

iTaukei Modernity

A Tribute to Joni Madraiwiwi

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This lecture is at once a homage to Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi and an attempt to define what I have called iTaukei modernity.

In a Foreword to Ratu Joni's book *A Personal Perspective* (2008) Steward Firth, while identifying the author's special attributes, has helpfully introduced the theme that I want to follow in this lecture; Firth wrote: "In a Pacific nation where traditional qualifications for leadership continue to matter alongside modern ones, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi combines both at the highest level." There is a good reason, then, to make him central to this conversation, our *talanoa*, on iTaukei Modernity.

There is another pertinent reason for bringing his life and work into focus through this lecture: Ratu Joni hasn't received the attention he deserves as an intellectual and a writer in Fiji, or elsewhere. There is no extensive analysis or essay on his work anywhere. Although he would have quietly dismissed any claim to be an intellectual, and also said 'not yet' to being called a writer, he combined strengths of both, and his untimely passing away deprived us of someone who would have evolved into a foremost Fijian intellectual and writer. He had just finished the first chapter of his autobiography about his childhood in

Levuka when he died. He fits the definition of intellectuals, without having to stretch the term, as “... men and women of ideas who explore and challenge the underlying values of society. Theirs is a normative function: to prescribe what ought to be.” This is precisely what emerges from reading his book *A Personal Perspective*: the book is a challenging analysis of underlying values and fault lines and a forceful suggestion of way Fiji ought to be. The book reveals an on-going interaction with fellow citizens in the project of defining who we are as a people.

There is another, more personal, reason for talking about him in this address: it has to do with friendship and mutual respect and admiration for each other’s work. He gave me a copy of his book with these touching words inscribed in it: “With warm regards and gratitude for your friendship as well as your writings which inspire me in the intellectually expansive perspectives they offer on mankind and the world we inhabit”. They could well have been my own words for him.

Ratu Joni occupied a solitary position in our national life: he came from the mainstream of iTaukei life, yet by temperament he seemed to prefer the periphery; he was local and at the same time beyond local; he was an insider who was also an outsider. That can indeed be a difficult position for an iTaukei who belongs to the chiefly ranks and has to grapple with the question, ‘what are the sources of not my chiefly but intellectual authority?’

He was a product of a genuinely modernist sensibility. Modernism, briefly, is a belief in transmission of humanist and democratic values, enlightened and rational thinking, material and spiritual well-being and

progress. I shall examine the success and failure of modernism more critically later in this lecture.

The iTaukei was first exposed to modernity through British colonialism. Right from the start modernism was poorly imagined. For instance, colonialism brought to Fiji people of different pasts and fenced the communities into different territories, thereby fostering ethnic divisions and tensions. Ratu Joni, however, was settled in a deeper awareness that modern artists and philosophers assume for themselves. He was always urging Fijians to think differently, avoiding the ethnocentric practice of Othering, or excluding and assigning the adjacent community a bleak definition.

That leads me to speak on the matter of intervention. You will find this an important issue for students and academics in Fiji. Most students and academics in their study and research at universities, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, are content to investigate culture and history of their own community, rarely venturing into the knowledge systems of the adjacent community. This fact alone demonstrates how deeply the colonial divisions have penetrated into our consciousness. Thus modernism that came to Fiji through colonial intervention radically rearranged life in the country into iTaukei and Indo-Fijian cells through the policy of separate development. All the modernist thinking and practices of enlightenment, progress, and rational discourses were meant to be conducted within one's own ethnic confines. Having lived in separate ethnic enclosures since colonial rule, we have become accustomed to the concepts of self-interest and separate development even in the sphere of thoughts and ideas. This lecture gives us the opportunity to reflect more fully on this matter of intervention in the discourses of another community. Ratu

Joni entered into these discourses with remarkable ease because of the trust he generated. That is something all Fijians have to learn from him.

There are many paradoxes of modernity that will become evident during the course of this seminar. The most obvious of these paradoxes is that modernity preached to us to give up our narrow tribal thinking but in the process established a larger form of tribalism called the nation. At this very moment our chief proponent of modernism –Great Britain -- itself is abandoning the larger union and withdrawing into narrowly secure tribalism.

We have yet to engage in serious research on various means of intervention and interactivity; that would define new forms of emerging modernity in contemporary Fiji relevant for this discussion. I would like to give an instance of conscious interactivity in form of creative literature. In 1978, at the time when we were finding writing as a way of seeing and feeling, Pio Manoa, an iTaukei poet, and I decided to engage in an experiment in creative interaction: he was to write his experience of the Indo-Fijian community, and I, on the other hand, undertook to explore iTaukei life through the means of fiction. Pio Manoa, like Ratu Joni, had a sensibility that was formed by modernist literary culture (he had studied the most representative of modern poets who explored extensively the subject of tradition and modernity —T.S.Eliot). Manoa came up with a classic essay called ‘Across the Fence’. In writing the essay, he describes brilliantly how we should enter the discourses of another community. He used the metaphor of a fence to explain the thin line that, he thought, ought to exist between communities, for the sake of what he called ‘mystery’. He wrote:

Writers have an important role to play in this process of mutual self-understanding. But let their art rehearse truth, let their feelings find their proper objective correlative for art dies when it feeds too much on lies.

As for the fence, it probably is still necessary, and I would hope that it continues to remain – for the sake of mystery in human existence. But let that be accessible, explorable mystery.

I employed the form of short fiction to compose my own contribution which I called 'No Man's Land'. In hindsight, what we appeared to be doing, you might say, was two 'moderns' describing how we related to each other and how we understood ourselves living in the same world. Looking at this creative experiment in another way, we were Fijians engaging ourselves with modernity, and contributing to decolonizing by looking with clarity 'across the fence'. However ours was a fleeting intervention; in Ratu Joni's book we find more sustained engagement.

Creative writing as an act of individual self expression, representing a distinctively individual vision, came to us as part of the modernist enterprise in education. We learnt to appropriate the aesthetic criteria of English literature to create something new and local by gradually bending the norms, producing an aesthetic that was original and Fijian. Literature is one of the places where the doors are wide open and we can meet, without waiting for invitation, to collaborate in the production of a literary culture. These thoughts about fences and barriers, and intervention in each other's discourses were in my mind

when I was editing a book about Indo-Fijian diaspora; it offered me the opportunity to explain why non-Indo Fijians writers were included in the two anthologies I edited, *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (1979) and *Shifting Location* (2009):

... we did not want to impose definition of the young literature that would exclude and segregate. Therefore we included among the writers, non-Indo-Fijians who were also helping to define the Indo-Fijian Experience. Living in country where communities existed in exclusive psychological ghettos we were only too aware of the danger of erecting more barriers. Literature is one of the places that requires enormous flexibility and fluidity. Besides, the influences at work in any literature aren't totally internal to the culture that produces it. The forms, styles and language are all unavoidably derived from mixed traditions. It is not misleading to view literature as belonging to those are actively contributing to it.

We wanted language and literature to be one arena where we can all meet each and make collaborative contribution without waiting for an invitation. Of course we have to travel from our respective cultures, with our distinctive voices, but we should avoid any definition of culture that is enclosed, that prescribes exclusionary practices that would limit our perception and shut out creative possibilities in interacting with others. We need to be in our culture and at the same time be able to stand outside it.

That is the troubled state in which writers and intellectuals sometimes find themselves.

Ratu Joni is part of the significant gains of modernity: a high court judge and an ex-Vice President of nation state, he came to writing late though he was always an essential presence at literary event. We often met him at these events, especially at book launches. He always purchased multiple copies and encouraged others to do the same. He even bought several copies of books that he would never read like *Dauka Puraan*, in order to give away as gifts. The gift of a book is one of the highest gifts that one can give another person.

Ratu Joni was a precious product of the reading culture that established itself relatively early in iTaukei culture, after 1835, with the arrival of the missionaries and the setting up of the first printing press on the island of Lekeba in 1839. The events are recorded in *Dairies and Correspondence of David Cargill 1832—1843*. An interesting entry in it in the remarks of the chiefs who said, “ True –everything is true that comes from the whiteman’s country; muskets and guns are true and your religion must be true.” In iTaukei culture that which is true comes from belief in mana, the power that brings into existence what wasn’t there before. What wasn’t there before were these ammunitions of modernism: muskets and guns. Education, also part of modernism, began for iTaukeis in the missionary centres, and 1000 copies of the New Testament was published in the iTaukei language and distributed . Relevant to our discussion is the Cargill’s entry of October 25, 1838: “The greater part of this day has been occupied in selling books to the natives. They purchased them with fowls and cloth. Many of them have made considerable progress in reading.” The practice of buying books

and reading that became established in the 19th and 20th century is currently on the verge of eclipse in the 21st century 's digital age, without the practice having become sufficiently deep-rooted in the mainstream culture. This is our gravest loss.

We are compelled to ask these unsettling questions: Who amongst iTaukeis still reads printed books for pleasure? Was Ratu Joni the last great iTaukei reader of books? One gets the disquieting sense that with his death an era of enlightened pursuit has come to a close.

The notion of Fijian is modern and contemporary that requires further definition and theorizing. A meaning emerges from reading Ratu Joni's book. He participated with great philosophical ease in the cultural life and discourses of other communities because, he said, "I consider myself the servant of all communities that comprise this nation." Thus the role he assumed as a true Fijian allowed him to interrogate how the Indo-Fijian festival of Diwali was celebrated. He said boldly, in an apolitical manner, to Indo-Fijians, "When many of you have open house, it is confined to people of your own community. Just as your Fijian (iTaukei) brothers and sisters have to extend the concept of neighbour beyond their own kind, many of you need to do likewise in reverse." It is true his speeches came out of invitations he received to speak. The book, of course, is another matter: no one invites you to write it; the book is for everyone irrespective of your cultural or ethnic background. Ratu Joni's book is meant for all Fijians.

The struggle that is evident in our discourses between tradition and modernity is never an issue in his speeches; instead there is a quiet awareness of 'the creative intelligence in the world' where everything – all thoughts, ideas, faiths -- is reconciled, and there is no need for such

debates and disputations that I have been agonizing over in this lecture. This feeling of deep acceptance comes out brilliantly in a sublime moment in his book when he is speaking at Tui Nayau's 80th birthday: "In the autumn of your life, as you make peace with friends and foe alike, now is the time to do what you always wished. To fish, write, sail and walk along the lovely beaches of Lekeba. Worry not about the future of our country or about dearth of leadership among ethnic Fijians. For whatever happens, the sun will still rise over Lau in the morning and the moon and stars shine at night."

While Ratu Joni is a positive gain, modernity on the whole, in term of enlightenment and democracy, failed disastrously because the objects that modernity brought with it -- muskets and guns -- ironically, were deployed to destroy the same democracy, rational thought and progress in 1987. Similarly the promise of emancipation of iTaukei language and culture at independence in 1970 became aborted by dominance of the English language and the ethos associated with it, thus placing the vernacular language in a dire state. More serious is the recent descent into illiteracy because of decline in reading culture with the advent of the digital era. I had once attempted to define literacy in the following way: "My definition of a literate society is one that does more than read – that is the minimum standard; a truly literate society derives pleasure and wisdom from the written word in all its forms: social, educational, intellectual, artistic and spiritual. Societies in the East and West, where literacy existed for a much longer period of time, indeed centuries, the written word has found expression for all these purposes in the highest form; we in our postcolonial state had just created our first books when we started to descent into illiteracy again."

We all know that iTaukei language is in a perilous state in view of small number of speakers and absence of any significant corpus of books. Absent too is any advanced intellectual or creative work in the language. There is almost no serious scholarship in iTaukei language in Fiji's universities. It is not enough to teach iTaukei language; research and writing should be conducted in the language for the highest objectives. The emancipatory agenda I have in mind is aims at creation of a space for suitable discourses to take place on these matters, and for a program to be developed for the emergence of iTaukei historians, journalists, writers, translators, educators, theorists, and literary critics who would form the vanguard for the advancement of iTaukei intellectual and creative life.

Ruciate Nayacakalou in his book *Leadership in Fiji* (2014) had posed the challenge that iTaukeis 'must now make the momentous choice between preserving and changing their way of life.' I would like to suggest that a way out for iTaukei life, in theory, is for us to move beyond viewing tradition and modernity as incompatible, that is, as opposites or separate; the new critical theories proposed here will allow the iTaukei to embrace simultaneously tradition, modernity, nationalism, indigenous ethos and universal culture. Thus the contemporary iTaukei will be rooted in local culture, be enlightened, progressive, patriotic, well-travelled and global in outlook. In other words, he or she will move freely with ease between life-styles and knowledge systems. This will provide the necessary critical space from which to speak. This can be the beginning of genuine decolonization of our thought and ideas. Joni Madraiwiwi has given us this sort of expanded context in which iTaukei critical discourses can take place.

We have not taken full advantage of our bilingual abilities. Functioning in the intersection of languages places us in the privileged position of benefitting from multiple cultures and world-views that ought to facilitate gaining a broader perspective on life. And if we are ingenious enough, we can contribute to the expansion of our languages. There are great opportunities for creative bilingual individuals to engage in clever, innovative use of language. This is probably a new direction in which postcolonial writing, showing signs of exhaustion, can find new expression.

We have reached a decisive moment when something new ought to be brought into existence and given cohesion and momentum. What it is and how it will be realized is something we have to determine in the context of the theoretical position I have outlined. The situation I am laboring to define involves a plea for a radical shift in the thinking of those present here at this lecture. Already there are enormous gaps in scholarship, research and writing that cannot be easily filled. It will require slow and patient work. I have attempted to define the iTaukei intellectual and creative enterprise; now we have to forge association with institutions of higher learning, government agencies, the educated class and the media; and finally diffuse the message so that there is transforming impact on the iTaukei community's perceptions. That work had started after an iTaukei symposium and workshop in August 2012; an Association of iTaukei Intellectual and Creative Life was formed for that purpose with Ms Seruawia Vukivou as the Chairperson. The Association came to an abrupt halt with Ms Vukivou's untimely death in 2015. We have to consider ways of carrying on that work.

It might be a provocative thing to say, however, it ought to be said that much of iTaukei thought and energy has been invested in political programs. Politics, no doubt, is a source of power. But overdependence on politics to find answers for everything will lead to distorted relationship with power. Those who have turned away from politics understand this very well! They know that there is strength in intellectual and creative life that surpasses transitory political supremacy. All our communities in Fiji need to establish an alternative space that is not contaminated by politics, in which we can carry on the compelling work of innovating, creating, debating, renewing, remapping and producing for the purpose of upliftment, growth and evolution of our communities.

By invoking the name of a remarkable individual like Ratu Joni here, it is not my intention to suggest that we should wait for exceptional individuals to lead iTaukei creative and intellectual life. Exceptional thinkers are necessary for the inspirational leadership that they are capable of providing. We also have to believe that each of us is endowed with gifts to take responsibility for the creative well-being of our community. There is plenty of work to be done, and we need many hands. Some of the work has to be done collectively; the rest becomes the personal responsibility of individuals who are willing to seize the opportunity and become part of something larger than the individual self.

In September 2016, Ratu Joni and I were invited to speak at the Pacific Centre for Peace conference held in Suva. The conference was from 20th to 23rd September, and Ratu Joni and I were scheduled to speak on

the final day of the conference. I addressed the conference in the morning, and we waited for Ratu Joni to arrive from Nadi to speak to us in the afternoon. He did not come. We learnt that he had fallen ill and was taken to the hospital. A week later he passed away at the Colonial War Memorial hospital. The Great Bard told us, 'Give sorrow words.' So I hurriedly composed a couple of pages and rushed them to the newspapers. They were never published. This morning I have been given the opportunity to speak in gratitude that I have known such an exceptionally noble individual in an age in which wisdom and nobility of mind in is rapid decay.

(This lecture was given by Professor Subramani at the University of Fiji on the occasion of International Peace Day, 21st September 2018. It has been recommended that the University of Fiji institute an Annual Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi Lecture at the university).