

# Salabogi, Ratu Meli (c. 1870–1939)

## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek, Avondale: Experiment on the Dora, Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist*, the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Ratu Meli Salabogi was an influential chief of the Ra district on the island of Viti Levu, Fiji. He was instrumental in sharing the message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with political and community leaders in Fiji.

## Times of Mixed Loyalties

Nineteenth-century Fijian culture paid little attention to birthdays. For that reason Ratu Meli Salabogi's age was always an educated guess. In 1930 he was reputed to be "over sixty years."<sup>1</sup> The title "Ratu" signified his rank in Fijian society as a chief. His father was Ratu Mara, one who accepted the Christian faith carried by early Wesleyan missionaries. Their home village was Nabukadra, on the Ra coast, northeast Viti Levu, Fiji. During John Fulton's early years in Fiji, 1896 through 1902, Salabogi wrote to him and asked for literature. Years later Salabogi said Fulton "led me into the message." He was baptized as a member of the *Lotu ni Kavita ni Siga* (the Seventh-day Church).<sup>2</sup>

For many years Salabogi held the government position of chief of the Ra district, making him responsible for the civil welfare of his people.<sup>3</sup> His duties caused him to drift from the standards of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, but when he retired, he had a change of heart and renewed his enthusiasm for his former faith.<sup>4</sup>

## Visitation on Behalf of the SDA Church

When Fulton was president of the Australasian Union Conference, he arranged for Salabogi to do a six-month speaking tour of Australia in 1925/1926. His appointments began at the South New South Wales camp meeting<sup>5</sup> and moved on to church gatherings in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth.<sup>6</sup>

The Australian tour was a preliminary to his six-month visit to America in 1926, principally to attend the General Conference session at Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He sailed from Sydney with Fulton in March 1926, stopping off at Wellington, NZ, and Tahiti where Salabogi addressed church members with Fulton translating. They had time to speak to many more gatherings in California before pressing on to Milwaukee for the session, May 27 through June 13. At the meetings Salabogi made a deep impression, barefoot, with his traditional whale's tooth hung around his neck and carrying his long war club.<sup>7</sup>

Wherever Salabogi preached in Australia and America, he made an appeal for band instruments to be donated to the Fiji Mission schools. He arrived back in Suva with a lot of extra baggage packed with gifts of used cornets, trumpets, and even a double bass. Wherever he spoke in his homeland he told of the deep impressions made when he toured overseas, the SDA institutions he visited, the large congregations of fellow believers and the kindnesses shown to



Ratu Meli, the Fijian Chief, with the war club of his old life in one hand and the Bible of his new life in the other

Ratu Meli  
From *Review and Herald*, 1926.

him.<sup>8</sup>

Salabogi sorely felt his lack of formal training for mission work and requested that he be allowed to attend Buresala School for two years. As a mature-age student he sat in classes with the teenagers during 1929 through 1930, absorbing further material suitable for his sermons.<sup>9</sup> Following this time of enrichment he resumed his visitation throughout the Fijian churches until 1932.<sup>10</sup> He then retired to his home village, Nabukadra, where he died peacefully on May 26, 1939.<sup>11</sup> Salabogi held a missionary licentiate rather than ordination. He was a natural leader among his people, and his Christian influence in his senior years was salutary.

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## NOTES

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2. A[ndrew] G. Stewart, "Ratu Meli Salabogi," *Australasian Record*, August 28, 1939, 7.?
3. Ibid.?
4. H[erbert] C. White, "A Remarkable Transformation," *Australasian Record*, December 7, 1925, 8.?
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6. Ratu Meli Salabogi, "Visit to America," *ARH*, August 4, 1927, 11, 12.?
7. Ibid.?
8. Ratu Meli Salabogi, "Back in the Islands Again," *ARH*, August 11, 1927, 10, 11.?
9. Anna L. Hindson, "Sabbath School Department of the Australasian Division," *Australasian Record*, September 29, 1930, 14–17.?
10. E.g., "Fiji Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1932), 107.?
11. Stewart, 7.?

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