



Ratu Ambrosia, Chief of Suva, and wife

Photo courtesy of Michael Campbell.

## Ambrose, Ratu Tui Suva (c. 1847–1912)

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Ratu Ambrose<sup>1</sup> was a Fijian *roko* or high chief who converted to Adventism. For many years Adventism was seen as an outsider religion in Fiji, but Ambrose's conversion created an opportunity for many people to give Adventism serious consideration. Chief Ambrose's donation of property and other resources for a permanent Adventist mission station provided the much needed help at a crucial point in the development of Adventism in Fiji.

Ambrose was a *rombolas* or governor of the Fijian islands. He was a “near relative of old king Cacobau [Cakobau], the last Fijian king, who, in 1873, turned the government of the island over to England.”<sup>2</sup> His mother, Adi Elenoa Mila, was King Cakobau's sister and his father was a grandson of Ratu Tanoa—Cakobau’s father.

Ambrose married Adi Kelera [Kilara, Kelerayani, or Clara], a daughter of the Vunivalu of Rewa, one of Fiji’s most powerful kingdoms. His family and marriage connections enabled him to “become a central figure in the process by which Suva became the capital” of Fiji, giving him “considerable mana among his people.”<sup>3</sup> His various titles meant that he was the hereditary Tui [King] of Suva. Even after his conversion to Adventism, he remained *buli* in charge of thirteen villages.<sup>4</sup> He was Buli Rewa for the last six years of his life. The couple had one child, Ratu Ravula, who became Buli Suva.<sup>5</sup>

According to one account, Ambrose was converted to Adventism in 1899 through his acquaintance with Pauliasi Bunoa<sup>6</sup>, another early Fijian convert:

Ratu Aporosa went into Pauliasi’s house at the beginning of the Sabbath some weeks later, telling Pauliasi that he had come to open the Sabbath with him. While Pauliasi was praying, Ratu Aporosa broke down and wept like a child, telling the Lord what an awful sinner he was. He was indeed a vile sinner. There was not a sin in the category that he had not and was not committing, even to murder. He told Pauliasi that he was impelled to come and meet with him at the opening of the Sabbath, and that now he had decided to unite with him in keeping the true Sabbath, and would cast himself wholly into the service of the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Another account mentions that Ambrose’s wife was present at the meeting in Pauliasi’s home when Ambrose “broke down in tears and cried out, ‘I am a sinful man; what must I do to be saved?’” She suggested that they worshipped with the missionaries, which they did. He afterward held an assembly and assured his people that no one had pressured him to join the Adventists. “He knew it was right, and would stand with it.”<sup>8</sup> He was baptized later that year with Pauliasi Bunoa in the very first baptismal service by immersion in Fiji.<sup>9</sup>

A memorable incident took place when Ambrose celebrated the Lord’s Supper and foot washing for the first time. “Ratu Ambrose, who is one of the highest chiefs of Fiji, washed a young boy’s feet.”<sup>10</sup> Many people were shocked to witness the transformation of the chief’s life, who broke rank to lower himself to wash a boy’s feet. John E. Fulton, an early Adventist missionary, described the service:

A week ago last Sabbath we observed the ordinances of the Lord’s house. That was a blessed day. The ordinance of humility was new to our Fijian brethren but was greatly enjoyed. Especially was this true of our Brother Pauliasi, the native minister, and Ratu Ambrose, the chief. The latter took an active part and celebrated this institution of our Lord with some of the younger men. He is a higher chief and much respect is shown him. But he seemed to enjoy bowing down as did his Saviour to show his love for his inferiors.<sup>11</sup>

Fulton recognized that Ambrose would have been king had the old government still been in existence. “His old subjects still bow to him and respect him.”<sup>12</sup> However, some of “his townsmen . . . no longer counted him a chief

as he had taken with a new religion."<sup>13</sup> Fulton added:

People say he was the biggest rogue in Fiji, and that we must have paid him a big sum of money to keep Sabbath. I remember when he came to church on Sabbath morning, he prayed and broke down and cried. He invited us to the town and gave us land. I was quite carried beyond myself. It seemed too good to be true, and we all cried with him for joy that morning. He has been many times tempted by white men, who like him to drink with them, but he has remained true to his convictions.<sup>14</sup>

Ambrose's gift of land made it possible for the Adventist mission to develop a permanent home. This property is still owned by the denomination to this day. Within a year there were twenty-nine Adventist church members in Ambrose's village.<sup>15</sup>

Ambrose met several Adventist world church leaders. In 1899 he met George A. Irwin (1844-1913), president of the General Conference, as he passed through Fiji. He called him *Qase Levu kei Vuravura* ("the big man of all the world").<sup>16</sup> In 1907 Ambrose met Daniel Kress (1862-1956) and Septimus Carr (1878-1972). Kress wrote:

We all sat down on the floor in a circle, and carried on a pleasant conversation. This is the first time in my experience that I have been invited to sit on the floor, but Brother Ambrose and family were so genteel and polite that we soon forgot all about this, and felt we were in the presence of friends.<sup>17</sup>

In 1910 Ambrose attended the Australasian Union Conference session with Alipati Rainima<sup>8</sup>, another early Fijian convert. That turned out to be a memorable trip and gave Ambrose the opportunity to participate in the deliberations of the church.

In late 1911 or early 1912, Ambrose lost his right hand in a fishing accident involving dynamite.<sup>19</sup> On December 10, 1912, he passed away from typhoid fever. He was estimated to be 65 years old.<sup>20</sup> His last message was: "I have no fear at all, for I am trusting in the Lord. To-day I look to my Saviour on the cross. It is He that separated me from the world and brought me into this clean church. I know I have been a bad man, but He has forgiven me."<sup>21</sup>

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"The Passing of a Chief." *The [Australian] Signs of the Times*, January 27, 1913.

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## NOTES

1. His name is sometimes spelled as Ratu Abrosa, Aporosa, or Avorosa.
2. E. H. Gates, "A Sabbath in Fiji," *The Bible Echo*, April 30, 1900, 8.
3. Nicholas Halter, *Suva Stories: A History of the Capital of Fiji* (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2022), 88.
4. E. H. Gates, "A Trip to Fiji," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, July 24, 1911, 3.
5. Obituary, *Australasian Union Conference Record*, January 20, 1913, 7.
6. For more information about Pauliasi Bunoa, see Raymond Wilkinson, "Bunoa, Pauliasi (died 1918)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=B7TS&highlight=Pauliasi>.
7. C. H. Parker, "Pioneer Native Workers," *Australasian Record*, July 30, 1928, 1.
8. Myrtle G. Parker's letter cited in "Union Conference," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, July 17, 1899, 4.
9. J. E. Fulton, "Present Truth in Fiji," [dated Dec. 19, 1899], *The Signs of the Times*, April 25, 1900, 12.
10. C. H. Parker, "Mission Studies. Fiji," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, May 31, 1909, 7.

11. J. E. Fulton, "Progress in Fiji," *The Missionary Magazine*, April 1900, 169, 170.
12. J. E. Fulton, "The Work in Fiji: Evening After Sabbath, July 12," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, July 22, 1901, 22.
13. J. E. Fulton, "Suva, Fiji," *The Bible Echo*, May 14, 1900, 8.
14. J. E. Fulton, "The Work in Fiji: Evening After Sabbath, July 12," 22.
15. Avorosa Tuivuya et. Al, To governor, September 21, 1900, in CSO 606/1900, enclosure in CSO 2256/1902, National Archives of Fiji, Suva.
16. J. E. Fulton, "The Work in Fiji: Wednesday Evening, July 17," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, July 26, 1901, 50.
17. Daniel H. Kress, "Leaving Australia, and Our Trip to Fiji," *Australasian Union Conference Record*, May 13, 1907, 8.
18. For more information about Rainima Alipati, see Milton Hook, "Rainima, Alipati (died 1912)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=BI7K&highlight=Alipati|Rainima>.
19. See note *Australasian Union Conference Record*, February 12, 1912, 8. The detail about fishing with dynamite comes from: "The Passing of a Chief," *The [Australian] Signs of the Times*, January 27, 1913, 59.
20. "The Passing of a Chief," *The [Australian] Signs of the Times*, January 27, 1913, 59.
21. Obituary, *Australasian Union Conference Record*, January 20, 1913, 7.

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