

Institute of iTaukei Language and Culture in Fiji: iTaukei Cosmology

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Planting of *Dakua Makadre* (*Agathis macrophylla*) saplings
(Photo by Institute of iTaukei Language & Culture, Fiji)

ICH is an integral part of the indigenous population of Fiji known as the iTaukei. Borne of a rich oral tradition that spanned migration from Southeast Asia into the Pacific from 3,500 B.C., the iTaukei people of Fiji share many similarities with their island neighbours of Melanesia and Polynesia. ICH has manifested itself in many elements - from oral traditions, social practices, knowledge of nature, traditional craftsmanship and performing arts. These elements exist in a rich interplay of a reciprocal social systems in which the pinnacle is the chief, the physical embodiment of the ancestral spirits. Practice of the various elements legitimises and enforces the status quo in traditional iTaukei life.

The Institute of iTaukei Language & Culture in Fiji began its Cultural Mapping Program in 2004, and to date six out of fourteen provinces have been mapped. During the Cultural Mapping exercise, our field data collectors encountered remnants of Traditional Knowledge on the verge of being lost, with only less than five remaining practitioners in the given provinces keeping the Traditional Knowledge alive. These Living Human Treasures are then taken note of by the data collectors and referred to the Institute.

Within the Institute is a newly established unit called the Special Revival Unit which facilitates revival workshops in any given locality, thus enabling the revival of the TK to a level where it is not only shared by its traditional custodians, but also elevated to a level whereby it gradually becomes part of social practice, even to that of earning an income.

One such exercise was carried out in the village of Qelekuro in Tailevu Province of mainland Viti levu. In the course of being mapped out, the data collectors were told that the name of the village signified 'potting clay', but the only surviving villager with memory of the traditional craft was an elderly woman. Moreover, there are four clans

in the village, but the clan whose TK is pottery-making is called '*naqele*' which means 'the earth'. In pre-colonial times, earthenware pottery was used in a barter exchange system with neighbouring clans for other goods. The same clan also provisioned their local high chief with earthenware pottery as a gesture of loyalty and respect. With colonialism and later globalisation, these traditions gradually became untold and unpractised.

The Cultural Mapping Team of the Institute of iTaukei Language & Culture came upon this predicament in 2008, and in February 2009 the first revival phase was carried out. Since this was the first of its kind, a special *vanua* approach (Nabobo, U., 'Knowing and Learning – An Indigenous Fijian Approach, 2006) had to be undertaken which complemented traditional iTaukei ethos. The craft is a woman's trade, but its gatekeepers are the male elders and chiefs. The revival workshop had two sessions held concurrently – one for men and the other for women. For the women, it was more of a practical hands-on approach to pottery. For the men, it was more of a revision of their traditional roles and responsibilities as custodians and keepers. Concepts of traditional governance concerning customs, protocols and the roles each sub-clan played regarding the safeguarding of ICH were revisited and strengthened.

Earthenware crafts are glazed over by the resin of the endemic *dakua makadre* (*Agathis*

macrophylla) hardwood to render an aesthetic quality. The absence of the tree in Qelekuro suggested that either it had been obscured a long while, or the potters had previously obtained their resin from traditional exchanges or barter. The revival workshop not only revived an almost dying ICH, but also integrated environment conservation. Through joint collaboration with the Department of Forestry, *dakua makadre* resin was provided. In the process, the Department of Forestry initiated a mangrove replanting project along the Qelekuro coast in an effort to halt the fast erosion of the coastline. However, the *dakua* trees were planted to provide resin for the future generation of Qelekuro potters.

A follow-up visit three months later revealed that the number of TK owners had increased to 50 women. They even built a thatch house solely to cure the freshly made artefacts and are honing their skills in anticipation of a soon-to-open resort in the locality. Apart from the replanting of *dakua makadre* saplings (only two survived from the batch initially planted), the story from Qelekuro is an encouraging testimony of how Traditional Knowledge and Intangible Cultural Heritage has the potential not only to revive traditional skills, but also to sustain traditional families, kinship and communities. The Qelekuro village is living evidence of how ICH can affect the iTaukei cosmology to reclaim its once silenced voice and dignity amid the clutter of today's modernisation and globalisation.



Women of Qelekuro re-learning pottery making (Photo by Institute of iTaukei Language & Culture, Fiji)