

SIMIONE DURUTALO (1956-1994): an appreciation

Vijay Naidu
University of the South Pacific

SIMIONE DURUTALO (or Simi as he was known) would have turned 38 years old on his next birthday. From very humble beginnings at Natabuquto village in Magodro, in the remote highland interior of Ba Province, Simione Durutalo became a scholar and commentator of some stature. His father, who died only a few months before Simi, was the late Tui Magodro. Simi himself was brought up by his maternal uncle, Viliame Waqanigade. Urged by Simi's teachers at the Magodro District School in Bukuya, who recognised the boy's academic potential, Viliame sent him to Lelean Memorial School. In 1973, Simione successfully completed the University Entrance examination and proceeded to USP.

After some ups and downs, Simione proved his academic capabilities at the University, graduating in 1980 with a BA in Sociology and Economics. He was engaged by the University as a research assistant in a fisheries development project with the Institute of Pacific Studies in his final undergraduate year. This was followed by a research assistantship with the Centre for Applied Studies in Development, and an internship with the Institute of Social and Administrative Studies. In 1981 he obtained a Diploma in Energy Management and Saving at the ILO Centre for Higher Technical and Vocational Training, Turin, Italy.

He joined the staff of the Department of Sociology in 1983 and pursued studies for a Master's degree on a part-time basis. He obtained his MA with distinction in 1985 for a thesis that continues to be widely cited. The following year, Simione went to the State University of New York at Binghamton on a Fulbright-

Hays Fellowship Award to do his PhD. He completed his pre-doctoral courses and Qualifying Examination, to a high standard, in 1989. Returning to Fiji he worked on his dissertation and had completed the drafts of eight chapters at the time of his death.

In addition, Simione wrote widely and knowledgeably on a diverse range of topics. In his brief 14-year academic career he concerned himself with such areas as the development debate, political development, political economy of the South Pacific, tourism, fisheries, the law of the sea, constitutional development, nuclear issues and peace, internal colonialism, disaster rehabilitation, technology and change, Fijian paramountcy and the politicisation of ethnicity, trade unionism, international relations, forestry, energy development, foreign aid, social welfare and transnational corporations.

He was never a narrow academic. Because of his background and expertise, Simione Durutalo was an authoritative commentator on Fijian and regional matters, and he received many invitations to international conferences. As in the case of his publications, the topics he was called upon to address at regional and international forums were diverse. A mark of his scholarship was that he was able to engage in intense and enthusiastic debate without taking or giving offence.

Simione was also actively involved in community services - in his Province, in the University, and in Fiji as a whole. He was a member of the Ba Provincial Council from 1990. He worked with the Fiji Council of Social Services. He raised funds for library books in his Tikina of Magodro. He was involved in meetings with the Department of Energy to enable the supply of electricity to the community from the mini-hydroelectric plant installed by the Chinese in Magodro. He assisted individuals and communities in the Ba Province who came to Suva to obtain services from the government and the private sector. He was Chairman of the USP Kindergarten Committee. He was also a political activist, a founding member of the Fiji Anti-Nuclear Group, and of the Fiji Labour Party. Such was his reputation abroad that he was invited, late last year, to attend the British Labour Party's annual conference.

As a social analyst, his views were respected and widely appreciated. Although of chiefly birth, his scholarship and

personal commitment led him to the conviction that within traditional Fijian politics lay embedded strong democratic principles. He spoke on behalf of commoner Fijians to retrieve this democratic inheritance and give it a contemporary reality. His concept of culture was a dynamic and an ever changing one. He felt very strongly for his country and people, especially after 1987, and this severely affected his PhD work. The constant demand on him as adviser by various political and interest groups continued to disrupt the work on his dissertation. At the same time, this involvement helped to keep him uncommonly well informed on political developments which, had he lived, would have enriched the eventual dissertation.

Despite the distractions, he was developing into a first rate academic. His competence in the social sciences was of a magnitude that allowed him to feel at ease as a sociologist, an anthropologist, a political scientist, an economist, a historian and a philosopher. His research and writing interfaced several disciplines, making him the logical choice for the newly-created lectureship in Economic History. His referees, all recognised scholars, spoke highly of him. One said that Simione was "amongst the most gifted young scholars I have encountered". Another said that Simione "as a sociologist was one of a kind". The University appointed him to the position in July 1993, and found all these qualities in him and more. So impressed were his teachers at Binghampton that he was awarded a posthumous M.A. in Sociology from that University in fitting recognition of the high quality of his PhD coursework. This, indeed, is a great honour.

Simione was the father of four young children - Vika (9 years old), Seini (7 years), Andrew (6 years) and Mere (8 months). He was loving and caring to his children, indulgent but also strict. He tended to spoil them, saying that when he was small his family was very poor and he did not have those things which he wanted his children to enjoy. Also, he taught them to respect the elderly and persons of all races. To his wife, Alumita, he was an easy person to get on with. He never fussed about his food.

Simione was a person who stood for humane universalistic principles, yet never loosening the bond that he had with his own people. As well as building a solid academic reputation he contributed to discussions on resolving Fiji's problems. He

sought justice for all the peoples and communities that constitute Fiji. He was above race.

At his funeral service at Namena village in Tailevu, attended by hundreds of friends and relatives, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific said:

His death leaves us the poorer. At USP we are left, as a community, feeling that sense of loss so hauntingly expressed by the English poet John Donne: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".

Simione Durutalo's untimely death has left an enormous chasm in our lives; the magnitude of the loss that colleagues, students, and the people of Fiji in the South Pacific Region, and indeed internationally, have suffered, is difficult to measure. The best way to remember our departed colleague and friend is to recommit ourselves to the high academic standards that he set as well as to engage ourselves as activists in the myriad issues that face our people.

Simione Durutalo: select bibliography

- "Energy for Development Powering Change", *UNISPAC*, October 1981, p.5.
- "The 1982 Fiji General Election" [interview with Brij Lal], *Review (SSED)*, 9 (1982), pp.17-21
- "The Logging Industry in Fiji", *USP Sociology Newsletter*, 3 (1981), pp.6-9.
- The Political Economy of the South Pacific to 1945*. Townsville: James Cook University, 1983 (with Michael C. Howard, Nii-K Plange and Ron Witton).
- "The End of an Illusion: the reality behind the rhetoric", *Review (SSED)*, 10 (1983), pp.1-5
- "The Making of the South Pacific Intellectual", *Review (SSED)*, 10 (1983), 6-18.
- "How BP Destroys Fiji's Forests", *Multinational Monitor*, 3:13 (1983), 16-17.