



# On the Trail of the FIJIAN DAKUA

BY Y D BAR-NESS & A S TIEFHOLZ-DEVINE

**WE CAME TO FIJI IN SEARCH** of a strange and wonderful tree but we didn't know its name. We knew it was a species found only in the South Pacific...we knew it could live for more than a thousand years. And we knew its name in the obscure language of botanical Latin: *Agathis macrophylla*.

Our pursuit was filled with good fortune, a journey of serendipity and discovery. We found the magnificent tree and came to know it by its melodious Fijian name, dakua.

So, how did the dakua come to Fiji? Where can you find this most amazing of Fijian trees? Retrace our search, from the depths of geological time to the most accessible forests of Viti Levu.

You can visit these living trees in the forests of Fiji and as you follow your own trail, learn a few pieces of the natural and cultural history of the Fiji Islands.

As visitors to Viti Levu, we were fortunate to find ourselves, literally, on the trail of the dakua tree. At our lodgings in the centre of Suva, we asked our hostess: "Do you know of the *Agathis* tree?"

She confessed she did not, but her elderly father, a retired cabinet maker, spoke up from the corner of the room.

"It is dakua!"

He told us of the massive trees that used to cover the islands, held in awe and reverence by Fijians.



"Go to Colo-i-Suva," he told us. "There, you will find these trees."

Dakua, a close relative of New Zealand's kauri tree, is one of a group of plants with a curious Southern Hemisphere distribution. A quarter of a billion years ago, its botanical family, the Araucariaceae, covered the entire planet.

In those long distant times when dinosaurs walked the earth, they were a key element of extensive forests that are remembered through their petrified fossils.

Today, these trees are found in the South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and, curiously, Chile and Brazil. These monkey-puzzle, hoop pine and kauri trees are compelling evidence for the ancient existence of Gondwana, the ancient southern super-continent.

In geological terms, Fiji is a young landscape of rocky volcanic islands. Only eight million years ago, far, far younger than the ancestry of the dakua tree, the islands were born of fiery rocks from the ocean depths. Since then, coral has accumulated around these solid anchors of land, forming much younger islands of reef. The dakua trees must have made their way over the water from the continents to Fiji within this geologically recent timeframe.

Over the past eight million years, other plants and animals have immigrated from the larger bodies of land, especially New Guinea, to these volcanic islands.

These make up the native, pre-human biodiversity of Fiji, a dynamic array of changing species.

New arrivals came to Fiji: some adapted and thrived, while others perished.

The biggest event in Fiji's biological history was the arrival of human explorers on epic oceanic voyages, some 3,000 years ago.

Archaeological excavations show the early presence of a people known as the Lapita but little remains of their legacy but bones and pottery.

Modern Fijians trace their ancestry to the courageous expedition led by Chief Lutunasobasoba. The new settlers modified the natural landscape, seeking living space, building materials and food to eat. They brought plants and animals to the islands, including yams, taro, cassava, bananas, poultry, pigs, dogs and that most intrepid of animal travellers, the rat.

Some native wildlife, including giant iguanas and pigeons, became extinct around this time. The dakua tree doubtlessly had arrived in Fiji far earlier than the human settlers. They must have already been a component of the forests when the first explorers entered into the jungle.

The dakua was soon recognised as a fine source of timber. Master craftsmen of wooden boats and buildings, the Fijians distinguished two types of dakua tree: the taller, straighter dakua balavu, and the shorter, branchier dakua leka.

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Like the Polynesian Maori of New Zealand, they saw both the divine and practical aspects of these massive trees. It was valued as a sacred totem, a structural timber and a prized canoe hull.

Awed by such immense history, we followed our host's instructions into the steep green hills of Colo-i-Suva. This forest is the first of Fiji's National Parks, in the hills just above the capital city. Here, you will find these trees.

Although armed with the tree's Fijian name, we were still unsure ourselves. With so many species in the tropical rainforest, how would we recognise the tree when we encountered it?

At Colo-i-Suva, we walked downhill from the lakeside tourist lodge. We were looking for the Forestry Department, hoping to find more information. On the roadside, a young man in a traditional sulu waved to us, and with shining smiles, we exchanged greetings - "Bula!"

We took a moment to ask him if he knew the location of the Forestry Office. By sheer luck, we discovered this kind man, Maleli, worked for the Forestry Department. He told us the Forestry office was the building just ahead of us; yes, he knew about dakua; indeed, it was his family totem; and - "look over there - that tree just there, towering on the edge of the forest, that's a dakua tree".

It was instantly recognisable. Its thick branches were solid against its stout trunk and it grew in the ramrod-straight way of other cone-bearing trees. Maleli walked with us to the tree and, standing beneath its fern-covered branches, we gleefully captured the tree in photographs, gazing at it from all angles.



*It stood above and separate from the tangled forest beneath its branches; it was an ambassador from ancient times and forgotten continents before the Fiji Islands had been born from underwater volcanoes.*

This dakua tree was large and impressive but it was obviously planted by humans. Where could we find an ancient forest giant? we asked. Were there any in the forest here? Again, Maleli had the perfect answer for us.

"Yes, you can follow the forest path named 'Big Dakua Trail', and it will lead you to the big dakua tree, one of the last remaining elder trees."

He pointed towards the beginning of the trail and, before we parted, invited us to return to the Forestry Office.

We headed down the steep pathway into the thick, emerald rainforest and found the wooden sign towards the big dakua tree.

A narrow ridge, tumbled with volcanic rocks, picked its way up from the liquid pools and splashing waterfalls of the ravine.

We climbed higher and higher and dozens of metres before we reached it, spotted the mottled grey trunk and emerging top of the big dakua. Here was a venerable forest elder, a tree with a memory measured in centuries.

It stood above and separate from the tangled forest beneath its branches; it was an ambassador from ancient

times and forgotten continents before the Fiji Islands had been born from underwater volcanoes.

Humbled and inspired, we returned to the office. Maleli introduced us to the scientists and caretakers who shared their passion for the forest with us over hot tea and warm bread rolls.

We were especially happy to learn that we had science-friends in common: the Colo-i-Suva Park has worked with many international collaborators over the years. On the wall, a calendar showed the seasons of fruiting plants. It was June, the Fijian month of Vula i werewere, the month of dakua.

Our search ended in glowing success. Not only had we learned about the dakua

tree, but we had seen it in the wild and befriended the people devoted to protecting the forest.

But Maleli had one more surprise in store for us. He took us back across the road and towards a large greenhouse. Inside, thousands and thousands of dakua seedlings were flourishing in cups of black, fertile soil as part of Fiji's Million Trees Project.

He told us about what it meant to him to be replanting these once-numerous trees into forests altered by human activities. He told us of his family's totemic link to the dakua tree and how he shared our enthusiasm for these magical trees. And with that, he handed us a shovel and two seedlings, and we went outside into the sunshine. ■



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