FIJIAN WOMEN AS ORATORS: EXCEPTIONS TO "TRADITION"?: THERESA KOROIVULAONO INTERVIEWED BY CAROLINE SINAVAIANA AND J. KĒHAULANI KAUANUI

Caroline Sinavaiana
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui
Wesleyan University

This interview examines the position of Fijian women through the structures of formulaic, ceremonial, oral narratives that provide the framework within which Fijian rituals and customs are enacted. A specific ceremony, the *Kau Ni Matani Gone*, which marks a person's first visit to her/his mother's or father's village, informs the discussion on changing gender constructs. Research included fieldwork in Fiji and involved both the examination of written history and conducting interviews to collect information on Fijian oral traditions and history. Examining the position of Fijian women in modern society with recourse to traditional elements that have defined their identity provides the basis for gender constructs that more accurately reflect contemporary patterns and roles.

We are interested in your work on Fijian women, gender, and decolonization. What got you started on this area of inquiry? How did it come about?

As part of a research project, in 1999, I made my first visit to my father's village on Matuku Island in the eastern province of Lau, Fiji. On the occasion of a child's first visit to either parent's village, a special ceremony called the *Kau Ni Matani Gone* (literally, "taking the face of a child") is performed

Pacific Studies, Vol. 30, Nos. 1/2—March/June 2007

to mark the event. Following these formal rituals in the ceremonial pavilion we call *vakatunuloa* (a construction of wood, corrugated iron, and leaves) my mother, aunt, and other female relatives accompanied me in a symbolic visit to extended clan members, in order to reaffirm our traditional kinship ties. Upon entry into the house, we were welcomed with a *tabua* (whale-tooth) presentation from the male head of the hosts' household. This was in keeping with gift exchanges that reaffirm kinship or historical ties. In return, our party presented gifts of *gatu* (barkcloth), *ibe* (mats), drums of kerosene, and tabua to the hosts. In the absence of any adult males, my mother and aunt performed the formulaic oral narratives which acknowledge gift exchanges.

What were the circumstances that enabled your mother and aunt to perform those particular ceremonial roles?

The adult males who had accompanied us were drinking *yaqona* (kava) with our hosts in the ceremonial pavilion. So, when we went to visit relatives, the only males accompanying us were my younger brother and a cousin, neither of whom felt competent enough in reciting the oral narratives. So, based on their status as elder female relations, my mother and aunt assumed the orator's role and recited the narratives from their memories of past ceremonies. As the head of our informal "delegation," my mother began with introductory remarks. Then my aunt followed with the fuller recitation of the appropriate narrative that expressed our gratitude to the hosts and acknowledged our kinship ties with them.

How unusual is it for women to take on that role in this particular ceremony?

In my experience, this was the first time it had ever happened. I should emphasize that our ritual was not conducted as part of the formal presentations in the ceremonial pavilion. In the formal context, the customary male orators are present. In our informal context, the women assumed the orators' role and followed the same narrative formula that men would have used. After the formal ceremonies, many villagers described their observances of this shift away from traditional practice. Some had witnessed women orators speaking at other ceremonial gatherings, but they noted that such occasions were extremely rare and always took place away from the main ceremonial pavilions. Others informed me that they have noticed this shift happening in the last ten years or so.

What were the most common examples of such cases?

Typically, they take place in residences when visiting parties exchange presentations with their host families. I should mention that these informal visits take place following formal ceremonies, for example, to mark births, deaths, marriages, and first visits. When the main ceremonies are completed in the formal pavilions, groups of participants then disperse on a round of informal visits in order to acknowledge and reaffirm relationships in the village.

Can you say more about the distinctions between the formal and informal social visits? Are women better positioned to assume orators' roles in informal settings?

Yes, this shift I am discussing is limited to informal settings. The significant change here, however, is that for the first time women can speak as orators at all, without recrimination. Men continue to speak as orators in both formal and informal contexts.

Formal ceremonies usually involve larger groups of people, whereas informal gatherings involve fewer people and take place in residences following the formalities in the public pavilion. The break between formal and informal parts of ceremonial gatherings is marked by a shift from oratory and a respectfully silent audience to the informal register of social conversation. If there are ancillary rituals involved, for instance, another type of informal visit to neighboring households, they would take place at this juncture. I think it's interesting that even in such ancillary rituals, the honorific language of formal ceremony is used.

I am hopeful that eventually, we will see women orators speaking in the formal ceremonies as well. Just as a significant shift has occurred in the extension of the Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremony (to include first visits to both mothers' and fathers' villages), women orators may not be such a far-fetched notion!

So, it seems that even though the women performing this role are going against generally accepted ideologies, they do so without worrying about being reproached?

Prevailing Fijian cultural ideology and scholarship would categorize examples such as the one I share here as exceptional and not worthy of record or scrutiny. In this way, my research challenges traditional Fijian beliefs in regard to the requisite gender for orators in formal ceremony.

What about published scholarship on gender roles and Fijian society—what is the state of the literature and prevailing understanding of women's place in their villages?

Throughout most of Fiji's written history, the position and role of Fijian women in society has reflected the traditional view; that is, women do not play a significant role in ceremonial presentations. Nayacakalou's views (at best) represented prevailing views at the time, that is, the 1950s. For example, R. R. Nayacakalou cites his 1950s fieldwork on the main island of Viti Levu to support his claim that "the women did not count for much in such situations."[2] Nayacakalou was the only other man present in his host's delegation, which was otherwise comprised of women. Such a dismissive view of the role of women in ceremony exemplifies a commonly held belief in contemporary Fijian society. In Fijian ceremonies, gender roles fall distinctly into speaking and nonspeaking spheres. Generally, men deliver the formulaic oral narratives and drink kava while women amass and redistribute traditional wealth items and cook and clean for large numbers of people over several days. Both are equally important but due to the "insignificance" attributed to the domesticity of women's roles, we have been misrepresented.

You, then, are working to restore the official record and rescue these experiences that illuminate shifting gender norms in contemporary Fijian villages?

Yes, I am interested in tracing sociological changes and the resulting impact on orally transmitted knowledge, with an initial focus on the performance of oral narrative in the Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremony. I think that the aforementioned gender shift is a prime illustration of one way in which oral traditions change over time. I also see the so-called exceptional cases as tangible evidence of the dynamism, which characterizes oral traditions. However, I have found it risky to go against the grain of conventional thinking by suggesting that indigenous Fijian women can and do assume roles as orators in formal tradition. By doing so, I open myself to the scorn and consternation from Fijian men and women elders who generally believe that only men can act as orators in formal ceremony, a notion that has persisted, largely unchallenged, until recently.

In my own fieldwork in Fiji from 1999–2000, I witnessed a number of ceremonial presentations, ranging from welcoming ceremonies to communal fundraising events, in which the orators and spokespersons were exclusively male. However, I believe that this commonly held perception masks some important factors.

If men serve as the formal orators and spokespersons, what role are women seen as fulfilling?

In regard to formal ceremonies and rituals, men appear to make the important decisions about time, place, exchange gifts, and venue. This perception is understandable, given the predominance of men's voices in family, tribal, and community meetings. As a participant-observer at family and tribal meetings, I witnessed the men generating and facilitating gatherings, with women actively contributing to the discussion. The women were especially influential in the final decisions on important matters, such as how much to spend for exchange gifts, what types of tapa or mats to present, and any decisions involving Western currency. The actual practice of custom on a daily basis reveals a more complex system of power dynamics between genders than at first meets the eye! My central interest here lies in the ways in which oral traditions adapt to changing conditions in the social milieu.

Can you say more about traditional beliefs that prevent women from performing ceremonial oratory?

Many Fijians believe that our traditional ceremonies have existed since time immemorial. They also typically believe that men are superior to women in decision-making situations.

What about definitions of tradition which underpin the continued belief in adhering to ceremonial customs and rituals "in theory" if not always "in practice"?

That's an important question. I am interested in the internal cultural tensions about the shifting boundaries between traditionally defined gender roles in Fiji. I want to understand how male-centric conceptualizations of "tradition" work to confine women within limited definitions of social roles, despite the contrary evidence of expanding leadership roles for women in recent times.

What about social changes that have led to other transformations in the ceremonial protocols?

Because residential patterns in precolonial times were predominantly patrilocal, the Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremony was originally performed to mark a child's first visit to his/her mother's village. Thus, first visits to the father's village were extremely rare, since children were typically residing in their fathers' villages. Traditionally, kin-groups and common descent were

"determined by the principle of patrilineal descent."[3] So, residential patterns tended to favor the patrilocales. At the same time, there were in fact exceptions to this rule, when men would reside in their wives' villages. Much of my information here is anecdotal. But it is safe to surmise that generally, while there exists a number of rules that govern any type of human behavior, there will also be exceptions. With cultural "norms" especially in oral cultures, for one reason or another, a generally observable pattern, like patrilocality may change due to a family feud or a visit turning into a number of years due to a man's potential for assistance/expertise at house building or planting. Moreover, when the movement of Fijians from rural to urban areas sharply increased in the early 1900s, more and more children were being born and raised in areas where they had few if any kinship connections at all. Consequently, the ceremony began to be performed in both fathers' and mothers' villages. So, here is an example of tradition changing in response to altered sociological circumstances. As the movement of Fijians from villages into urban areas continues to increase, so too does the propensity for cultural adaptation. On the one hand, conventional beliefs constitute a collective ideology based on knowledge passed down by successive generations. On the other hand, daily adaptations to imported or impinging ideologies have significant potential to destabilize ceremonial customs and practices.

Is there resistance to this change in terms of risking the violation of ceremonial tabus?

This particular change appears to have unfolded gradually and without incident. A number of elders attest to the fact that Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremonies have been performed in both mothers' and fathers' villages for at least two decades. Neither ethnographic studies, such as Nayacakalou's, nor anecdotal reports, suggest any opposition to the change in venue for the ceremony. However, the relative ease that this change has occurred is not reflected in other spheres—a case in point being women as nonorators on (formal) ceremonial occasions. When I asked people what would happen if women did perform ceremonial oral narratives, they would invariably recapitulate the traditional position, that is, that women did not recite these narratives on ceremonial occasions.[4] This might sound contradictory. But, the point should be made that it is not unusual to trivialize or even disregard changes that happen "on the ground" as it were, when they appear to challenge what is perceived as a traditional construct. With modernity and the real threat it poses in most, if not all, cases of further eroding indigenous cultures, it is understandable that we will fiercely protect what is "ours." But it is equally, if not more, damaging to presume that oral cultures and traditions are static and exist today in their primordial states. To propagate

this view is to deny the very premise upon which the culture has survived to the present day; its organic ability to absorb and continue.

Is there a tabu against women's speaking rights in formal oratory?

I have not as yet been able to locate a specific authority supporting any tabu against women delivering formal oratory. During my 1999 fieldwork in Fiji, most of the cultural "experts"—adults and elders—I interviewed, both in rural and urban areas, reiterated the "fact" that male orators had been the norm since time immemorial.

My own questioning of such a norm then, at the service of Western academic enquiry, borders on transgressing Fijian tradition. So, I was somewhat uncertain and indecisive in my enquiries about any negative sanctions resulting from women "breaking" with tradition in the context of oratory.[5] Whenever I asked what sorts of misfortune or adversities might befall female orators, people were vague and noncommittal. Instead, both men and women would emphasize the "fact" that orators were male.

The main reason I raise the issue of tabus here is that an important aspect of Fijian oral tradition is the role of negative sanctions against transgression of the rules governing the performance of ritual. Among Fijians, it is widely acknowledged that sudden illness or death, especially of a child, can be forms of retribution by the *vu*, ancestral gods, for such a transgression. For example, should a family lodge a false claim to a chiefly title, the sudden loss of a child or other grave misfortune would typically be seen as a sign of disapproval by the vu. The usual antidote and corrective to restore balance with the vu involves a symbolic presentation of tabua or *yaqona* (kava) to the other contending parties, as a positive step toward reconciliation and resolution of the conflict. Otherwise, these conflicts can continue for years.

I would also add that many Fijians, living as they do in predominantly Christian society, may not publicly acknowledge the existence of such tabus and their ensuing sanctions. If the conversation is being recorded for publication, people would more generally tend to characterize such beliefs as superstition. The fact remains, however, that fear of offending the *vu* acts as a powerful deterrent to radical changes in tradition.

Still, I have yet to find any record, either written or oral, of adverse consequences such as curses or mysterious mishaps, befalling families whose women had spoken as orators.[6] Moreover, some people report having witnessed women delivering the formal ceremonial narratives[7] in instances when no adult male was present or when the woman was a high-ranking chief. In the latter case, the female chief might have her spokesman or orator to deliver the major address, but she herself can deliver a short, formulaic utterance of acceptance.

How do people justify or explain male domination as being acceptable within Fijian culture?

People sometimes refer to the Fijian origin narrative as evidence. For example, in *The Fijian Ethos*, Ravuvu includes a Fijian origin myth of Ratu-mai-Bulu.[8] Here, Ravuvu asserts a superior role for males, based on certain features of the narrative. In the myth Tomaniivi, the female half of a dual-gendered entity, disobeys the male-half god's order not to eat a particular bunch of bananas. Tomaniivi gives the fruit to her children, with the top half (or head) of the banana going to her son, and the bottom half (or tail) of the fruit going to her daughter. Ravuvu argues for the symbolic association of head/tail in the myth with mind/male/superior and nurture/female/inferior in society.[9] It is interesting to note the androgynous nature of the humans at the beginning of the narrative. Distinctions between genders, including the imputed superiority of males, appear to develop later in the storyline. In an earlier work, *The Fijian Way of Life* (1983), Ravuvu elaborates on this assertion of male superiority.[10] To support this claim, he cites the prominence of patrilineal kinship, a view which reflects prevailing social attitudes in the early 1980s.[11]

On the other hand, I would argue that such views are inaccurate in their portrayal of Fijian women as subordinate members of their communities. While patrilineality may still be regarded as a defining construct of Fijian identity, the role of women in other spheres must be reconsidered in light of changing sociological conditions and ideological constructions. Without doubt, the most fundamental single challenge to traditional systems was the advent of colonization. In island nations such as Fiji, tradition "—especially as reflected in the idiom of chiefliness—stands for the natural, authentic expression of Fijian identity as against western modes."[12] In a similar way, the role of Fijian women as accumulators and distributors of traditional wealth, as organizers and participants rather than orators in ceremonial contexts, represents a tradition within specific cultural contexts. For example, in the rituals that constitute funeral rites, it is the exclusive domain of women to accrue tabua, ibe, and gatu for use and redistribution. While these items are generally understood to "belong" to families/households, women as custodians of traditional wealth are directly responsible for these decisions.

What about other changes in the ceremony?

In all ritual gift exchanges, the nature of the gifts has changed. In addition to the traditional tabua, ibe, and gatu, introduced items such as tinned fish and meat, drums of kerosene, flour, and sugar are also exchanged. Unlike

other innovations, these adaptations have been absorbed into Fijian tradition without resistance. For example, in cases of opposing claims to chiefly titles, contention tends to be vigorous and often results in long-standing and bitter family feuds. Fijian hereditary systems favor the male line, although not exclusively. Chiefly title typically passes from one brother to the next before being bestowed on the younger generation. With the introduction of western education and forms of wealth, the English system of primogeniture was adopted by some families, which then led to animosity and conflict between rivalling families or factions.

In the Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremony, prescribed oral narratives continue to frame each ritual performance. For the most part, women's participation remains primarily supportive and preparatory in relation to the accumulation of wealth, both traditional and nontraditional, for the ceremony. While their participation behind the scenes is crucial in terms of ritual procedure, their contributions do not include any formal vocalization during the ceremony proper.

If one considers the "virtue of oral sources"[13] as authentification of social obligation, then the role of women as silent participants is a given. However, with colonization, demographic patterns underwent substantial changes. People moved in large numbers from villages with tribal/kinship connections to urban areas largely devoid of such comprehensive kinship networks. Thus, the role of women in their families changed as well. For the first time, women as well as men participated in a wage economy, as opposed to village divisions of labor that had men planting and hunting and women fishing and looking after households. This profoundly changed social situation led to fundamental changes in traditional gender roles as well, including those governing ceremony and ritual.

In regard to the role of women in the ceremony at its inception, I have found no substantial information from the literature or the oral tradition. One interview in Vuci village left me with the impression of trying to read pages floating under water.[14] It was an "undisputed fact" that the ceremonial first visit to a mother's village symbolized the revered position of women, through their child-bearing function. If there are other originary facets of the ceremony, they have disappeared over time. From such interviews, it again became clear to me that such questions about origins belong to the context of academic enquiry.

Is it possible for you to give us more of a sense of what the Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremony entails?

In general there are four stages in the ceremony. These begin with the arrival of the visiting party, comprised of the child and members of the father's

mataqali (subclan or lineage) at the mother's village. The *vakasobu* (arrival) involves a presentation of tabua, the traditional item of highest value, from the hosts to the visitors as a formal invitation to enter the village. The adult males are then directed to the ceremonial pavilion, which has been specially erected for the occasion. Women and children are directed to nearby accommodations where the child is dressed in tapa and mats, the traditional ceremonial attire for rituals. This ceremonial dress is gender-neutral, with variations occurring only if the child is of noble birth.

The *qaloqalovi*, or thanksgiving, to the gods for the safe passage of the visitors is marked by the presentation of the tabua from hosts to visitors. The visitors in turn present tabua to their hosts in gratitude. The *sevusevu* (first fruits of harvest), consisting of *yaqona* (kava root) is presented by the visitors to their hosts as a sign of good faith. Together these rituals comprise a standard cluster of introductory ceremonies conducted during formal occasions in general. One ancillary ritual that might follow the introductory ones is the *kida*, in which the hosts present tabua to the guests as a mourning tribute to all those who have died in the past. Here we can see the ritual gesture marking the central significance of ancestors and history within the cultural framework of Fiji.

The *kidavi*, greeting to the child, consists of a series of exchanges of traditional and nontraditional gift items. These include ibe, gatu, bolts of cloth, and food. Each exchange is usually marked by reciprocal presentations of tabua. The kidavi is exclusive to the Kau Ni Matani Gone ceremony and constitutes its most distinctive feature vis-à-vis the oral narratives that frame these gift exchanges. In these, as in all gift presentations, the narratives have been passed down by oral transmission from one generation of orators to the next. While modern scholars have transcribed and translated some narratives, oral transmission remains the traditional method of instruction. Recently, male peer groups exchange such information more informally. In any case, the tradition remains officially situated in the domain of men.

Can you say more about Fijian Ethos and the *Vasu* Relationship?

Vasu refers to the relationship of a child to his/her mother's kin-group and village or patrilineage and explicitly marks matrilineal or affiliate links between mothers and their children,[15] as opposed to those between fathers and their children. For example, to describe where I'm from, I would say *Yaroi* (village), *Matuku* (island), *Lau* (province). The same answer would be given by my father and his children. However, I would also add that I am *vasu* to Ono-I-Lau, my mother's island. If we shared the same mother, my

siblings would add the same response. My father, on the other hand, would cite his mother's village, and likewise my mother will name her mother's village as her *koro-ni-vasu* (village to which one is a vasu) .

There are certain types of social relations characterizing this relationship, the most notable being the implied kin-group. For example, a child who is a vasu may take from her vasu's allocation of traditional gifts and wealth, such as any movable property, food, pigs, cattle, or anything else they may fancy.

The proliferation of writing about contemporary Fijian society appears to have eroded the oral transmission of certain customs and traditions. In field interviews, people emphasized the importance of vasu, but with little reference to kin-based responsibilities and power structures associated with matrilineality. The act of naming one's vasu, which in effect shares privileged knowledge with outsiders, appears to signal indulgence by the vasu family members or village toward the child or adult who claims the vasu status.

Until the late nineteenth century and the advent of colonialism, a chief could trust the members of his vasu to provide assistance in times of war. Over time, the strength of the vasu relationship has been eroded by the imposition of the English patriarchal system, which reinforced certain male-dominant notions embedded in traditional Fijian ideology.[16] Thus, a predominant theme found in western scholarship, both by indigenous and nonindigenous writers, strongly favors males over females in discussions of gender politics.

In conclusion, what do you make of it all?

The gradual emergence of women orators in Fiji (albeit within informal contexts) constitutes a significant departure from traditional conventions of ritual practice. More comprehensive study of cultural adaptations such as this offers the potential to reveal important insights into the nature and dynamics of oratory in contemporary society.

NOTES

1. R. R. Nayacakalou, *Leadership in Fiji* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975), 76 (hereafter, Nayacakalou, 1975).

2. R. R. Nayacakalou, *Fijian System of Kinship and Marriage* (Auckland: Auckland University College, n.d.), 3.

3. Work in progress. Fieldwork, May 1999–February 2000. Suva, Fiji (hereafter, Fieldwork, May 1999).

4. Work in progress. Fieldwork, July–September 2000. Suva, Fiji (hereafter, Fieldwork, 2000).

5. Fieldwork, 2000. Interviews with informants were carried out in Vuci village, Tailevu, on the main island of Viti Levu and also on Matuku Island in the eastern province of Lau. In both cases, informants professed no knowledge of adverse conditions when the change in the purpose of the ceremony became apparent in early 1900s. Some informants had even forgotten that the ceremony had originally been performed only for a child's first visit to his/her mother's village. Generally, informants expressed reluctance when questioned about changing traditional customs and practices. But, if change was affected and there didn't appear to be severe consequences like death or illness to individuals and family members, then the changes were viewed with tolerance and acceptance.

6. Fieldwork, 2000.

7. Asesela Ravuvu, Vaka I Taukei [:] *The Fijian Way of Life* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1983) (hereafter Ravuvu, 1983).

8. Ravuvu, 1983.

9. Ravuvu, 1983, 1.

10. Ravuvu, 1983, 23.

11. Ravuvu, 1983.

12. Fieldwork, May, 1999.

13. Fieldwork, May 1999.

14. Fieldwork, May 1999.

15. Nayacakalou, 1975, 16.