

## A DOUBLE DOSE OF UNITARISM: EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN A SMALL FIRM IN A SMALL ISLAND STATE

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*This article utilises original fieldwork material from Fiji to propose a better understanding of employment relations in very small firms located in small scale societies. The familiar concept of 'unitarism' in workplace dynamics is over-ridden by the intimacy and clannishness found in many small, often island based, societies. The cumulative effect is an environment disposed towards communalism, strict conformity and even stronger authority figures.*

### INTRODUCTION

While global giants and multinational corporations play a demonstrably influential role in today's economic system, it is the small firm which remains largely responsible for a high proportion of economic activity and employment creation.

The small firm is an organisation with typically a very small number of employees (the minimum being one person who is self-employed), a weak management structure, low capitalisation and a low turnover of marketable goods or services. Optimistically, the small firm is a depository of skill, entrepreneurship, flexible specialisation and a close-knit working community; ingredients which help the organisation to weather and hopefully survive its various operational setbacks, while exploiting windfall opportunities when and if they occur. The outfit is typically loosely defined: there is no sharp distinction between work and non-work, between business and emotional exchanges, given that the workforce usually consists of family members or of employees from whom boundless loyalty is demanded. The firm typically operates on the threshold between the formal and informal economy and official registration may be simply a matter of convenience.

The small firm has been 'rediscovered' of late as the potential solution to long term employment generation in both developed and developing economies. Downsizing and rationalisation of large firms in the context of global competitiveness, automation and restructuring has led to the shedding of millions of jobs, while subcontracting has seen new firms taking over the work formerly done by tenured staff. Missions by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have identified the enormous potential of the informal sector generally, but especially in developing countries, for income provision and alleviation from abject poverty. In Western Europe and North America, the small firm and its entrepreneur have become heroic symbols of a new age of competitiveness, productivity and job control, although the evidence has also been one of exploitation, deteriorating working conditions, sexual harassment and anti-unionism: small was, but also wasn't, beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these practices, the argument goes that it is far better to have work providing some income than to have no work at all, especially in conditions where the welfare state is either being scaled down or is non-existent.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is no wonder that major international agencies (like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme) and pan-national groupings (like the European Union and the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement) harp on measures and policies intended to protect small-scale enterprise and to provide the right conditions and incentives necessary for its sustained growth. Admittedly, evidence of the economic performance of the small firm is essentially one of both success and failure, of many start-ups but also many episodes of business collapse. Yet, small firms today read as the main panacea to resolve economic stagnation and urban poverty.

Of course, such is easier said than done. It is also naïve and crude to collapse all types of small firms operating in different markets within a single, blanket category. The very characteristics of a small firm make it difficult to observe and investigate except from an aloof, macro-economic perspective where the features and dynamics of individual small firms are all but totally lost. Small may be beautiful but hard to find and hard to penetrate.

## **AIMS**

This article attempts to present the first critical account of employment relations in small firms operating specifically from small islands. It does

so by first recognising the distinct conceptual contributions of the growing, separate literature on small states and on small firms generally, then attempts to integrate these by pushing their analysis into the domain of unitarism where they clearly converge and overlap. In this way, an interesting and composite profile of the double effects of smallness on the behaviour of working people and enterprise employment relations may be profitably drawn.

## LIMITATIONS

Such a research exercise continues to puncture the myth that an organisation is essentially a 'black box', a mere logistic necessity to translate inputs into marketable commodities with the right combination of land, labour, capital and ingenuity. The 'black box' is darker still in the case of small firms. They are difficult to research, because they may be suspicious of investigation or concerned that such investigation may unduly prejudice their operation. They are also often tightly closed, working communities who see no reason why they should condone a 'stranger' to 'research' them and 'expose' their doings. Their history, records and statistics may not be physically available or in a retrievable format. The majority are managed by their owners so they can dictate whether or not to allow access to investigators: as a result, research has to be conducted on the proprietor's own terms. Frequently there are difficulties in obtaining the time and space to accommodate interviews and participant observations. Even were all these obstacles overcome, the intrepid researcher is always confronted with the results pertaining to a single small operation from which it may be tempting but impossible to generalise.<sup>3</sup> No wonder large firms continue to remain the likely targets of research efforts. Even if results are case specific, the sheer size of large firms somehow makes these reports valuable in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

Another associated methodological problem is the messiness of the research target. It has been argued that it is far easier to explore the behaviour of a council of sixty persons than that of a committee of six.<sup>5</sup> The law of small numbers causes each discrete person to assume a plethora of functions, rights and obligations - a complex multiskilling and multi-functionality which would prove impossible to tease apart in practice.<sup>6</sup> There is no clear division of labour but a blending of duties which result in a wider, less predictable and less legal-rational

distribution of roles and processes. This is typified by the absence of any occupational hierarchy, apart from the boss.<sup>7</sup> Charisma, autocracy, paternalism are diffuse terms which try (vainly?) to explain the variety of intricate styles deployed successively or simultaneously by undisputed leaders to 'motivate' and control their workforce. A resort to the classical division of managerial roles and personnel management functions finds itself unable to help to understand the operation of a work environment which usually exhibits no specific management cadre or functions. Strict occupational considerations are also overridden and mediated by the inevitable emotional baggage of relatives and friends working together.

### CONCEPTUAL BAGGAGE

There is today a fairly comprehensive body of conceptual guidelines to structure our understanding of the dynamic, process features of small firms. This emerges from the literature pertaining to the sociology of organisations, the social geography of island studies, industrial relations theory and the humanities.

The Orwellian rendering of the workplace as a prison or surveillance site finds an easy parallel in the small firm. There, typically in confined space, each employee is subjected to the continuous gaze of every other, as well as to that of the boss who is usually physically present. There is no exit, no solace, because private life merges violently and mercilessly with one's work.<sup>8</sup> In a complimentary representation, organisations are conceived as 'total institutions': worlds in their own right, with their own language, code of ethics and practices, culture, rules and ceremonies.<sup>9</sup> Many small firms with their intense, *gemeinschaft* relations which endure over long periods of time afford useful examples.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, there is the distinct contribution of social-anthropological research on small, island communities. Useful is the notion of a 'social island' with its 'small scale behaviour syndrome' exhibiting the leitmotifs of intimacy and monopoly in conditions of totality with outright exile often being as the only viable exit route.<sup>11</sup> This cluster of conditions has however never been operationalised in the context of small firms.

For our purposes, perhaps the most important source of conceptual understanding of the inter-personal dynamics occurring within small firms is derived from industrial relations. Here, the term 'unitarism' is

deployed to explain employment relations where there is only one recognised locus of authority. This is undisputed and both leads and controls the organisation through its discretion, vision and judicious allocation of sanctions and duties.

Unitarism implies a view of the organisation as a team, 'unified by a common purpose', namely the success of the organisation.<sup>12</sup> With management as the single and undisputed source of authority and with all players sharing the same goal, harmony and co-operation are predicted outcomes. From this perspective, any conflict is pathological, the result of misunderstanding or mischief, and must invariably be weeded out.

Such harmonious industrial relations dovetail with the intentions and philosophy of strategic human resource management but even in the total absence of any discrete, professional management cadre, similar conditions apply in the context of very small firms. The basis of compliance to such uncontested power is person-specific loyalty and commitment to the boss. All the more so if one's employment situation is somewhat precarious as when on a part-time basis, without a written contract, or operating on a somewhat shady, semi-legal or illegal basis; say, without a proper work permit. No wonder any notion of contestation is alien by definition from the cultural environment. Hence trade unionism is considered by the owner-manager to be an aggressive and unwarranted intrusion into such an 'extended family' culture. Attempts at union membership can be construed as acts of defiance or of disloyalty, emotionally painful to the boss who may thus retaliate accordingly. Owner-managers in particular typically regard their company as unique and regard themselves as benign, fair, even-handed and reasonable:

Typically, the business is seen as his [sic] possession to do as he wishes - and especially where the owner/manager is also the founder. It is important to realise that for many owner/managers the business is essentially an extension of their ego.<sup>13</sup>

Unitarism may thus prove desirable (especially by/to the owner or top management) and company policies may be operationalised with such a harmony model in mind; however, not all may be quiet on the western front. Even where there is an obligation to act loyally, one can still find expressions of resourcefulness which are departures from the condition of alleged compact single-mindedness. Here, an

understanding of employee compliance and resistance (apart from commitment) at an individual and group level are important analytical tools of worker behaviour. Such tools have been developed in earnest by the so-called 'labour process' perspective.

Within the labour process model of employee relations, the job contract is seen as comprising a repertoire of options for employees across the whole range of the occupational hierarchy. These are expressed consciously or unconsciously, as countervailing tactics to the demands of management and the deployment of the latter's power and authority on those who are expected to get things done.<sup>14</sup> Such a span of employee discretion always exists thanks to the critical distinction between labour and labour power, an 'embodiment' necessitating labour's ultimate consent to transform potential energy into actual productive work.<sup>15</sup> No workplace which brings together people with different responsibilities is exempted from such a labour process, even though great care might be taken to prevent such dynamics from breaking the surface. This is likely to be the case in very small firms where one's livelihood may depend on an internalisation of all disagreements with company policy.

## METHODOLOGY

What is one to expect from an exploration of employment relations of small firms in small and island territories? How is the double bind of unitarism in both firm and society fleshed out in practice? And how does a specific cultural context disturb the intersection?

To provide tentative answers to these challenging questions, the author uses data gathered from primary fieldwork carried out in Fiji. The company under scrutiny is Soap Products Ltd. (SPL), a small manufacturing firm producing quality soap for local and export markets. The research material was obtained from extensive interviews with the company chairperson and with the general manager, as well as semi-structured interviews with its three other full-time employees and four of its self-employed out-workers. All interviewees were guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality. The company premises

were visited a number of times and other incidental but relevant material has been collected from other sources.'

Soap Products Limited is the brain child of David Qalo. It was set up in 1982 to produce unique soap products for the hotel industry. The General Manager of the firm is Martha, David's wife. The two senior employees, James and Wallace, have been personally associated with Mr Qalo for many years and all three were co-employees in an earlier venture. Mr Qalo invited them personally to join Soap Products Ltd. William, the only other full-time employee, is the son of a deceased long time associate of Mr Qalo. Among the four workers who work on a piece-rate basis on the factory premises, one is James' niece and the other is William's half-brother.

## WORK AND THE SMALL COMPANY IN FIJI

[In Fiji], the structure of manufacturing employment with small firms very much at the forefront is conducive to flexibility; and labour militancy will also continue to be tinged by family and kin ties that bind workers in many of the small enterprises to their employers.<sup>16</sup>

Fiji is an island archipelago in the South Pacific with a land area of 18,270 square kilometres, a resident population of some 720,000 and a per capita GNP of approximately US\$1,300. Typical of small countries, the average size of firms in Fiji is very small: the latest published Census of Industries reports only 46 enterprises each employing more than a hundred employees.<sup>17</sup> Many small organisations are not officially registered and operate in the sprawling informal, rural and semi-urban economy.

Recent employment statistics reveal a gainfully occupied population of 98,686 (December 1995), only 24 percent of the potential working age population.<sup>18</sup> As expected, international advisors recommend employment policies which should favour small scale and informal sector enterprises which have a large labour absorption potential.<sup>19</sup>

Employment relations in Fiji, as in the South Pacific generally, remains subservient to a dominant cultural norm which glorifies

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\* The name 'SPL' and the names of its employees are all pseudonyms, meant to protect what is a going concern.

consensus and tradition. Known as the 'Pacific Way', this belief system is founded on an impression that the history of the region has been relatively harmonious and peaceful in nature.<sup>20</sup>

On one hand, such unitarist ideology mystifies the various contradictions and tensions which exist between individuals and groups at work and in society.<sup>21</sup> And the ideology may not have been recognised before 'the oppositional dynamics of the colonial encounter'.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, it assumes the stature of a self-fulfilling prophecy and therefore becomes 'real' in the eyes of individuals, who see themselves as invariably operating within its strong cultural parameters.

The emphasis on consensus, harmony and communalism may be in part a fabricated antithesis, a reaction to the equally stereotypical view that western values are all about individualist and exploitative capitalism. This is compounded in Fiji with the presence of an Indo-Fijian community which is also seen as essentially more socially mobile and individually minded.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, without the comparative backdrop of alien ideology, there is considerable evidence to suggest that South Pacific islanders and Melanesian communities in particular, perceive and locate their identity in relation to their language and village; a linkage reinforced by an enduring collective system of land tenure. Melanesian communal identity is deep and enduring, anchored solidly in land, language and residence.<sup>24</sup>

The ties of solidarity are reinforced by long and regular meetings of one's kin (*matangali*) and of other social groupings which revolve around the *yangona*, a ceremonial drinking of grog (*kava*) - a mildly tranquillising drink. Furthermore, such meetings and other important manifestations of social solidarity, such as marriages and funerals, are opportunities to practise *kerekere*: to make requests from, and/or present gifts and donations to, other members of the group - events which reinforce social obligation and reciprocity.<sup>25</sup>

This cultural backdrop to the Fijian way of life provides an additional incentive towards behaviour patterns at work influenced by these wider encapsulating social ties. Consider first the internal dynamics of a workplace. There will be invitations for manifestations of solidarity with one's kin and overtures to practise reciprocity which will have to be skilfully and carefully observed or managed in the context of the avowedly impersonal and bureaucratic context of organisations. Sensitive areas where these pressures are brought to bear include selection and recruitment, promotions and assignment to better



paying work stations. Managerial discretion has the potential for manipulation, resulting in nepotism, favouritism and discrimination.

This is bound to be the case in very small firms. Here, the room for discretion is ample because of less rigid bureaucratic procedures and the need for flexibility. Added to this is the obvious preference criteria which are premised not so much on technical competence and functional qualifications but on proven personal allegiance and dedication. Nepotism and discrimination are not dirty words here but basic criteria for employment:

*The main employees recruited are people that you know or that you can trust. Sometimes, people ask us if we have a job opening. If you know who is calling, we accept their judgement. That's how recruits come in.*  
(Martha)

Consider next the impact of these social demands when external to the firm. Waged employment is still privileged among the Fijian population; those involved in the monetised economy thus become the obvious targets for requests and assistance in cash or in kind to less fortunate members of their family and community.<sup>26</sup>

The requests may mean that one's wages get spirited away and consumed by others, reducing the incentive to work for cash. The representations could also take the form of pressure to secure employment by clinching any vacancies which might arise; in this instance the privileged employee is expected to put in a kind word or somehow influence the recruitment decision.<sup>27</sup> Or else, friends of friends and kin networks will be accosted and solicited to secure information or services beyond the organisation:

*The Director of a particular state department is from my island. He stayed at my house when he was studying in Suva. When we needed official clearances which had been kept pending, I used to ring him up and he would get round to them immediately. He would tell us to send our messenger to collect them soon after.* (Wallace)

The strongest pressure of all may be concentrated at the apex of the organisational pyramid. Economic success may be translated as a steady drain of profits from one's client community. Successful entrepreneurs have been boycotted, their business operations

sabotaged and, on rare occasions, persons have even been executed for failing to maintain their social obligations.<sup>28</sup>

This is a *tholathola*, a heavy load and a social burden which cannot be avoided:

*There is too much pressure on a Fijian to maintain family obligations. This is a stone around the Fijian's neck. It's something that you cannot escape, perhaps only if you are abroad. But, no, that's not exactly true: Even if you are abroad, you can still get a kerekere letter. (Martha).*

The pressures to conform and pull the same rope in a small firm also impact on the manner that employees talk about each other. Living in a small island where it is everybody's business to know everyone's business, people get to know intimate details about the private lives and dealings of others. These others may include work-mates with whom one has to work shoulder to shoulder. Hence there is a judicious clamping down on the public articulation of information which may hurt people and sour relationships. There is a deliberate management of knowledge, restricting how much and which of it is made public at the place of work. This also occurs because a revelation of content may lead to a revelation of one's source, which perhaps one might prefer to keep secret:

*When the employees get to know something, they keep it to themselves. They don't want to hurt the other's feelings. Even if they hear something, they may try to ignore it. Otherwise, if it leaks out and someone gets to hear, they will be asked: 'Who told you that?'. Relationships will be soured. (James)*

*We avoid talking about personal things at work. We only talk about production. (Wallace)*

The small social scale of the Fiji island world means that human interactions are mediated by the likelihood of renewed encounters and interactions between the same individuals in different social settings. There is therefore a higher threshold on conflict; people go through great trouble and ingenuity to avoid disagreement, making enemies or losing friends. No wonder there is a deliberate keeping away from breaking painful news, or taking painful decisions:

*It's impossible to have a cool, dispassionate business argument here. People are more circumspect. Serious dealings are not only business dealings. I am bound to meet the people I negotiate business deals with in social occasions, at the yacht club, at luncheons, parties, family reunions... (David)*

*Before coming to Fiji from abroad, I was told that, within a couple of months, the people here would know more about me than I know about myself. The health of my bank account, the dark sides of my life, all the skeletons one usually keeps in one's cupboard... (David)*

*Indeed, if you leave the Fijians by themselves to take a difficult decision they will eventually come to adopt a solution which is the most equitable and where any losses are evenly distributed - intended mainly so as not to hurt anyone's feelings. (David)*

Similarly, there is no attempt at introducing trade unionism into the firm. SPL is solidly non-union and the employees are anxious to keep it that way. On one visit to the company, the author was accompanied by a trade union organiser. The workers appeared strongly concerned lest she had come to try and entice them to become union members. She quickly reassured them that such was not the case! Yet there is some room for departures from obedience:

*If there is a serious breach of discipline, the employee would get fired. But for a less serious offence, they get pulled up and questioned. If it is genuine, they would get excused. We have always been up front with the employees. It's like a family. If they have personal problems, I encourage them to talk to me. We involve the employees in some of the major company decisions. It is a team effort. We let them know that our success is all due to the collective work of one and all. (Martha)*

During the 15 years of its operation, none of the full-time core staff of the firm have left employment. This is an indicator of commitment to the unitarist philosophy. But it is also a realisation of the high opportunity costs of departure: lack of alternative employment opportunities, the strong grip of the boss and the threat of disappointing him in the event of resignation. This disappointment may also prejudice the already slim chances of alternative job options. Furthermore, this condition is also a reflection of the tight social bind in

which the employees find themselves. In the social island setting, it is very difficult to divorce SPL: *'I would like to think that the employees are loyal and committed. No one who had a 'hands on' position with the company has left'*. (Martha)

Another worker expresses the situation as follows: *'Other employers are after me. From Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga... they want me to work for them. But I want to stay with Mr Qalo... Anything he tells me to do, I do it.'* (Wallace) Yet another invokes ascribed criteria for staying put: *'My father used to work for Mr Qalo. I grew up here. Leaving here would be too much. The company is part of me'*. (William) SPL now has a completely ethnic-Fijian workforce and therefore it is even easier to associate the unitary working environment with a natural and traditional Fijian way of life:

*Only the part-time accountant, an Indo-Fijian, left us. But the Indians have an attachment to the mighty dollar. That is their anchor. For us [ethnic Fijians], it is the land, the family, the community, which is our base.* (Martha)

Employees and management, even those who have no blood relationship, have regular social interactions outside working hours. Such intercourse is easier to set up logistically (and more difficult to avoid) in a small island and helps to cement bonding:

*A restaurant lunch, a glass of wine, little perks now and again - these are little rewards to congratulate the staff when we exceed the target at the end of the month. We have also invited them to take up shares in the company and one employee has so far accepted.* (Martha)

Integration via socialising is a regular process: *'Every now and then, I take the employees to my home to drink kava and to have a talanoa [a chatting spree]'*. (James)

And such 'gelling' is both in vertical and horizontal directions, in relation to the hierarchy of work: *'I am a friend of the other girls. We go out together. Sometimes also to the Village Six [The Suva Cinema Complex]. Sometimes I visit them in their homes'*. (Sandra)

The result is an internalisation of potential sources of conflict. The tension is articulated more confidently by the piece-rate workers since their occupational position does not demand total dedication - they are on the periphery of the company team:

*Sometimes we girls have misunderstandings. Of course. But basically it is all a question of lack of communication. We don't speak to each other for some time - but it passes quickly. (Ruth)*

*We have clashes sometimes because we girls have our work to do. Yet James comes up and asks us to perform other work. Packing money is lower than screen printing money. This reduces our productivity and our income. (Eva)*

A problematic issue concerns the exercise of authority in situations where employees have a blood relationship. Siblings compare their conditions of work and may expect equitable treatment, which is not always the case. Take for example the tension between the brothers William and Patrick:

*My main problem has to do with my brother. I ask Patrick to do something and he tells me that he doesn't feel like doing it. Perhaps there is some jealousy involved here. I'm a wage earner while he is on piece-rate. (William)*

A suspicion which is indeed confirmed:

*Here there is a difference between wage earners and piece-rate workers. It's good to be a wage earner. If my brother doesn't report for work because he is sick, he fills in a sick sheet and he will still get paid. In my case, I have to come to work even if I'm sick - otherwise, I don't get paid. (Patrick)*

Another source of tension concerns the standing of Ruth in relation to the three other female packers. According to James, who is their supervisor, the fact that he happened to be Ruth's uncle, and Ruth also lives at his house, does not affect the working environment. Indeed, Ruth is in a worse position:

*I exercise authority over my niece. One word and that's enough... My niece's grandfather was older than my own father. But now her grandfather is dead and since I'm older than her father, by tradition, I'm the big daddy. I'm the oldest adult now and she has to respect me more. That's a Fijian tradition. (James)*

But the other employees are not so sure about this: *'James' niece gets privileged treatment here. She's placed to work on the screen printing machine which allows her to earn more money than packing soap'*. (Sandra)

This comment is confirmed by Eva's earlier remark which, however avoids (deliberately?) identifying Ruth's better relative standing. Even were these remarks unsubstantiated, they are likely to remain as likely terms by which to adversely judge managerial behaviour and subjectively observe discriminatory treatment. Yet these are mere squalls on the unitarist horizon.

## CONCLUSION

Our evidence suggests that the small firm's natural disposition towards unitarism and processual harmony is compounded by the Pacific ideology of communalism, social reciprocity and conflict avoidance, as well as by the very strong social pressures of a small island society towards consensus building. This is also a function of an actual extended family condition, involving blood relations but also work associates, with whom one invariably mixes and meets also outside one's working life.

Of course, no organisation exists in a vacuum, and will always have a dynamic with its embracing environment. In a small scale context, it appears that such an embrace is tighter, more restrictive and constrictive, particularly in the manner in which emotional labour is managed.

The actors and interactors of small firms in small scale contexts have an obligation to handle emotional and social relationships out of geo-societal necessity. This is not a requirement expected from and extorted by management or customers, indeed they are as much victims of the same intimate and incestuous embrace, but one imposed anonymously and generously by a ubiquitous social order which looms larger than life. This matrix of power wielders and power mediators, of other than functional relationships, of embedded socio-cultural traits and expectations, prejudices 'independent' individual behaviour quite considerably.

It appears that the operation of small firms in small scale settings exacerbates the conditions associated with the management of intimacy, the handling of information, lack of privacy, emotional transactions, networking on the basis of class, kin, island home or

friendship, and the clamp-down on conflict. Differences will always exist but they are less likely to become overt and declared in 'worlds within worlds'; the streetwise actors know fully well that, in the context in which they work and live, there is no working alternative to the double dose of 'unitarism'.

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