Taoi, Joeli (1930–2018) and Miliakere Roko

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Dr. Joeli Taoi, commonly called “Dokta belong mifala” by the people of Vanuatu, was a missionary doctor in the Pacific Islands from 1958 to 1995. He was especially well known as a pioneer missionary doctor to Aore in New Hebrides (1958–1976). His service extended to other Pacific islands, including Papua New Guinea, and then American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Niue, Pitcairn, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Western Samoa. He served as health director for the Central Pacific Union Mission from 1990 to 1993.1

**Early Life (1930–1945)**

Joeli Vuotanavanua Taoi was born on the May 4, 1930, to Jesoni Taoi and Lute Nakiti, both of Vanuavatu, Lau, in the Fiji Islands.2 Joeli was the youngest of eight children. Eroni Taoi, also a medical doctor, was the eldest, followed by two sisters, Timaima Usamaki and Mereseini Nukuciri; then three brothers, Paula Vesidamu, Jone Manua, and Kilaki Taoi; then another sister named Makenesi Tagi; then the youngest, Joeli Taoi.3 These eight children grew up in a Methodist home and gained their religious upbringing under the guidance of their parents and the Methodist minister of the village.4

**Arrival of Christianity to Vanuavatu (1870)**

Joeli’s grandfather Ulaiasi Leauli accepted Christianity when Aisea Nabarua, a chief from Cicia island, Lau, brought Christianity to Vanuavatu in 1870. At that time the chiefs were the best medium for sharing the gospel because their subjects would listen and obey their advice and words. Aisea Nabarua, chief of Cicia, introduced Christianity to Ulaiasi, the chief of Vanuavatu. As a result, animistic worship and practices were surrendered. Aisea Nabarua married lisapeci, a convert from his teaching. After his marriage Aisea settled in Vanuavatu and did not return to Cicia. He had two sons and a daughter, and they continued in Vanuavatu as Methodist missionaries.5 Their teachings and beliefs, along with Ulaiasi’s influence, motivated Jesoni Taoi (father of Joeli) to be a Methodist church leader on the island. He was determined that his children and family would remain faithful to this belief. When the seventh-day Sabbath came to the island, Jesoni Taoi strongly opposed it. In Dr. Joeli Taoi’s own words, his father was “the hater of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church.”6 He never became an SDA.

**Education and Marriage**
As noted above, Joeli Vuetanavanua Taoi was born on May 4, 1930, and the first nine years of his childhood were spent on his home island of Vanuavatu. He was sent to the neighboring island of Lakeba for his primary education; then at the age of 9 his older brother Jone Manuwa Taoi arranged for him to go to Suva for school. He sailed for Suva in a copra boat.

With his brother’s support, Joeli continued on to the Queen Victoria School in Nanukula on Viti Levu to complete his high school studies in preparation for tertiary education. He was an outstanding student scoring A grades throughout school. In 1954 Joeli began his medical training at the Central Medical School in Suva, known today as the Fiji School of Medicine. He graduated in 1950 as a native medical practitioner.

In 1951 Joeli commenced his medical internship, and during that year he was baptized during the annual session of the East Fiji Mission at Vatuonu, Buca Bay, Vanua Levu. His mother, Lute Nakiti Taoi, and brother Kilaki Taoi joined Joeli as SDAs. The introduction of a new faith on the island was not well received by Joeli’s father, Jesoni Taoi, and the village elders. Joeli, his brother Kilaki, and their mother Lute, were expelled from their home village. Joeli’s father, Jesoni, built another settlement outside the village and moved Lute there. She remained an SDA until her death. Her brothers also became SDAs. One of her nephews, Pele Vola, became an SDA pastor. His son Josua Qalobula was for a time principal of the Vatuonu Adventist High School in Buca Bay. The families of Lute, and her sons Kilaki and Joeli, are well known among SDAs in Fiji.

Also in 1951 Joeli married Miliakere Roko, a nurse. She was the daughter of Akuila Kuboutawa and Lanieta Vunawa of Loa village. Lanieta was the daughter of the chief, Timoci Vakadranu, who had become an SDA. He was the first chief to become a Seventh-day Adventist on the island of Vanua Levu. Through his influence the church was established in Natewa, Naduri, in Macuata, Visoqo, Kerda, and Somosomo, the chief village in Taveuni and Qamea Island.

Joeli and Miliakere met while they were studying at the central medical school. They were to have eight children, four boys and four girls.

Career and Ministry

Between 1952 and 1957 Dr. Joeli worked in a number of hospitals and dispensaries throughout Fiji. Then in 1958 he received an invitation to be the founding doctor of an SDA hospital at Aore in the New Hebrides. Until 1976 he remained at Aore; during much of that time he also served as the health director of the New Hebrides Mission.

When the family arrived at Aore, they found that there were already some Fijian families at Aore. Among them were Samu Ratulevu and Sala, his wife; and George Moce and his wife, Sereima. Other missionaries from Australia and America were there also. Dr. Joeli had the challenge of starting a medical clinic. Most of the building materials and builders came from Fiji. R. R. Frame and other church leaders officially opened the new hospital on June 11, 1961.

By 1965 the work had grown to the place where that year it was reported there were 745 hospital admissions, 350 surgeries, 6,700 outpatients treated, and nine medical patrols by Dr. Joeli to other islands.

Mrs. Isabel Paget, a nurse graduate from the Sydney Adventist Nursing School, arrived with her husband at the beginning of 1965 to assist Dr. Joeli in the training of nurses at Aore. Arnold Paget was in charge of ships’ maintenance. With the practical training and commitment of Dr. Joeli and Isabel Paget, nurses graduated from Aore and were fully recognized by the Vanuatu government. They were assisted by two Fijian nurses, Atelini Domoni and Losalini Tunitabu, who came to help Dr. Joeli at the Aore clinic. The first graduation of trained nurses was in 1966.

Dean Giles, president of New Hebrides Mission, wrote in 1965 that “Joeli is a dedicated missionary and competent doctor. . . . Our only wish is that our medical team were not called upon to practice without all the facilities they require.” His comments were made in the context of announcing that Dr. Joeli had been appointed as a delegate to represent the Australasian Division attending the 1966 General Conference session.

At the General Conference session Dr. Joeli represented Fiji at the mission pageant. He was dressed in Fijian dress. After attending the General Conference session, he spent some time at the White Memorial Hospital in California in order to gain some further surgical experience.

On returning to Aore, Joeli worked with skill and patience to establish the reputation of the hospital. Over the next 11 years it provided quality service to the people of Espirito Santo and continued to train nurses for the country of Vanuatu. In 1973 Joeli was granted leave to study surgery, obstetrics, and gynecology in New Zealand. On returning to Aore in 1975, he was appointed as a member of the Australasian Division executive committee.

Because both Dr. Joeli and his wife, Miliakere, were involved in operating the clinic, Mereseini Sususewa came from Fiji to care for the Taoi children and made sure the house was in order and the family meals prepared. She continued with the Taoi family throughout their time in New Hebrides and in Fiji when Dr. Joeli Taoi returned from mission service. Marica Moses was another Fijian woman who came to the hospital to undertake the janitorial duties and do the hospital laundry. Dr. and Mrs. Joeli greatly appreciated the assistance of these women.

After his time at Aore, Dr. Joeli joined the British Medical Service as divisional medical officer responsible for all the government clinics in the district of Malekula, New Hebrides. He remained there in 1976 and 1977, and then returned to Fiji, where he was the director of the SDA Lami Health Centre for the Fiji Mission during 1978 and 1979.
In 1978 he was granted the honor of being awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). An MBE is granted by the British government as recognition of outstanding service to the community—in this case the New Hebrides.\textsuperscript{31}

Between 1980 and 1987 he was the senior district medical officer (SDMO) for Sigatoka Hospital, Nadroga and Navosa, Viti Levu; Savusavu Hospital, Vanua Levu; and Taveuni Hospital, on Taveuni Island, Fiji. Then in 1988 he accepted an appointment with the Papua New Guinea Medical Service in Port Moresby, where they remained until the end of 1989. During this time he did much to strengthen the medical services at Sopas Adventist Hospital in the Enga province of Papua New Guinea. At that time, Miliakere Roko’s illness brought them home to Fiji. She died at home in 1990.

Dr. Joeli worked for the Fiji Medical Service for the last time between 1993 and 1995. He was then briefly employed as director of health by the Central Pacific Union Mission. In 1996 he established a clinic in his hometown of Savusavu. This clinic served the people of Vanua Levu and also was the transit center for mission workers passing through Savusavu for other parts of Vanua Levu.

## Later Years

Shortly after establishing his clinic in Savusavu, Joeli married Alieta Tagaii of Samoa.\textsuperscript{32} Alieta Tagai was the daughter of Tagai Tui and Siimoasina Kuresa, both of Samoa. She was born on October 14, 1953, and grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist home, attended Adventist schools, and graduated from Fulton College in 1973 as a primary school teacher. She served as a teacher for the Samoa Mission both in Western and American Samoa. Alieta became the children’s ministries director for the Samoan Mission. Her older brother Kuresa Tagai and his wife, Maryanne, are known for their mission service to the Pacific Islands and Pacific Adventist University, where Kuresa served as senior lecturer and dean for the School of Education, while Maryanne was a senior lecturer in the School of Business. They also served at length in Sonoma College, Papua New Guinea, and Fulton College, Fiji. Some of Alieta’s other siblings were Meki Tagai and Lynette. Her siblings all attended Fulton College.

Alieta’s maternal grandfather was the first ordained pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Samoa. Her uncle Kuresa Sauni was a musician who composed the Samoan national anthem and started two brass bands in Samoa. He also translated a number of hymns in the Samoan hymnal. Kuresa Sauni started two churches while serving as a church elder in the main Apia church.

Joeli and Alieta were married in Samoa at Satui Fasitoouta on September 11, 1997.\textsuperscript{33} They came back to Fiji in December of 1997 and settled in Savusavu. In June 1998 Alieta opened a small school for just nine students. The school was registered in 2007 as Temple Hill Kindergarten. It has grown to 55 students and three teachers. It is a private school without any government assistance.

Both Joeli and Alieta enjoyed similar interests, such as gardening, walking, and a simple diet. They grew their own vegetables and lived on a very simple diet of raw foods and fruits. They shared their commitment to God and were well respected in the community. Dr. Joeli retired in 2010 at the age of 80, and died on August 5, 2018, at their home in Savusavu.\textsuperscript{34} He was survived by his seven children; his second wife, Alieta Tagai Taoi; 37 grandchildren, 44 great grandchildren, and one great-great-grandson.

## Legacy

In a eulogy for her father at his funeral, Alumeci Tuivucilevu (Dr. Tui Taoi) spoke of Dr. Joeli’s trust in God and his spirituality. She regarded him as a mentor both in life and in the medical profession.\textsuperscript{35}

Tokasa Taoi Thomson, Joeli’s third daughter, described her memory of her father as someone bent over a sick child or treating an old man with an infected wound. She pictured a brown hand flicking his thermometer and reading it. She recollected a man with a Bible Picture Roll standing before New Hebridean women and children telling Bible stories. She described a man with his brown briefcase running down to the Aore jetty to catch the mission boat to an outer island for a medical emergency. Tokasa added that her father was a mobile dispensary: a doctor, dentist, optician, and Bible teacher. Tokasa described her father’s lengthy prayers at 4:00 a.m. every morning. It was an alarm that woke everyone up. He addressed the heavenly Father as his Papa God. His demeanor and prayer life held their family together.\textsuperscript{36}

Litiana remembered going out with her father each week to run branch Sabbath Schools in the neighboring settlements and villages. They would walk behind him and sing songs as they went. At the sight of him, mothers would bring their children and their sick. The men, half naked in their grass wraparounds, would squat on the grass and listen as Dr. Joeli shared stories from the Bible.\textsuperscript{37}

Such was the legacy of this missionary doctor.\textsuperscript{38}


NOTES

1. Alieta Tagai Taoi, email to author, February 8, 2019. Much of the data in this article comes from oral records of the extended family of Dr. Joeli as follows: Alieta Tagai Taoi, second wife of Joeli Taoi; Timaima Vuetanavanua, eldest daughter of Joeli Taoi and Miliakere Roka Taoi; Alumeci Tuvucilevu Taoi, third child of Joeli Taoi and Miliakere Roka Taoi; Tokasa Taoi Thomson, fifth child of Joeli Taoi and Miliakere Roka Taoi; Litiana Maraivale, sixth child of Joeli Taoi and Miliakere Roka Taoi; Damu Tuiyadua, great-grandson of Aisea Nabarua, of Cicia Island; Asena Tamari, wife of Kilaki, the brother of Joeli Taoi.


3. Timaima Vuetanavanua, eldest daughter of Joeli Taoi, Savutalele, interview with the author, Princes Road, Suva, Fiji, February 17, 2019.


11. Ibid.

12. Interview with Asena Tamari, wife of Kilaki, the brother of Joeli Taoi, conducted by Karalaini Tukutukuwaqa at Narere, Suva, Fiji, January 24, 2019.


14.
15. Dr. Tui Taoi, daughter of Dr. Joeli Taoi, interview with the author, Savutalele, Fiji, February 16, 2019.


22. Taylor, 3.


24. Ibid.


32. “Dr. Joeli Taoi, Eulogy,” unpublished manuscript held in the personal collection of the author.


34. Litiana Taoi, interview with the author, Savutalele, Fiji, February 17, 2019.