Modernity and the Management of Madness in Colonial Fiji

This paper presents some results of my research into the history of ‘madness’ in Fiji, especially the establishment in 1884 of one the Pacific’s earliest lunatic asylums: St Giles. The management of madness was considered a small but significant project in Fiji’s colonial history. How might we read this transference of the asylum, a major institution and symbol of modernity and ‘European civilisation’ to this colony? Was the agenda of social control, primarily about the physical sequestration of ‘dangerous bodies and minds’ or more broadly was it part of the framing of madness and normality, of the modern civilised subject? Of relevance here is comparative literature concerning the contradictions within debates about madness and the Native ‘other’. Although the modern management of madness attempted to ‘homogenise’ the Mad subject, in Fiji this was complicated by ethnicity, gender and class. Further the framing of madness was not just a European imposition but was mediated by local constructions and tolerance of aberrant behaviour.

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