

The Story of the Fijian Story-teller

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In the gradual fading away of traditional stories and story-telling due to new occupations of both the tellers and the listeners in a changing society, the oral art takes on a new dimension in the form of “snippets”, short stories often containing a slice of humour. A cultural and linguistic analysis of a collection of these stories tells us much about a large group of multi-dialectal Pacific islanders, the Fijians. These stories provide insights into sources of humour, popular expressions, and reactions to change in modern Fijian society. They constitute a popular but largely unrecognised genre. This paper presents aspects of the form and style of this art.

Introduction

I will begin by relating a few stories. May I note that these are not actual transcriptions of a story-teller's version, but are re-tellings adapted for this article. These stories are meant to be humorous but, if you do not find any humour in them, it is understandable.¹

Two Policemen

One night, two policemen were patrolling the streets of Suva, the capital city of Fiji. Driving past the Southern Cross Hotel, they noticed an Indo-Fijian man and a Fijian woman walk out of the hotel and get into a car. The two policemen decided to follow them to 'book' them. On the next street, MacGregor Road, they stopped their car. The man was surprised as he thought he couldn't have done anything wrong. The officer writing the information had to write the site of the questioning. However, he could not do so since he could not spell

¹ My thanks go to the people whose stories are being retold in this paper: Anisi Volausiga, Mere Veikata, Rosa, Ratu Peni Tamata, Vilimaina Vakaciwa, and Ratu Luke Qiritabu.

the name MacGregor – the name of the road. His colleague did not know either. They asked the Indo-Fijian man for the spelling of MacGregor but he refused to tell them, saying that it was their job and not his, since they were the policemen. At that point the other policeman said, “Let them go. We’ll get them on Rewa Street”, which was the next street.

No Fis!

In part of Vitilevu, Fiji’s main island, two women were paddling back from a fishing trip when they saw a white man wading out to sea, presumably to them. The women, who knew very little English, did not want the man to get to them because, should he speak to them, they would not know what to say in return or they would be forced to use the scanty English they knew, which would be very embarrassing. So they decided to tell him that they hadn’t caught any fish. “No fis! No fis!” they yelled out to him. The women were surprised to hear the white man respond in their Tailevu dialect, “*Drau dina sara nu qori ni wara na lagamudrau ika?*”. Is that the truth? You really didn’t catch any fish?² Surprised that he replied in their tongue, one of them exclaimed, “*Tina*³ *ganena*”: (May he) marry his sister!

Father and Son

A young boy from the island of Kadavu was attending a boarding school on mainland Vitilevu. After a few months of being away at school, his father received a letter from him. He asked one of his children to read the letter to him. While the whole family listened the child read, starting with the address, “Ratu Kadavulevu School, Lodonu, Private Mail Bag, Suva.” Next, the date was read, then the salutation, “Dear *tamaqu*,”: dear father. On hearing the greeting the father quickly responded, “*A cava tale xa? Na viraqaji?*”. What is this? Flirting?

² A colon (:) after a quotation introduces a translation of the quotation.

³ *tina*, short form of *watina*

Sleep 'it'

A woman was visiting a niece who had married into another village. After the initial greetings, the niece introduced her children to their great-aunt, "This is Amena, that's Suliana." "Come, come. Let me see you," the old lady replied and embraced each of the children. "This is Sakiusa. This, Rusiate." Amazed at the number of children she was being introduced to, the woman asked in the local dialect, "Ae! How many children do you (two) have?" "Seven." Spontaneously she replied, in the raise-drop-raise intonation typical of the Koro dialect, "*A kuu! E sa sega ni dua na bogi rau mocera!*". There is not a night slept by those two!

The dying man

On the other main island in Fiji, an old, dying part-European man was surrounded by his sons and daughters. They were each telling him their wishes and what they were going to do after their father was gone, and he was giving them his last words. One of the sons wanted his dad to be buried, not at the cemetery but on the beach where "Dad, I can look out to the waves brushing up against the sand and I can think of you often". But their father quickly replied, "*Oi me ra lick-taka noqu arse na dogs!*". Oh no, the dogs will lick my arse!

Fifteen minutes!

On one of the small islands, an airstrip had just been completed. An aircraft was loading and getting ready to return to Suva. Travelling by air was something the islanders had only heard about until then. Men, women and children sat around to watch the inter-island Bandirante take off. In the local dialect, a woman asked, though not to anyone in particular, "How many hours does it take the aircraft to fly to Suva?" "Oh only about 15 minutes," one of the men replied. In disbelief the woman exclaimed, "*A kuu! Eda sa veveke la i ke da qai lai taqari ki Suva!*". We shit here but wipe ourselves in Suva! Another person

quickly responded, “*Oi me boidada o pailate!*”. The pilot will smell like shit!

The bus

It was the first time for this man to travel by bus. He was going to the town of Labasa and he had sacks of coconuts, bundles of taro and his bag to take. When the bus stopped, he opened the baggage compartment at the back of the bus and stacked his luggage inside. He also got himself in there, closed the door and shouted to the driver at the front, “*Lako!*”. Go!

The menu

It was the first time this woman had eaten in a restaurant. She was so nervous. She had always heard from other people that in restaurants one is given a piece of paper (the menu) from which to select what one likes to eat. On this day she was thinking that she would not be able to select a dish because she would have no idea at all what those dishes were, let alone read their names. So she told her sister that she would simply have ‘beef with cassava’. The sister selected a dish for her and while they were waiting, salad was served at the table. The woman uttered in surprise, “*Bara da xana dranixacu?*”. Are we eating leaves?

Rourou!

The girls of some neighbouring villages were asked to collect *rourou* (taro leaves) as one of the villages would be hosting some visitors. Four girls decided to go and collect *rourou*, without asking, from Deve’s taro patch. (Deve was an Indo-Fijian man living close to the village). On reaching the farm the girls found Deve’s daughter in the taro patch. While talking, Deve’s daughter became disgusted with a head louse that one of the girls was holding. The girl playfully held it out to her to scare her. Another of the girls told her in local dialect to run after Deve’s daughter with the louse in order to lead her away from the garden so that the other three could pick *rourou*. And the chase was on! The

more Deve's daughter screamed the harder the girl tried to put the louse on her head.

After a while, both girls came back. The village girls said good bye to Deve's daughter and set off home, each with a basket full of *rourou*. On their way to the village, they met Deve. When Deve asked them where they had picked the taro leaves, they replied that they had picked them by the stream.

In the evening, when the girls from several neighbouring villages were practising the *mēke* (traditional dance) for the visitors, they saw the chief and Deve walking towards them in the meeting house. The four girls eyed each other knowingly. After a while the chief said in the local dialect, "Girls, someone has come to see me today to tell me that four girls picked his taro leaves; not a single leaf is left, he is very sad. All the girls will stand up so that Deve can identify the girls that stole his taro leaves."

When one of the girls was identified by Deve, she quickly said, "*E maqa, o au leni Koroinasolo.*": No, I am a woman of Koroinasolo.

Two other girls protested they were from other villages.

The last girl Deve pointed out said, "*E qarasi! O au qoi u len Navai. Au tam kilaya a vanua ni vusou qori!*". Me, I am a woman from Navai. I don't know that place of taro leaves.

Deve was furious saying in his pidgin Fijian, "*Ko au sa levu rarawa baleta, noqu dalo, sa taura mai ni gone vata tinana; tauvata na kau sa tiko, tauvata sa sega drauna*". I am very angry because, my taro, the children (young shoots) as well as the mother (big leaves) have been picked; they are like (standing) trees without leaves.

The prayer

A church minister was conducting a service in a village. Before the service started, he had been asked to pray for a particular man who was considered by the villagers to be going insane. So while the prayers were being offered, the minister prayed for the man. Parts of his prayer were as follows:

- a) Minister: "... *turaga ni curumi koya ...*". Lord, may you enter (possess) him.

The man responded: "*Na yava kari na jimoni!*". What are you saying? Is he a devil?

- b) Minister: "... *ni viribaiti koya ...*". enclose him.

Man: "*Je na vore!*". Am I a pig?

- c) Minister: "... *Ni yalovinaka ni tokoni koya ...*". Please Lord support him.

Man: "*Je na vuni vuzi!*". Am I a banana tree?

'Snippets' in Contemporary Fijian Orality⁴

The telling of stories like these is a popular tradition amongst Fijians, especially among those who speak any of the Fijian dialects. The stories are popular for they are humorous, short, easy to remember and easily told. They might be told in the Fijian dialect they were originally told in, or in the Hindi-Fijian pidgin, or in Chinese-Fijian pidgin, from one village to the next, from one storyteller to the next, or from one grog session to the next. Many adult Fijians revel in listening and re-listening to stories, and telling and retelling stories. These snippets are not meant to be read silently; they are oral in style and nature and

⁴ Following Manoa (1995:3), orality refers to 'speech acts, verbal communication, word-arts – songs, chants, riddles, proverbs, anecdotes, jokes, and all manner of story in visual, oral-aural codes without hieroglyph or inscription or any form of writing at all'.

orally is how they are best told and listened to. A typical characteristic of a snippet-teller is to adapt the snippet to the audience. While the gist of the story is retained, there is the tendency for parts of the story to be omitted, altered or exaggerated a little to add to the element of humour. After all, the snippets are very informal and variations are to be expected. Another feature is the repetition of the punch line while the audience is still laughing, giving the snippet-teller satisfaction that the message has been transmitted and received successfully.

Occasionally such short stories can be heard on radio stations. They are also recorded on tape and sold by South Pacific Recordings⁵. These tapes are usually sent as gifts to Fijians living abroad should they miss Fijian stories and humour. The weekly Fijian newspaper, *Nai Lalakai*, features a section of short humorous stories in what is called '*Dredre ga mo cegu*' (Laugh and be satisfied). Some stories have become so popular that significant lines or characters from them have become group, village or community idioms. The Rotumans, for example, are often teased with the word '*bisikete*' because of the story that when biscuits were first taken to Rotuma, the islanders liked them so much that they planted some in order to have the product in constant supply.

These stories are a form of Fijian orality. They are items of natural description and expression, reflecting people, life and society; they have mobility and currency. Novels, plays, poems are written by mostly educated or schooled people but snippets are the verbal productions of anyone. The spontaneity and use of imagery in snippets are intriguing and humorous, giving them a uniqueness in style.

⁵ "Dua mai keri", volumes one to six, told by Isoa Makutu and Peni Mudu.
"Na italanoa lasa", volume one, told by Mateo kei Pailato.

An analysis can reveal a lot of information about society just as other genres of literature do. Snippets reveal typical Fijian humour; those things that in many cases only Fijians would laugh about. A closer look at snippets would explain why they are so popular, retold from one group to another over the years. Fijian snippets portray a general picture of how Fijians view the world around them, based on the knowledge and experiences they have had, their cultural values and norms, as well as those things that are not accepted or not customary for Fijians. Furthermore, snippets also present a view of aspects of the social system of a society, in this case, the Fijian society, especially its multi-ethnic, multilingual and multidialectal dimensions. In other words a closer observation of Fijian snippets would reveal a worldview of the present multi-ethnic society that exists in Fiji from a Fijian perspective.

Recognition of this popular tradition and the messages it contains is an invaluable domain for literary analysis in the quest to understand societal issues. A sociolinguistic understanding of the short accounts together with a cultural or local interpretation of each context is vital if one is to appreciate snippets as a form of orality. Firstly, though, here is a survey of some Fijian words or idioms (with my own definitions) that show the existence of snippets as well as the various types of stories or *talanoa* in Fijian:

- (i) *ucu mai duru*
pull from knee
'to pull (a snippet) from the knee' or 'to tell a short funny story';
the implication is that snippets are easily accessible – just
from the knee! – not something serious from, supposedly,
the brain; it is also expected that some parts will be
exaggerated.

- (ii) *miramira*
tiny falling pieces
'various stories from one particular place or from one particular
incident'

- (iii) *tara koro*
build village
'the telling of stories about various happenings'
- (iv) *coro*
'the telling of stories especially about the opposite sex'
- (v) *kakase*
'to gossip'
- (vi) *tukuni*
'stories of mystery and magic, traditional myths and legends'

Other expressions such as the following are associated with stories:

- (vii) *Dua mai keri!*
'Let's hear one (snippet) from you!'
- (viii) *vakatubu'*
'to add to a story', or 'to exaggerate'
- (ix) *vakaivosavosa*
'to be saying smart things'; used to refer to a person or village that is known for stories containing popular verbal expressions
- (x) *Sa dri yani!*
'All yours! (the story is there for your taking)'; usually said at the end of snippets.

A local interpretation of the snippets

Two Policemen

The snippet about the two policemen tells us that a Fijian's failure with the English spelling system is not sympathised with, but is cause

for mockery and teasing. However, the quick thinking of the mate to suggest that they exchange MacGregor Road for Rewa Street is very witty as 'Rewa' is a Fijian place name and the two policemen would no doubt have no difficulty in writing it. The snippet also reflects the antagonism between the Indo-Fijians and the Fijians in Fiji. Had it been a Fijian or a white man escorting the Fijian woman out of the hotel, the two Fijian policemen would probably not have bothered to stop them.

Numerous instances of the inability to pronounce correctly an English word or using disjointed English structures would initiate laughter. The use of fluent English is usually seen as a measure of success and of being educated. On the other hand a person that uses English with 'errors' or broken English is usually seen as stupid for failing to attain the use of the prestige language. In other words, one should either be fluent in speaking English or abstain from it all together, anywhere in between is considered failure and is cause for humorous rivalry.

No Fis!

This story reveals a few things about Fijians.

a) Language

no fis is the nativised pronunciation of "no fish" where the *o* in *no* is pronounced as the *o* in *nor* and "fish" is pronounced *fis* as there is no *sh* speech sound in Fijian.

The person telling this story is obviously not aware of the phonetic details but attempts at the English language with the nativisation of the pronunciations are in themselves something to have a laugh about and the story gets passed on. Mocking other people's failures is a common form of light verbal rivalry amongst Fijians. This is more

obvious when traditional relations (*tavale*⁶ and *tauvu*⁷) are part of the audience.

- d) **A Fijian view**
Tourists and researchers are often seen as curious people because they tend to ask questions, take pictures and are always wanting to see how things are done in the Fijian way. To the Fijian, it is peculiar for such people from a 'better' world and lifestyle to be curious about the ordinary things in the daily lives of Fijians. From the women's point of view, this could be the reason the man was wading out to them.
- f) **Use of English**
The two women obviously did not want the white man to come to them; they wanted to avoid the situation where they would have to converse with the foreigner because they barely knew English. In such confrontations, should either of them make a funny response (from the Fijian perspective), it would be told in the community and probably become a popular story, which is exactly what happened! Most foreign visitors coming to Fiji do not speak Fijian but many Fijians can speak some English, which is why they were so surprised that the white man replied to them in Fijian – and not just in standard Fijian, the dialect most foreigners learn, but actually in their local dialect!
- h) **Exclamations**
The use of the particular phrase for exclamation, such as "*Tina ganena!*" reflects the woman's utter embarrassment and surprise that the white man knew her Fijian, let alone her dialect. The use of curses or swear words as exclamations is not uncommon in Fijian. The meaning of the

⁶ the children of siblings of opposite sexes where the expected norm is a joking relationship as well as a certain right to claim what the other has

⁷ traditional relation where the display of verbal rivalry and joking is normal

expression used in exclamation in this story is not intended literally at all. Friends and certain kin relatives are known to greet each other with swear words!

Father and Son:

Attending Queen Victoria School or Ratu Kadavulevu School, the two Fijian boys' government schools, or Adi Cakobau School, the Fijian girls' boarding school, is considered by many to be a prestigious achievement for the child and also for the family. The 'old boys' and 'old girls' organisations of these three government schools are significant forces in most Fijian communities.

When the letter was received, the boy's father humbly contained his excitement and pride that his son, who was attending the prestigious RKS, had written to him. So the letter was given to another child to read. On hearing that his son had addressed him using the salutation *dear*, the father was taken by surprise at the unexpected word which implied an intimacy and a foreign tone since what he expected to hear was the familiar *ia saka*, the salutation in Fijian letter writing.

The meaning and usage of the word *dear* is slightly different when, as a borrowed word, it is used in the Fijian context. The father may not have been familiar with the use of the word *dear* in letters, which the son had obviously learnt at school. However, his response using the word *viraqaji* indicates his understanding of the word, i.e., that when people like each other, or want to show fondness for another person, *dear* is used. The term *viraqaji* means 'behaving in ways to attract the attention of another person, or to show fondness, especially of the opposite sex', in other words, 'to flirt'. However, showing affection or intimacy openly between partners or some relations, or, in this case, between men, is inappropriate, especially in a traditional village context. So the son's use of *dear* to the father was inappropriate, and if that was a result of schooling at RKS, he was taken by surprise as it contradicted his expectation.

So a closer look at this snippet can tell us something about Fijian schooling. It also shows the differences brought about by modern education, i.e., in teaching students the formalities of letter writing in English and it exemplifies the shifts in meanings and the connotations attached to English words when they are used locally. The difference in the views of the older generation and the educated younger generation is also noticed.

Sleep 'it!'

Some Fijian dialects are marked with particular patterns of intonation. A particular Koro dialect is known for its variable intonation such that certain types of utterances have a raised intonation, then a drop and finally a rise on the antepenultimate syllable. This suprasegmental feature alone – such dialects are often called ‘singing’ dialects – is one feature that would make this story popular and humorous, especially amongst non-speakers of the Koro dialect.

The other feature concerns the use of the word ‘*mocera*’:

moce-r-a
sleep-TR-3s.OBJ⁸
‘sleep it (the night)’

The use of the word *mocera* is particularly interesting in this context because its use in the transitive form taking “it”, referring to “the night”, as its object is unusual. The transitive form for *moce* in this context would normally take as its object ‘mat’, ‘pain’, ‘illness’, etc. Its witty and hyperbolic usage with the implication that all seven nights of the week were for making children and ‘were not slept’ is cause for much laughter.

⁸ TR is abbreviation for transitive verb, 3sOBJ for third person singular object pronoun

The Dying Man:

This snippet represents many such stories told about the part-European community in Fiji whose code-switching between Fijian and English and speech styles are in many cases humorous to Fijians. The father's switch to English and the words on which he chooses to switch are cause for laughter in this snippet. It is taboo to use names of private body parts with certain relations so the switch to English in 'arse' and 'lick' may be seen as alleviating the seriousness of violating the taboo.

Fifteen Minutes!, The Bus, and The Menu

While each of these stories would have its own style and message, they are representative of numerous other stories that tell about the encounters of Fijians with foreign goods and services. However, stories about successful encounters are not as popular as the ones that show failure and embarrassment, or the ones that tell about the wrong use of foreign technology, ideas and language.

Comparison is made between travelling by boat to Suva which, depending on where else the boat stops, may take up to a couple of days, and flying to Suva, which takes only about twenty minutes. The out-of-the ordinary image created with the time to fly is being likened to the time 'to shit' and, when told in the Koro intonation, would make the Fijian audience bend over with laughter. Adding to this witty comparison is the fact that, in Fijian culture, the body's excretory processes are not mentioned to a general audience.

In *The Menu*, we are reminded that Fijians are not vegetable or salad eaters. Meat and seafood meals are an indication of an able family. A family is regarded as weak or unable to fend for itself if a vegetable or salad dish is frequently offered. When green salad was served at the restaurant, the woman thought that these leaves were the main dish, but it was totally different from her expectations, especially in a

western eating place. She had expected some kind of meat dish.

Rourou

The story of the chasing of Deve's daughter using the "disgusting" louse to make her run away from the girls that were pinching the rourou is humorous because of the innovative use of the louse to get someone running. Although this incident may appear a mean thing to do, in the familiar local context, there was indeed laughter. There is also laughter when the story-teller tells of the girls that were mistaken for the culprits and they each replied in their dialect (hence indicating from which village they came) that they had no idea about Deve's *rourou*.

Furthermore, the switching of codes, as would be used by the story-teller, and the use of metaphor ('leafless tree', and 'mother and children') are striking features of snippets as they add vibrancy and colour. It is noted also that in this snippet, the storyteller uses the speech sound [k], and not the Bua dialectal [x], when imitating Deve's utterance which was spoken in pidgin Fijian.

The Prayer:

During the last twenty years or so, there has been a surge of new Christian sects with a flavour towards evangelising, healing and ministering. The new practices have been attracting followers of the dominant Catholic and Methodist denominations. On this particular island, one such preacher is spreading the word of God and praying for the special needs of the people. At play in this snippet is the use of two dialects, that which is used on the island (Kadavu) and the standard dialect used by the preacher. The person being prayed for is perhaps not familiar with the language of praying (standard dialect) used by the preacher which is why there are spontaneous responses to the words used.

From the worldview of the person prayed for as well as for the speakers of this Kadavu dialect, or from their perception, for God's spirit to *curuma* (enter or possess) him would have to be nothing else but the devil or a spirit because that is what happens in Fijian culture; for him to be *viribaiti* (literally 'to fence', figuratively 'to protect') would imply that he was a pig, and for God to *tokoni* him is suggesting that he is a banana plant because a banana tree that is *tokoni* is supported with a piece of wood when it is laden with fruit and thus bends towards the side. The corresponding comments containing the literal implications of the expressions used during prayer is cause for humour.

Features of Snippets

Several themes are common to these snippets which are what make them attractive to listeners. Things that are not normally Fijian, that are new or strange, or outside the Fijian expectation, like encounters with foreign technology, life-style, religion, education and language become popular stories – snippets. Raskin (1985: 30-35) explains that the incongruity theory is one reason for humour. Incongruent encounters in Fijian snippets are humorous because on the one hand there is the Fijian perspective which is shaped by cultural and societal knowledge. On the other hand, there are new things brought in by foreign cultures. When there is an encounter between the Fijian and the foreign, the result is often a spontaneous oral expression that in many ways reflects the degree of surprise faced. These expressions are the punchlines of snippets; they are the reasons snippets are popular and are recited to people who share, appreciate and understand the same humour.⁹

The linguistic features of Fijian snippets include the switching to pidgins and other dialects wherein the supra-segmental features are emphasised, the play on words, and the use of homonyms and hyperbolic expressions. While the inappropriate usage of language

⁹ For more on the incongruity theory and Fijian humour, see Siegel (1995).

is humorous, the switch to other non-standard Fijian dialects and varieties commonly employed in snippets is also funny to Fijians. Siegel describes how sociological and anthropological studies of code-switching in some societies show that “the switch itself may be the object of humor” and that “the variety of language to which one switches may be considered funny” (1995: 100). In the case of some snippets, the switch to pidgins and non-standard dialects of Fijian are certain to spark off laughter.

The oral features of snippet-telling are a significant factor of the currency and mobility of snippets. Snippet-tellers are able to bring the events close to listeners and encourage their participation, in laughter and affirmative gestures and comments, by the use of direct speech, the present tense, the repetition of punchlines, and the flexibility to adapt to the audience. Furthermore, the use of discourse features of Fijian orality, which include the use of recapping¹⁰ and the repetitive use of the sequential marker *qai* and the continuous verb¹¹ *tiko* (Overstreet, 1994), bridges the gap in time and space between the episodes in snippets and the audience.

Traditional Oral Literature

Orality and the oral forms of tradition, including mystery, myth and magic, are becoming more and more “de-oralised” as attempts to preserve oral knowledge have led to the oral forms being recorded and written, thus losing their contextual significance and the role of listeners. Some of these are now in print in the works of mostly foreign researchers, film-makers, writers, dictionary writers, anthropologists, and students. Recently, while doing some language fieldwork in a Fijian village, I was quite amused at the general thinking of the villagers that I was collecting legends, myths, and stories about

¹⁰ Re-telling a part of the sentence to introduce the telling of the next event

¹¹ Due to the limitations of translation, some of these features are not shown in the translated snippets.

the past. Nevertheless, in this changing world, it is best to preserve the knowledge of traditional wisdom, as knowledge of the way people live, if it is to be accorded importance.

Traditional literature in Fiji, as well as in other Pacific Islands, is basically oral in the form of stories, chants, song, *meke*¹² and lullabies. The contents of these oral arts form an integral part of the Fijian ethos. Being a non-writing culture, Fijian society itself is a cultural institution, involving the story-teller and the listeners. It is seen as the obligation of the story-teller to pass on the acquired traditional knowledge and wisdom of Fijian culture to the younger generations. Gifted story-tellers are recognised for their skill and their listeners, who are often children, swarm to them. The children know that occasionally during a story-telling session, they may be sent on small errands, such as getting *suluka*¹³ or tobacco; these favours are done in return for stories.

However in contemporary Fijian society, the institution of story-telling has crumbled. It is rare now to come across a real story-teller but if you do find one, he or she would in many cases have been asked to tell stories and the context is formalised; the act is no longer voluntary, spontaneous or informal. The story-teller may be telling stories to a microphone, or to someone from the national radio station in charge of children's programmes, or to someone from the Institute of Fijian Language and Culture, or to a foreign researcher. The role of these people and organisations in collecting and transcribing, and sometimes painting these oral art forms also serves to hasten their de-oralisation. Story tellers, grandparents and parents have ceased to be the transmitters of cultural wisdom and mythology.

Several factors account for the waning of story-telling. A major factor is that, like other societies, Fijian society has changed. Firstly the occupations of potential story-tellers and listeners have changed; there are simply other things to do! Men and women are increasingly taking part in kava sessions and these can take up four to six hours each

¹² Traditional Fijian dance

¹³ Dry brown banana leaves to wrap tobacco with.

night. There are school, village, church, prayer group and club meetings; hymn practices, fellowships and church services; shopping, bingo, *solli*¹⁴; fundraising and non-fundraising dances; office parties, birthdays and anniversaries. Such activities are taking over the time of the potential story-teller. Similarly, the listeners now have homework, television, videos, video games, computer games, rugby, athletics etc. all of which take up a lot of their time. The availability of electricity has certainly sparked off a whole new range of activities compared to embers and kerosene lights!

In this changing society, young people would also rather hear and talk about Nintendo, Agents Scully and Mulder, Waisale Serevi and Jonah Lomu, or the stars in Smash Hits and TV Hits, or the 'Top of the Pops' hits. These heroes and sensations are closer to them in so many ways – thanks to the media – than the mythical and mysterious ancestral heroes and places which depend on word of mouth. Many children today have barely heard of *Degei*, the snake god whose home is *Nakauvadra* in the hilly interior of Viti Levu; *Lutunasobasoba*, one of the first inhabitants of Fiji, and his five children; the tribesmen on the island of *Beqa* who are gifted with the power to withstand heat and heal burns; and how some islands, like *Makogai*¹⁵, came into being and how plants such as the rare *tagimoucia* flower, found only on the island of Taveuni, and the coconut were created. These children may never know about the mysterious and beautiful women of the vanishing island of *Burotukula*, nor about *Naicobocobo*, the place of exit of the dead to the spirit world, nor about the turtles that can be called, or the red prawns that are sung to, and hundreds more. These stories, *meke* and songs have existed for generations. They survived because they speak of magic and the supernatural, and of greatness, strength, wealth, beauty and power – qualities to be admired and talked about and which are the reasons they have dominated Fijian mythology and have been successfully preserved

¹⁴ A fundraising event

¹⁵ An island off the north east coast of Vitilevu

through oral transmission for generations.

However, these stories, myths and legends of such awe were celebrated and popularised at a time that is now history. The heroes of these stories were respected, revered and worshipped by a different generation of Fijians. Story-tellers, who were active then, are now inactive. In contemporary Fijian society, traditional stories are fast becoming only a unique oral inheritance, a possession that contributes to the Fijian identity but, in many cases, is failing to play a significant role in the cultural life of the community. In contemporary Fijian society, the features that are popular in stories are those contained in snippets; features that describe changes in life styles, in people and in society.

Conclusion

The concept of orality is very much alive in Fijian society although the contents are changing to accommodate the wider social changes taking place. In the study of oral literatures in the Pacific, one can look to a wealth of examples from the past. I believe also that one can look to a popular oral form of a multi-dialectal literature of the present society – to snippets – to find possible explanations for the way people think and behave, and the way the expectations and the world view of an ethnic group of people have been shaped by their cultural and societal experiences. One approach to ‘multi-ethnic literatures’, therefore, is through the analysis and understanding of snippets which, as I have tried to illustrate, reflect the world view of a group of people.

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