

## A Fijian Drama Performance at Minpaku

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## 9. A Fijian Drama Performance at Minpaku

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### Abstract

In this chapter, I explore how different cultures can be conveyed through cross-cultural settings from a case study of a museum event. Specifically, I will examine my own experience of showing a Fijian drama performance, *Na Ketekete Qele: Na iTukuni kei Di Nono* ‘The Basket of Soil: The Story of Di Nono,’ to a Japanese audience. Analyzing my experience when I promoted the event of using different cultures and languages, I would like to show some lessons which might be helpful for those planning to hold similar events.

### 9.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how different cultures can be conveyed through cross-cultural settings from a case study of a museum event. Specifically, I will examine my own experience of showing a Fijian drama performance, *Na Ketekete Qele: Na iTukuni kei Di Nono* ‘The Basket of Soil: The Story of Di Nono’ (hereafter “*Na Ketekete Qele*”) to a Japanese audience. I will present some of the lessons learned from hosting this cultural event at the museum. I believe that these lessons will be useful for the Fijian Language GIS Project as it continues to disseminate its findings across languages and cultures.

This performance took place as part of a promotion to raise public recognition about the renovation of an exhibition at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan. The renovation of the permanent exhibition hall of the museum began in 2008 and the renewing process of its Oceania section was completed in 2010. In the following year, some promotional activities were put together and named the “Immersed in Oceania” event. The event was held to introduce the new Oceania exhibition to the public. These are the circumstances under which I took charge of some of the events.<sup>1)</sup>

Initially, team members who were in charge of the Oceania section proposed and discussed various plans; inviting a band of pipe players from the Solomon Islands, demonstrating traditional tool making in the hall such as a *kava* bowl, showing sand drawings of Vanuatu and so on. The idea of having a Fijian drama to mark this special occasion materialized as a result of my connection with a long-time research associate and friend, Apolonia Tamata.

Apolonia Tamata, the writer of the drama, is a linguist and an indigenous Fijian. She got her master's degree from the University of Hawai'i in 1994 (Tamata 1994). In the dissertation she submitted to The University of the South Pacific in 2007 (Tamata 2007), she analyzed glottal stops through her field work in her own home village of Nasarowaqa, Bua. After working for several years at The University of the South Pacific, she was appointed as senior culture and heritage specialist at the iTaukei Trust Fund Board (TTFB). The goals of TTFB that are stipulated in the Act include "to provide funding for the undertaking, promotion and sponsoring of programmes on Fijian and Rotuman languages,<sup>2)</sup> culture and the study of ethno-geography and ethno-history" and "to sponsor research into languages, art and culture of indigenous Fijians and Rotumans and the better understanding and preservation of their heritage" (Act No. 15 of 2004). As such, we can confirm that her role there was to promote Fijian language and culture.

The idea of staging a Fijian play may have occurred to her during the course of engaging in these duties and based on her experiences with drama writing, which will be further discussed in the following sections. At first, I thought that the proposal to perform a Fijian drama in Japan was innovative and worth trying, but to be honest I also found it very challenging. I was not the only one who was concerned. When this plan was about to be deliberated in a meeting, the director-general and the deputy director-general of the time contacted me personally and asked me candidly whether I could make the drama be understood by a Japanese audience.

## 9.2. What Motivated Her to Write a Drama in Fijian?

By profession, Apolonia Tamata is not a playwright but rather an academic. Some might wonder what motivated her to write a play in Fijian in the first place. I would like to point out that there were at least three factors that motivated her.<sup>3)</sup>

First, I want to point out the situation surrounding Fijian as a language. Although Fijian is commonly used not only by indigenous Fijians but also by a small minority who can understand and use Fijian in everyday communication in Fiji, it is far from being fully utilized in modern scenes.

Second, compared with the overwhelming English influence in modern entertainment industries such as movies, novels, TV shows, plays and so on, the Fijian language has a rather inferior status even in its home country. It is possible that the great success of foreign dramas that had been seen in Fiji inspired her. A few years before she began to write her original Fijian play, a Filipino TV drama series such as *Gulong* succeeded in drawing a great number of viewers from across Fiji. This drama series was produced in Tagalog with English subtitles. It is important to note that the series was not aired through local TV channels but through mostly illegally copied DVD sets, and it was received enthusiastically by indigenous Fijians. She may have thought that if a foreign language drama could make it, why not one in Fijian?

Lastly, she was interested in telling the story of Fiji's culture. For example, she has written an article titled *The Story of the Fijian Story-teller*, in which she pays attention to the changing status of story and story-teller. Although these days, these stories tend to take

the form of snippets, they still provide “insights into sources of humour, popular expressions, and reactions to change in modern Fijian society” (Tamata 2000: 93). We can see this aspect in the content of her plays as well. What is conspicuous about them is that each has scenes full of light or joking conversations. Those who have had the experience of enjoying *kava* sessions in Fiji are familiar with such types of casual conversation beside the *tanoa* ‘kava bowl.’

### 9.3. Production History

In this section I would like to shed some light on *Na Ketekete Qele* by placing it within the production history of Apolonia Tamata’s playwriting. As I mentioned before, she is by trade first a linguist, and she had neither written a play nor produced a drama earlier. When she began writing, unsurprisingly, she decided to work with an experienced local playwright, Larry Thomas, who was one of her former colleagues.

Larry Thomas is a well-known local playwright based in Suva, Fiji. He is “of mixed Fijian and European ancestry” and he “grew up in Raiwaqa, an ethnically diverse working-class district of Suva, and many of his plays focus upon the dispossessed urban dwellers known as the *kai loma*” (Keown 2007: 124–125).<sup>4</sup> The reason his works tend to touch on motifs such as mixed races, ethnic minorities, poverty, and ethnic division caused by political issues might reflect his life background and the political conundrum surrounding Fiji since the first coup d’état in 1987 (cf. Keown 2007: 125; Gaskell 2001: 6).

Currently she is creating a trilogy with him. From the oldest first, they are *Lakovi* ‘Marriage Proposal,’ *Na iLululu* ‘Handshake,’ and *Somate* ‘Funeral’ (a tentative title), the third of which is currently being written (Tamata and Thomas 2015: 2). Each drama has one feature in common: they deal with Fijian customs in modern settings. *Lakovi* describes the Fijian traditional custom of engagement or marriage. The confusion and fuss caused by the traditional ceremony is depicted in the drama (Tamata and Thomas 2011). *Na iLululu* also depicts the similar confusion and generational gap by illustrating how modern Fijians deal with another Fijian custom, *kaunamatani gone* ‘child presentation,’ which obliges people to take their children to their mother’s village to connect them with the village and its people. *Somate* means ‘funeral’ in Fijian. Since the play is yet to be completed, we do not know any other details at this stage. However, while viewing her production history in this way, you can see that this trilogy presents traditional ceremony scenes held at each stage of human life. By depicting conflicts that traditional ceremonies are causing in modern times, her dramas show the meanings these traditional ceremonies have in rapidly modernizing Fiji.

In contrast with the trilogy, *Na Ketekete Qele*, the drama performed in Osaka, is the first work that Tamata wrote up by herself (Figures 9-1 and 9-2). As for the order of the production, it was written between the first and second works of the trilogy. I understand that the writing of *Na Ketekete Qele* became possible because she felt motivated and challenged to make a play in Fijian after the success of the first work of the trilogy.

夏のみんなばつフォーラム 2011  
オセアニア  
2011年 6月19日 - 8月21日

研究公演  
南太平洋の

カヴァ儀礼と  
天地創造のドラマ

2011年 7月30日(土)・31日(日)

**7/30** フィジーのカヴァ儀礼  
時間: 14:00~15:30  
場所: 国立民族学博物館 1F エントランスホール  
参加料 無料  
事前申込 不要

**7/31** フィジーの天地創造のドラマ  
時間: 13:30~16:45 (開場13:00)  
場所: 国立民族学博物館 講堂 (定員450名)  
参加料 無料  
事前申込 要  
【申込締切】7/14(木)必着

司会・演出  
高橋 洋子  
監修  
藤田 隆  
演出  
藤田 隆  
演出  
藤田 隆

演出  
藤田 隆  
演出  
藤田 隆  
演出  
藤田 隆

国立民族学博物館

Figure 9-1 Poster of *Na Ketekete Qele* staged in Japan<sup>5)</sup> (Source: National Museum of Ethnology)

#### 9.4. Creation Story

The story line of *Na Ketekete Qele* is based on a mythical creation tale. Set on the real island of Naigani in the Lomaiviti Province in Fiji, the story shows how the three hills of the island were born. In fact, similar mythical creation stories can be found in various parts of Fiji. Probably the most well-known story is of the Rewa River. The story unfolds as follows: A god who has a great appetite has eaten up all the food that was gifted to Clan A by another clan. The angry people of Clan A ordered him to drink all the water from the nearby river. The god ran away before finishing it and flew back to his home. However, because of his binge drinking, he threw up all the water he took on the way back, and this is how the Rewa River was created (Benson 1993: 15–17).



Figure 9-2 Poster of *Na Ketekete Qele* staged in Fiji<sup>6)</sup> (Source: iTaukei Trust Fund Board)

There is another example of a creation story that has a more similar story line to *Na Ketekete Qele*. In the small islands of Ono, Kadavu, there was a god in the forest. One day, he wanted to make a larger island for a place to live, but he needed to gather materials for that. He decided to steal soil from the mountain on Nabukelevu island. After knitting some baskets out of coconut leaves, he left for Nabukelevu the following day. When he arrived at the top of Mt. Washington, a volcanic mountain in Nabukelevu, he started digging up the soil and packing it in his baskets. As he started packing the soil in the last basket, the god of Nabukelevu realized someone was stealing the soil without permission. The god of Ono ran away with the baskets, so the god of Nabukelevu chased after him. Near Nakasaleka, the god of Nabukelevu nearly caught the god of Ono. The god of Ono was so terrified that he dropped some baskets, creating the small islands in the Ono District (Lasini 1981: 20).

### 9.5. Fiction or Non-fiction?

What has been described so far may give the impression that Apolonia Tamata makes use of the contents of the actual mythical creation story as is, but that is not the case. Only a small part of the drama is based on Naigani's creation story. Most of the story line came from her imagination and by distilling a creation story she heard in Natovi when she was a primary school student, an area located on the Eastern Coast of Viti Levu that faces Naigani Island which is about 12 km off shore.

However, I do not mean to claim here that *Na Ketekete Qele* is a pure fiction documentation either. The first time this play was performed in Fiji, the chief of the province where this creation story was thought to be originally born was invited to celebrate the occasion (Tamata 2013: 2–3). As far as I am aware, there is no evidence of negative comments or counterarguments made by him. Quite the contrary, he celebrated the drama essentially and gave a kind of official approval for it. In that sense, these kinds of creation stories seem to be widely spread around Fiji, and Fijians might often hear similar stories.

Having said that, I have no idea exactly how far away the creation story is known. After the performance in Japan, I went to Naigani and interviewed people who lived there to get more information about the creation story. The villagers' responses were basically negative. This may be less surprising when we remember that the outflow of migration from the small islands in Lomaiviti province has been intense, and that a considerable number of villagers have settled down in urban areas of the main island. I would like to suggest another explanation. Although the creation story is in fact about a place called "Naigani," the story itself may not originate from the actual Naigani. Bearing in mind the fact that the story is based on the visible features of Naigani Island, the mythical creation story may have been shared by the residents of the surrounding islands who enjoy the landscape of Naigani, rather than by the Naigani islanders.

Before going into discussion in the next section, I would like to call attention to the story line of *Na Ketekete Qele* which goes as follows: The characters include one older woman who serves as a narrator and actress, and five others (the king, the queen, the prince, the village girl, and the clown, who is the prince's alter ego). The king and queen misunderstand that the prince and the village girl are in an unacceptable relationship, and they exile the girl from her home village. The disappointed girl carries a basket of soil on her back and takes off to the sky. To stop her from leaving, the prince and the clown (his alter ego) throw a spear at her. The spears hit her basket, spilling the soil out which landed in three sections, creating three hills on the island.

### 9.6. Lessons Learned from Showing the Fijian Performance in Japan

In this section, I would like to discuss what kind of lessons were learned from showing a foreign language drama to an unfamiliar audience. What was the significance of Fijians performing drama in the Fijian language in a Japanese context? What were the differences between showing it in Fiji and Japan?

I would like to describe two major changes that were made to the drama in preparing

the performance in Japan.

First, delivering the drama in English may seem to have been a possibility, however, we decided against it and kept Fijian as the language of the performance. There are several considerations behind this decision. First of all, it was easier for the Fijian performers to fully express their cultural activities in Fijian. Although English is one of the common languages in Fiji and is not only taught from primary education but also used by various media such as TV and movies and so on, undoubtedly it is still much easier for most Fijian people to use their own language when it comes to conveying the meaning of their traditional cultures. Besides, since the performers were not professional actors and actresses, using scripts in Fijian helped them to concentrate on acting on the stage so as to reproduce relatively natural conversation and traditional performance there. On the other hand, some disadvantages were foreseen in the performance as a result. To stage a drama in an unfamiliar language to the audience itself did not seem to be a serious problem. In Japan, even if it had been delivered in English, many Japanese people in the audience still would have had difficulty understanding the content without appropriate translation. What appeared to be relevant to us was the fact that the majority of the audience were not familiar with the Fijian culture as well as the language. Therefore, we had to contrive some ways not only to convey the contents of the drama to them, but also to elicit appropriate reactions from the audience that we considered were also an important part of the stage performance.

The following were the ideas we devised to make this possible. First, explanatory narration in Japanese was added between the scenes. This was possible because it so happened that the story was composed in a way so that a character in the drama, an elderly woman, also serving as a narrator to the audience, tells an old story to small children. As such, at the beginning and end of every scene, there were some lines introducing and summarizing the development of the story. Taking advantage of that setup, it was arranged so that, when the elderly woman (and the narrator) finished speaking to the children in Fijian, she turned to me, who acted as a Japanese narrator, saying “And here you hear it in Japanese.” The second idea relates to the components of the play itself. Instead of constructing a play centering on verbal communication as performed in Fiji, Tamata tried to reduce linguistic barriers by incorporating various non-verbal activities on the stage, such as performances (*vucu*), dances (*meke wai* ‘spear dance,’ *meke iri* ‘fan dance,’ and others), songs (*sere*), costumes (*isulusulu*) and Fijian music with percussion (*lali*) and so on.

Both seemed to have helped. Although it was challenging to perform a Fijian drama for Japanese audiences, the gist of the story seems to have largely been conveyed judging from the responses of the audience we received after the show. Incorporating dance and song into the play’s composition was especially popular. Indeed, there were many spectators who commented on the beauty of the chorus. Even though we did not ask for applause, we did see and hear voluntary clapping during the dance scene.

On the other hand, I would like to point out that there were two parts of the play, the intended meaning of which did not seem to have been clear to the audience. First, one stage change did not go very smoothly mostly because the actors and actresses and the stage manager had not been able to practice enough on stage due to a hectic schedule. The basket from which the three hills were created got lost somewhere between the stage settings and

the other stage props. Pointing to the basket, Tamata, who acted as the elderly woman and the narrator, was going to explain the play's progress. However, inadvertently, she skipped this explanation. In the ensuing confusion, I, as a Japanese narrator, was not able to make the planned Japanese commentary of the scene. With a supplementary explanation immediately following that scene had not been delivered, I was anxious wondering whether the audience became confused and how far they were able to follow the contents of the play.

The second was a part of the last scene of the drama. A song was sung four times with the same rhythm as the play progressed toward the final scene. The lyrics went "Leaving of Di Nono (*Di Nono lei Di Nono*)," "Throw a spear (*Mai na moto, mai na moto*)," "The soil is spilt (*Sa tasova itolu na qele*)," and finally "Three hills are now created (*Yanuyanu vou sa mai buli*)" (Tamata 2013: 34, English translation is mine). For those who understand the lyrics, the ending would have been very clear. In fact, a small number of Fijian people who were among the audience got rhythmic and clapped their hands along with the song. However, most of the Japanese audience seemed perplexed and found it difficult to understand when the play was truly over and this was obviously because they could not follow the meaning of the lyrics. As I later watched the DVD that documented the whole event, I could see that the Japanese audience were participating in an awkward way clapping their hands along with the song, without getting really rhythmic especially during the ending of each song.

## 9.7. Concluding Remarks

This chapter describes my experience of, and lessons learned from delivering a Fijian play as part of the promotional event of a newly renovated exhibit at a museum. The play was based on a culture that is not familiar to the audience, which was performed in a language that is not understood by the audience. In the context of the Fijian Language GIS Project, I hope this chapter helps better to disseminate data compiled by the project not only to speakers of a particular language, but also to people who do not share that language or culture. For a researcher like myself who specializes in Fijian culture, the data compiled by the project itself is already very interesting. However, when it is made available to the general public in an accessible form on the web, it may become necessary to explain the context in which the data is placed in a way that the compilers do not necessarily expect. In some cases, this can add to the effort, but at the same time, it may come with unexpected insights.

## Notes

- 1) In addition to the Fijian drama performance, I was in charge of holding a *kava* ceremony and staging a *hula*.
- 2) Rotuma is an island located 646 km north of Fiji. Currently, this island is a part of Fiji's territory and Rotuman people are regarded as indigenous people other than Fijian in Fiji.
- 3) This observation is based on my conversation with Dr. Tamata on various occasions. I also conducted an interview with her at the lounge of Expo Park Hotel in August, 2011.

- 4) *Kai loma* means ‘someone descended from a European man married to an Indigenous Fijian or Rotuman woman’ (Geraghty et al. 2006: 307).
- 5) As you can see from the poster, the name of the drama is simply put as ‘creation story’ because the formal Japanese title had not yet been decided. Some of the pictures used in this poster are taken from scenes of her first trilogy drama *Lakovi*. On the contrary, pictures used in Figure 9-2 are ones taken during the performance in Japan.
- 6) As I will explain later in this chapter, the drama was staged in semi-closed setting at the meeting room of Draiva, Fiji. After the performance in Japan, it was staged again in the Civic Centre, Fiji. Also refer to the Figure 9-2.

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