Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara is the president of the Republic of Fiji and the last of several paramount Fijian chiefs groomed for high office by the British in the last two decades of colonial rule. For many years these chiefs dominated Fijian leadership and were at the center of dialogue with Indian leaders on issues of land and constitutional change. Even as Fijians of “commoner” status became prominent in government, the chiefs continued to be the core symbols of ethnic identity and the source of legitimacy. In part their security in these functions enabled them to become mediating and stabilizing national figures in a multiracial society, facilitating the transition from crown colony to independent dominion of the British Commonwealth after a brief phase of interracial tension.

As the most intellectually able of the chiefs, and the man especially favored by his uncle (and “idol”) the great Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, Ratu Mara rose to become prime minister in a predominantly Fijian government from 1970, the year of Fiji’s independence, until 1987. Several months after his defeat by a mainly Indian-based coalition, he was reinstated as prime minister in a military backed “interim” regime that ruled till 1992 when, after elections under a new constitution, the coup-maker Sitiveni Rabuka replaced him. In 1994 Mara succeeded the late Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau as president. Mara’s life might easily have taken a very different course, for when Sukuna directed him to study economics and history at Oxford in preparation for the career in government, he had almost completed medical studies in New Zealand.

Wittily recounted in a light and graceful style, Mara’s memoir strikes an engaging balance between personal life and affairs of state. Appendixes include the famous Wakaya Letter of 1963, in which Mara and fellow leaders insisted to the UK government that Fijians must approve any constitutional changes leading to self-government, his address to the UN Assembly after Fiji’s achievement of independence, and his moving tribute to the late Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau. Photographs range from the youthful pose in a students’ production of Romeo and Juliet, to his chiefly installation as the Tui Nayau, and meetings with world figures. Mara’s former secretary, Sir Robert Sanders, assisted in the research and editing. While the chapters on early life and international experience are particularly interesting and often entertaining, the account of events in Fiji over the last twenty or so years is disappointingly thin and rather one-sided. But perhaps we should not expect in such a work a candid warts-and-all review. For the most part it is a valuable and enjoyable book.

Over the last thirty years Ratu Mara has been the most outstanding political personality not only in Fiji, but among all island nations of the Pacific. He first achieved this prominence in 1965 for his forceful initiative in leading island delegates in a challenge to colonialist paternalism at
a conference of the South Pacific Commission. He later played a central part in setting up the South Pacific Forum, and quickly became leader of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific sugar-producing countries in their negotiations of trade terms with the European Economic Community. (This role occasionally drew him into most unlikely mediations, as when he helped Ghana and Denmark settle their dispute over payments for Mercedes cars!)

Mara’s local and international stature owes much to his efforts to promote a sense of nation in Fiji. Though he doesn’t mention it, he was the first Fijian leader to champion the goal of interracialism. Indeed, in the 1950s he was seen as a radical, advocating interracial schooling and local government based on common roll elections. His diaries as a young district officer reveal an enthusiastic commitment to evenhanded mediation of local disputes between Fijians and Indians, work that well equipped him for leadership of the Alliance Party, the interethnic coalition that governed for twenty years.

Ratu Mara recalls some of the early experiences that helped shape his liberal outlook. Anatomy class at the medical school in Suva taught him “that under the skin all people are the same—chiefs were no different from others.” After winning the prize for dissection he prepared for full medical studies in New Zealand by enrolling at Suva’s Marist Brothers School, where the staff were “more like friends than masters.” His year in this “microcosm of multiracialism,” where he was the sole Fijian in a class mainly of Indians, was “one of the formative episodes in my own multiracialist philosophy.” It also influenced his decision to switch from Methodism to Catholicism, because from the Catholics he had learned “individual responsibility . . . a creed to which I felt I could give wholehearted allegiance.” He was uncomfortable with the Methodist Church’s close alliance with the chiefly system, for “there seemed to be an unspoken feeling that rank would provide the way to salvation, whatever faults might intervene.”

In 1987 Ratu Mara’s reputation at home and abroad was severely shaken by unsubstantiated allegations that he had a hand in the first army coup, which occurred soon after his election defeat. His quick decision to join the military regime provoked condemnations by “the Western media [that] hurt and maimed me psychologically.” Of course the coups also devastated the interracial cooperation he had tried to promote in government and society. Mara reaffirms that he joined the coup council to prevent bloodshed and save the economy, though he now admits that “at that stage my heart ruled my head.”

His sympathies for the Fijians who most strongly supported the coup are revealed in the explanation and plea he made to the Queen’s secretary after Rabuka staged his second coup and declared Fiji a republic. This intriguing statement, one of the book’s most interesting passages, candidly acknowledges a tension in his leadership that had for many years been heightened by challenges from his main indigenous Fijian opposition, the anti-Indian Fijian National Party: “The Governor General and I are both
traditional leaders, educated and brought up under Western values. Our chiefly status gave us the privilege to enjoy both cultures. In our indulgence we have become insensitive to . . . the feelings of insecurity and anxiety of our own people.” Out of consideration for “Western values” Mara had rejected the Taukei Movement’s “desperate” request for his leadership: “They sought guidance from their natural leader and were spurned by him. They consequently burned, looted, assaulted, and were going beserk. The Army and Taukei Movement have now come (to us) again. The choice before us is either to stand on our Western pedestal, spurn and berate them again and ignore the consequences, or to agree to guide them to order, peace and harmony. . . . My gut feeling is that we should respond. We ask . . . for Her Majesty’s permission [and] blessing.”

Following his election defeat Ratu Mara had been proud to see that democracy was “alive and well in Fiji” and urged the people to support Dr Bavadra’s government. But he now has surprisingly little to say on the question of what might have happened had he continued, after the coup, to defend that government by standing with the governor-general against Rabuka. He doubts whether “the force of my moral authority would have altered the course of events [for] it was far beyond the capabilities of one man at that time to reverse events.” This will hardly satisfy his critics. Yet the true answer to the vexed question might vindicate Mara. The power of chiefly authority was by no means certain in that moment of unprecedented volatility.

Indeed, a sustained resistance by both leading chiefs might have provoked the army, or a section of it, to spur Taukei fervor in support of a far more ethnically repressive regime, perhaps irrevocably undermining the chiefs' restraining influence in ethnic leadership. Mara could well have made a stronger case for his “damage control” action than he has.

In much of the academic writing on Fiji since the coups Ratu Mara has been demeaned by a simplistic modernist orthodoxy depicting the chiefs as a reactionary self-serving elite obstructing political unity between ordinary Fijians and Indians. This view greatly understates the weight of ethnic difference in popular life, and quite misrepresents the chiefs’ significance in the national society. A close examination of the political process over the last sixty years highlights the part chiefs have played in containing and mediating ethnic conflict (beginning in 1936 with Sukuna’s persuasion of the Council of Chiefs to agree to land reforms giving security to tenants). In fact, the importance of the chiefs in restraining a more destructive escalation of “Taukeism” is now widely acknowledged in Fiji, and few people there would dispute the critical importance of the Council of Chiefs’ recent endorsement of the proposal for constitutional reform by which Fiji is now regaining its national vision.

Mara, towering still in physique and personality at seventy-eight, played a key role in this political breakthrough. Through his influence with the Council of Chiefs, and with the wider Fijian leadership’s continued respect for his wisdom and experience, he helped
encourage and guide the process of reconciliation between Fijian and Indian leaders. In his final report on the performance of his interim government, Mara asserted, “We have helped guide the country through the most trying period in its history, a period which began with fear, suffering, and uncertainty, and ended in a spirit of hope and renewal.” If such a claim was premature in 1992, Mara and Rabuka can rightly make it now. Unfortunately the memoir ends with that report, so there is no account of the events leading to the remarkable rapprochement. The viability of that achievement remains to be tested in elections and government, against the ever-present potential for militant Fijian ethno-nationalism.

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In 1522, right after Magellan’s death in the Philippines, one of his remaining ships, the Trinidad, sailed east in an ill-fated attempt to reach Panama. On the way, the Spanish stopped at Guam, where they kidnapped a Chamorro to provide needed information for the voyage. So began a trend of Oceanians joining the crews of Euroamerican ships, a movement that peaked in the nineteenth century. Although at first recruitment was forced, as in the case of the unfortunate Chamorro, from the late eighteenth century most Oceanians signed on “voluntarily,” enticed by gifts, promises of wealth, or just the opportunity to see foreign lands. Although some of these travelers were elites like the Tahitian priest Tupaia, Belau’s Prince Lee Boo, and the Hawaiian chief Ka’iana, most were anonymous young men—kanakas as they came to be called in shipboard Pidgin after the Hawaiian word for person—taken on board to haul lines, pump the bilges, scrub the deck, and carry out other unskilled duties. Visiting captains quickly grasped how useful they could be. By 1830 American vessels trading for furs along the northwest coast were crewed mostly by Hawaiians, and by mid-century fully twenty percent of the sailors in the American whaling fleet were Oceanians. So many were signing on that authorities in Hawai‘i, Rotuma, and Rarotonga sought to restrict and regulate recruitment during this era of acute population decline.

So widespread was this movement that historian David Chappell considers that it constituted one of the three great Oceanian diasporas, occurring well after the original settlement of the region by canoe and just before the current exodus to the rim by means of jet aircraft. However, getting a handle on this movement is not easy. Although its echoes are evident in the niche contemporary Rotuman and I-Kiribati seamen have found in international shipping, the diaspora of the European days of sail has long been over, leaving only fragmentary traces. Chappell labels those Oceanians who