

Culture

When visiting a Fijian village it is customary to present a gift of 'yaqona' (Piper methysticum), which is also known as kava. The gift, called the 'sevusevu', is not expensive; half-a-kilo (which is appropriate) costs approximately \$20.

It is presented to the Turaga ni Koro, the executive head of the Fijian village. The presentation is usually in his house and will generally be attended by some of the older men who happen to be in the vicinity at the time and can quickly turn into a social occasion. Pounded into powder, the 'yaqona' will be mixed with water and served.

Fijians are known as the friendliest people in the world. Your respect for their customs and traditions will not only make you a welcome guest in their villages and homes, but add another dimension to your Fijian holiday.

Let's Speak Fijian

Almost everyone in Fiji speaks English - as it is the official language of Fiji, but the Fijian language is preserved and widely spoken in many different dialects. Almost everyone is bilingual and many Fijian terms are included in everyday English usage. It is handy to know some of the more common words and phrases, and the Fijians will be delighted to know you picked up some of their language. Some Hindu is also spoken.

Fijian pronunciation is similar to English, but with a few changes to the phonetic alphabet. Below is a brief guide which will bring you close to the correct pronunciations. The best way to learn, since there are many subtleties, is to have a Fijian instruct you and then listen closely.

- "a" is "ah" as in father, but shorter. The correct pronunciation of Nadi, is closer to "Nahn-di" than "Nan-di".
- "b" is "mb" as in bamboo. you'll hear "bula" or "hello" many times. You may notice the slight humming "m", almost silent at the beginning. When something precedes the "b", then the "m" sound becomes more pronounced. The formal "hello", Ni Sa Bula, is pronounced "ni sahm" boola".
- "c" is "th" as in "this". So "moce" meaning goodbye is pronounced "moe-they".
- "d" is "nd" as in candy.
- "g" is "ng" as in singer.
- "i" is "i" as in sit or "ee" as in routine.
- "q" is "ngg" as in finger. The island of Beqa is pronounced "Mbeng-gah".
- "u" is "oo" as in bamboo or "u" as in put.

Some handy words and phrases are:

English

good morning
hello!
Goodbye
Please
excuse me
Yes
thank you
No
Eat
Village
Lady
Mister
Little
Plenty
Quickly
House
Toilet
Come
Go
Bring
one more
One
Two
what is this
Drink
Coconut
I want
Church
Shop

Fijian

ni sa yadra (ni sah yan dra)
bula(mbula)
ni sa moce (ni sa mothey)
yalo vinaka (yalo vee naka)
tulou (too low)
io(ee-o)
vinaka (vee naka)
sega (senga)
kana (kana)
koro
marama
turaga (tu rang ah)
vaka lailai (vaka lie lie)
vaka levu (vaka ley vu)
vaka totolo (vaka toe toe lo)
vale/bure (valey/mburey)
vale lailai (vale lie lie)
lako mai (la ko my)
lako (la ko)
kauta mai (ka ou tah my)
dua tale (ndua ta lay)
dua (ndua)
rua
na cava oqo (na thava on go)
gunu (goo noo)
niu (new)
au vinakata (aoo vina kahta)
vale ni lotu (vahle nee lohtoo)
sitoa (seetoah)

Note: Greetings may be shortened, for example - Ni sa bula can be just 'bula', ni sa yandra can be just 'yandra' and sa moce can be simply 'moce'.

Do's and Dont's

It will be interesting to relate to you things that are traditional and customary up till today, though the western concept is evidently becoming the reality of the day in the urban areas.

We kiss family members or relative on just one side of the cheek and for acquaintances just formally shaking hands when greeting or bidding farewell. Hugging and embracing was totally foreign to our land. Fijians don't embrace nor hug family members or friends. Just patting on the shoulders, cheeks or the head of the assurances of their love and commitment. Maoris in New Zealand have a different way of kissing and that is rubbing noses together as formal greeting. Whereas Fijians kiss the cheek by using the nostrils to inhale tersely and abruptly.

We have a specially designed mat purposely made for meals: size would be 8'L 3'W. As for ordinary family, they would have the general eating habit that is comfortable and acceptable in the individuals' homes with ordinary linen-table cloth spread out on the floor. But in a traditional feast, however, in the presence of the chiefs, Fijian etiquette would be the order of the day. The chief and his entourage would eat in isolation. Whilst the chief is eating, the only people allowed to move around in kneeling down position are the chosen servers. The clapping of hands ('cobo' – Thaw-BOH) by the spokesman of the chief subsequent to the formal announcement, is an indication that the chief is finished eating and simultaneously the cobo, or clapping of the hands would interrupt the silence.



Fijian artifacts and food are traditional gifts. The three significant exchanging of traditional gifts ceremonies are (i) the birth of a child (called 'roqoroqo' – rongo-rongo) (ii) a marriage ('vakamau' – VARH-KAH-maawoo) and lastly the ritual of a deceased member of the family ('Somate' – SAW-mar-te). Whales-

tooth is one of our priceless treasures: in all these three occasions, whales-tooth is the initial item that would be presented and would be received with great honor from the recipient. The 'sevusevu' (the presentation of a yaqona-(yah-qounah; Piper methysticum plant) is immediately presented after the 'kamunaga'– (Car- MOO-nah-ngar) (whales-tooth). It is considered a disrespect if these two items were omitted.

The chiefly burial ground is not a public place and only special people of each clan would be ritually appropriate and cleansed before entering the sacred ground before a burial ceremony and at any other required time. It is a belief that if one defiles this taboo, the person would strike terrible incurable disease that only through traditional condoning ceremony would then cleanse or free the defiler from the disease. It is one place that one should not venture out to take photographs – sacred chiefly burial grounds!



It is considered taboo to point a finger at someone who is older or of high rank. Once a person does that he/she challenges the Fijian authority in which it allows him/her to state his traditional status and right concerning the ground on which he dared infringe the traditional law. This is just an example there are many others.

All our scented flowers are processed and mixed with coconut oil and used as body moisturizer. The same flowers are also used for making garlands or leis on very special occasion such as wedding, feast to welcome and farewell some leaving or on the graveyards on the 4th nights after the burial ceremony, and the 100th night, for the lifting of the mourning period.



A visit to a village, it is a must to take a sevusevu (Sae-vooh Sae-VOOH). This is one of the traditions. It is the presentation of the yagona (kava in the Pacific and pharmacological, Kavakava) to the chief of the village to enable the visitors to eliminate any bad omen that would emanate from unconsciously violating the traditional taboos in the village through ignorance. Yagona is a plant that has the power to off-set any evil-related problem.

Shouting in the village or just plain making loud noise is considered offensive or disrespectful. Only exception to the rules would be someone who is of high-rank or/and vasu (VAR-Sue) of that village to be able to violate the traditional law without getting any adverse objections or remarks. Vasu is a person whose mother is originally from the village where she would have the freedom to take advantage of the supreme powers imbedded through blood ties to claim her heritage she would lust for beneficially as vasu, which cannot necessarily be denied in terms of traditional gifts, land and other traditional values and rights.

Fixed marriage is still maintained in some of the outlying islands in Fiji. Men are superior in our set-up. Women in the olden days are expected to sit crossed-legged awaiting the arrival of the husbands from work and not to raise the question of their whereabouts if they arrived home late. The women are very submissive and their emotions are intact and profoundly controlled. Men in our country are pampered. Women are suppressed with family and tradition.



Ritual in death is still very prominent in our country more so in the isolated islands and rural areas of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. The 4th night signifies the wandering spirit of the dead will discontinue. The 10th night signifies those in mourning are to finalize the ritual to those who donate tapa cloths, mats and food. The 100th night is the lifting of the mourning period, when presentation of gifts of mats, tapa, artifacts, foods to the family and relatives of the

deceased and the permission to discard the black attire of mourning worn during the mourning period.

We don't have many animals to begin with: Horses and cows are not indigenous. Pigs and goats are the animals of Fiji. Though they are both favorite dishes, the pig is rated as a chiefly food because it is presented to the chief or high ranking person during the traditional ceremony of welcome.

Any modern style is accepted: mini and bare top except wearing of two-piece bathing suit or swimming togs are strictly for the beaches. In a Fijian ceremony, Fijians are expected to wear their traditional clothes in church and also in other formal functions such as wedding.

In the presence of the chiefs no one is allowed to be standing up or make unnecessary noise except those who are equally high in status and of course with the exception of the traditional guards dressed like warriors.



When one watches a Fijian meke (traditional dance) performed whether sitting down or standing up, Fijian spectators or those who know the custom would automatically focus on the performers in the center whose costume would be prominently different from the rest. Also, the two performers placed at both ends, but, their costumes will not be as outstanding as the centre position. The positions emulate the chiefly set-up in any Province or the whole of Fiji for that matter. The middle performers would be someone of high rank. The center and the two end sides' positions are reverently for those in the hierarchy of the chiefly set-up.

Fijian customs are very important to learn and to understand. These include caring and sharing, respecting parents and older persons, responsibilities for not only immediately family but also extended family and others.