying anything.

After four days of travel together, **D** said goodbye to Nanise and her husband with a feeling of gratitude for the social networking site that had put them in contact. He continued the trip around Viti Levu alone, along Queens Road. He had to return to Nadi Airport by January 7. He had long since bought his ticket for a flight to Sydney, and he regretted having given himself such a brief stay; this island had a very interesting history. Before leaving, **D** also wanted to get to know the Indian community that lived on the island. In 1874, the Fiji Islands became a colony of the English Crown, contributing to the empire's economy with sugar cane, cultivated by laborers brought from India. On Viti Levu and the other islands, tens of thousands of Indians were devoted to the cultivation and cutting of sugar cane, working in extremely difficult conditions that were almost slave-like for them, too. The transportation of the Indians continued until the first decades of the 1900s. In 1970, the English left, leaving the Fiji Islands with two populations in equal number. The natives, who had control of the land, modeled an aristocracy, a manifestation of their history, represented by the Great Council of Chiefs. The population of Indian origin had developed a Western working style while laboring under English control. As in many former colonies, the English language became the means of communication spoken by everyone, but the native Fijians continued to cultivate their language, and the Indians perfected a form of Hindi coming from their own dialects. The state of affairs between the two communities gradually worsened until a military coup in 1987. After that followed a bewildering

succession of attempts to institute a constitution with equal rights, more coups, and ethnically based elections. Due to the ethnic and political tensions, many Indo-Fijians returned to India. The native Fijians are now the majority of the population. The conflict between these two communities extends even to the name one calls oneself.

Near Sigatoka, the old, cheaply rented Toyota Corolla broke down, and **D** thought briefly of the SUV he had refused. But this lasted only a moment. Sure enough, a young Indo-Fijian, who managed a store precisely where the car had come to a stop, came immediately to his aid. This young man was very kind and offered to be an intermediary to make contact with the rental agency simpler. After a couple phone calls made with a smile that only the Indians know how to display, he calmed **D**, informing him that a representative from the agency would be arriving with a replacement car within an hour. While waiting, **D** took a brief walk on the beach. The tide was high, and the conditions were perfect for a refreshing swim. When he returned, the rescue car had arrived and two young Indo-Fijians handed it over, taking the old one. Little more than an hour after the breakdown, **D** was able to get back on his way with gracious smiles from his rescuers. That was his first contact with the Indo-Fijian community. The Fijians, regardless of their ethnicity, did not easily talk to foreigners about their conflict. Nevertheless, **D** was able to discuss the subject with an Indo-Fijian and was struck by something he said: *“My great-grandfather was born here in 1899, but according to many natives, I don't have the right to call myself Fijian.”* He was commenting on a position expressed by the proponents of the indigenous aristocracy: *“To call oneself Fijian, one must know the language, the culture; one must understand vanua.”* While they talked, **D** looked the bottle of his drink: vodka, lemon, and soda. In Fiji it is called *Tribefusion*.

Unsettled by the conflict between the two communities, **D** took refuge with his own, which stayed in the international resorts of Viti Levu. But was his own community really this one that he saw here, with the manicured lawns, a beach on a picture-perfect gulf, and beautiful women in designer swimsuits? **D** thought again of the two ethnic groups, now in conflict even though they had both endured *“the blood coming out of their shoulders.”* The first fears being expropriated from their land and identity, as has happened to so many other indigenous civilizations. They therefore try to maintain control of their clans' land, lifestyles, and values, while adapting in their own time to modernity. The second, uprooted from their own land, wants to assert Western values, under which they could easily become hegemonic. **D** came to see that he couldn't take sides, couldn't choose between the motives of the two communities. At the resort, he took a swim in the gorgeous sea, but he continued to think about that conflict. All of a sudden, it seemed to him that globalization reproduces such situations everywhere, and he despaired for humanity's destiny. However, his discomfort was tempered by a manhattan, prepared as it is in New York, and by the view of the sunset, which was reason enough to visit the Fiji Islands.

A continued to follow the political events of the Republic of Fiji, where on September 17, 2014, the first elections without an ethnic bias were held. International observers found them valid.