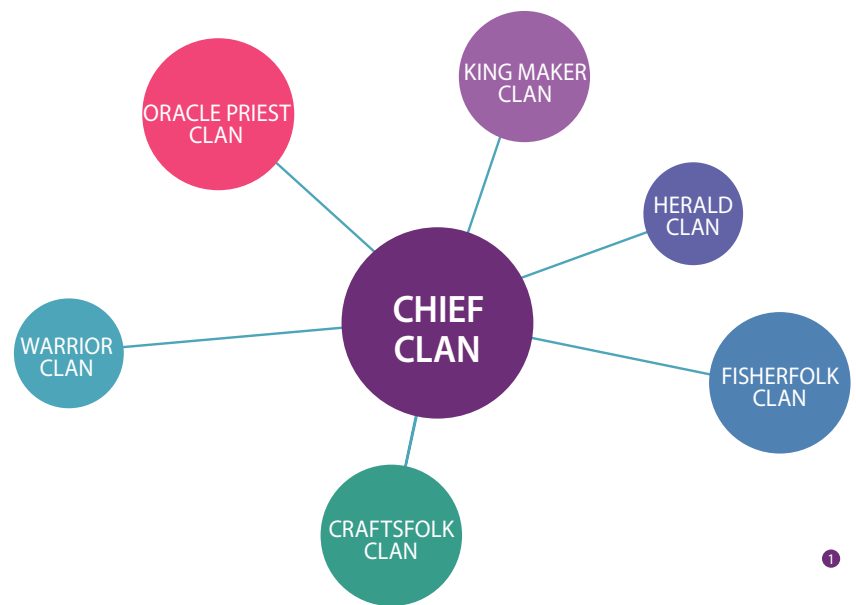


VERATA TRADITIONAL ENVOYS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTATION

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Vaka e vidi na ivi matua
(Crunchy like chestnuts ready for harvest)
—A Fijian saying often uttered by the Mataka

The traditional structure of the indigenous people of Fiji can be broadly described as comprising chiefs, heralds, warriors, kingmakers, fisher folk, crafts folk and oracle priests. This structural arrangement can be loosely found in traditional village settings. The term “loosely” is used here in the sense that some tribes have all these traditional roles living in the same village, whereas in some other areas, the clans can be in different villages. For instance, a village located some distance away from the sea may have the chiefs, heralds, and priests in one locality while the fisher folk are situated on the coast and the warrior clan is located further away up in the hinterland. Though the reasons for these separations may vary, these clans of people still identify themselves in relation to their roles with the chief, who is at the figurative center as illustrated in Figure ①.



Governance in the indigenous Fijian landscape can best be described as consisting of numerous autochthonous chiefdoms. Traditionally, no overall chief holds total jurisdiction over the indigenous traditional governance, even though there have been claims in the past by one or two. One such claim arose prior to Fiji’s colonial period, when the Bau warlord, Cakobau, became a self-styled king when his precession *matanitu* or government was established in Levuka,¹ the first capital of Fiji.

The term “generic” is used in the caption for the illustration above because there are instances of clans that were remnants from the ancient warring days and have become subsumed under a dominant group, existing as retinue and retainers of the ruling chiefly clan in the process. “Generic” also fits because some of these components may exist in one village with the other clans clustered in another village.

TRADITIONAL HERALDS AND CHIEFS

In the chief’s clan, the selection of one to ascribe into leadership follows established protocols and traditions. The process is usually carried out by the traditional king makers (as in Figure ①) in consultation with the chief’s clan. Variations differ across Fiji, but the usual characteristic is the collective consultation and consensus among key clans and their elders. Once the chief has undergone the

1. The town of Levuka is now inscribed in the UNESCO world heritage list.

① Generic traditional iTaukei society.

traditional investiture ceremonies, he or she also assumes a whole retinue of retainers. Unlike leadership in the traditional Western monarchy, chiefs are traditionally referred to by elders or kingmakers as *gone* (pronounced NGAW-nay), which literally translates as “child.” Symbolically, in terms of traditional seniority in indigenous understanding, chiefs are not of the same stock as the aboriginal people over whom they rule.² Because chiefs were believed to be living embodiments of the unseen deities, they were above talking, at least to the other classes. This is where the role of the traditional herald comes into play. The herald’s position is as mediator between the chief and the people and vice versa.

Heralds are appointed to their positions when groups disperse and relocate away from their ancestral places, and this position is transmitted down the generations. The *matanivanua*³ is the official herald of a chief and is also the master of ceremonies. When a *solevu*⁴ takes place, it is the herald who superintends. At a kava drinking ceremony,⁵ he always drinks immediately after the chief and directs the order of the ceremony throughout. In addition to his other duties, he is the proper channel or medium through which a message is conveyed from the chief to the people or vice versa. No one has free access to the chief as a herald and certainly no one else may speak with boldness. This is the special privilege of the herald, his role and responsibility. For all intents and purposes, he is the chief’s aide-de-camp.

TRADITIONAL ENVOYS IN VERATA

The traditional envoy role is of a higher class of traditional heralds. Envoys are called Mataka along with the addition of the name of the place to which they are accredited; thus, Mataka Bau is the envoy to Bau,⁶ or Mataka Verata is the envoy for the high chief of Verata.⁷ Tradition has it that the concept had its early origins at the height of the Verata kingdom’s era,⁸ a period said to have already been established by 1000 CE. Suffice it to say, these roles or offices are invariably kin-determined, i.e., the envoys are kin to the people of the places to which they are accredited, and it is this fact of kinship that ensures them a friendly reception. It is not unusual to find the office or role of the traditional herald and traditional envoy belonging to the same landowning unit but to different extended family units.

2. Marshal Sahlins, “The Stranger-King: Or Dumézil Among the Fijians,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 10, 3 (July, 1981): 112.

3. Literally “face of the land,” referring to traditional heralds, mediators/spokesmen between chiefs and the people.

4. A traditional state occasion in which exchanges in food and traditional artifacts are done between two or more traditionally related clans, tribes, or states.

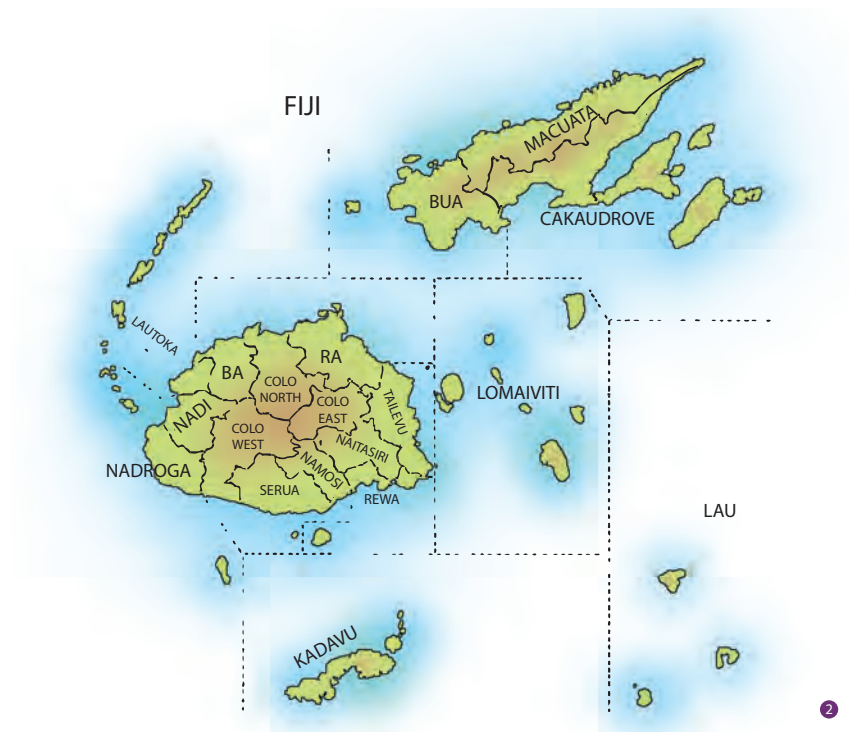
5. The traditional ceremony accorded with the drinking of kava (*Piper methysticum*).

6. A traditional state on mainland Eastern Vitilevu deriving its name from its island capital of the same name, whose realms began in the mid-1800s.

7. An ancient traditional state in Fiji that derives its name from its principal seat of power on mainland Eastern Vitilevu.

8. This era was by tradition a time when Verata was the only major traditional chiefdom to exist, a chiefdom whose territory spanned from the interior of mainland Vitilevu to include the Vitilevu eastern coast, across the islands in the Lomaiviti province, and encompassing the whole of Vanualevu, the second mainland. It is from this era when tradition holds that many chiefly households and people migrated from Verata to settle all over Eastern Fiji.

Verata's seat of leadership is located in the village of Ucunivanua in Tailevu Province. At its prime, though, the kingdom spanned from tribes in the hinterland of mainland Vitilevu to the islands in today's Lomaiviti province, Taveuni and Laucaala islands in northern Fiji, as well as most of Vanualevu, the second mainland.



Oral traditions about Verata tell of a famed ancestral hero called Tuivanuakula who left Verata and assumed the new title Kubunavanua⁹ to symbolize his charisma and powerful warrior skills. Kubunavanua went to Totoya and Moala islands in today's Lau group in Fiji, and his descendants became chiefs. Kubunavanua then assumed lordship of Burotu, a place famed for its trade in red feathers of the *kula*, or collared lory (*Phygis solitaries*).¹⁰ Oral traditions tell of Burotu sinking due to some calamity, but by then its fame and its warriors had spanned the Western Pacific. It is interesting to note that in Tonga, all the paths that the souls of the dead chiefs followed were called *hala ki pulotu* (similar to the Fijian *sala ki Burotu*, meaning the path to Burotu), and these paths all reached the coast facing east toward Fiji. Burotu grew more in fame as the land where everything was red (*kula*), hence it became known as Burotukula, the offshoot of Verata warrior prince Tui Vanuakula.¹¹

9. Literally, "The Land Flees" or "Land is Conquered."

10. Dick Watling, *Mai Veikau. Tales of Fijian Wildlife* (Suva: Environmental Consultants Ltd, 1986), 60.

11. Paul Geraghty, "Pulotu, Polynesian Homeland," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 102, 4 (1993): 343-384.

Verata was once a thriving metropolis, and its influence was regularly strengthened through its annual traditional tributary and trade routes. It was from this that the role of the envoys featured prominently. They were established along key points on the Verata trade route and were called *matakiverata*, a compound word comprising three terms: *mata* (eyes or face), *ki* (to), and *Verata* (referring to the principal seat of power that is Verata). The role of the *matakiverata* was mainly as ambassadors of the Verata interests and as official homes-away-from-home of the Verata chiefs or people whenever they visited. While traditional visits to Verata and its usual social intercourse would be facilitated by the traditional herald on the home front, whenever the *matakiverata* presented himself at Verata, he directly presented himself to the Verata chiefs and did not follow traditional protocol. These traditional envoys were at the frontiers brokering traditional trade and diplomacy of and for Verata.

A clan assumes the role of *matakiverata* characterized by these three points:

- 1) The role of the envoy is looked upon as higher in degree than that of the *matanivanua* (traditional herald). The envoy may also be referred to as the *matanivanua turaga* (chiefly herald);
- 2) The role is hereditary, following paternal lineage;
- 3) The functions of the *matakiverata* are exercised on occasions during traditional ceremonies or in meetings between tribes. In such events, the envoy acts as the master of ceremonies. If the chief wishes to convey a message to a fellow chief, the *matakiverata* is the bearer of the message. Likewise, on the arrival of an envoy from another district, it is the *matakiverata* who receives the visiting envoy, conveys his message to the chief, and afterwards, if the chief wishes, escorts the visiting envoy to the chief's court.¹²

It isn't uncommon to hear Verata chiefs and *matakiverata* referring to each other as *vuvale*, meaning "of the same family," thus reinforcing the notion that *matakiverata* may probably have once been members of the Verata nobility strategically placed along the Verata tributary routes and frontiers. It is not unusual for those playing the role of *matakiverata* to also assume the traditional herald role in the micro

12. G. A. F. W. Beauclerc, "Fijian Heralds and Envoys," *Transactions of the Fijian Society* (1956): 10.

context of their respective villages. This varies according to location, but fellow matakiverata share a deep bond whenever they meet and address each other using the title with their respective clan name as the suffix. For instance, a matakiverata from the Dere clan, a village in northern Tailevu Province, and a fellow matakiverata from the Nailagolaba clan, at the southern tip of Tailevu Province, would greet each other as such:¹³

Matakiverata from Dere: *Bula vinaka Mataki mai Nailagolaba* (Good day to you envoy from the Nailagolaba clan)

Matakiverata from Nailagolaba: *Bula vinaka Mataki mai Dere* (Good day to you envoy from the Dere clan)

As with the Verata chiefs, the home of a matakiverata is the sanctuary of a visiting matakiverata from any other clan. Ordinary people from Verata also share the sanctuary of the matakiverata in a similar manner.

When Bau enters Verata, the clan of matakibau alone prepares a feast and presents it to the visitors. This is followed by the chief of Verata preparing a feast and presenting it to the visiting party. In the case of a ceremony taking place, a portion of the feast presented will be set apart first of all for the mataka. In the case of the ordinary matanivanua, that course of action is not pursued.

The key characteristic of the matakis' traditional knowledge is that they are repositories of genealogy, stories, legends, and traditions about the Verata chiefs. This knowledge is not open to other clans, but is closed knowledge that demonstrates the legacy of the Verata chiefs and how the Verata chiefs and people are related to other chiefs and people who originally dispersed from Verata. In the days prior to the arrival of Christianity, when warfare was common, these stories told how the matakiverata distinguished friend from foe.

To demonstrate, one such legend is retold here showing a traditional Verata connection with one of the paramount titles in Fiji, the Rokotui Dreketi of the Burebasaga confederacy. The whole indigenous governance in Fiji comes under three major

13. A common greeting between heralds.

confederacies: Kubuna, Burebasaga, and Tovata. The paramount head of Kubuna, which has been left vacant since 1989, is the warlord of Bau Island. Kubuna comprises the provinces of Tailevu, Ra, Naitasiri, and Lomaiviti and parts of Ba Province. Burebasaga comprises the provinces of Rewa, Beqa, Kadavu, Nadroga, Navosa, and the remainder of Ba Province. Tovata comprises Vanualevu and the Lau group of islands.

Rewa is the principal village in the Burebasaga confederacy, and according to a Verata oral tradition, the founding chief of Rewa, who established the Burebasaga confederacy, originated from Verata. Here is a legend transmitted within the matakiverata that tells of the link between the chief of Verata and the paramount chief of Rewa, the Rokotui Dreketi:

Rokomoutu is the ancestor of the Verata people. His older sister is Buisavulu. Rokomoutu's three younger brothers are Romelāsiga, Tuinayavu, and Daunisai. Rokomoutu's title is 'O Koya na Ratu mai Verata' or 'Ratu' for short. Romelāsiga's is 'Rokoratu.' One day Romelāsiga decides to seek land on his own and asks permission from his older brother Rokomoutu. Romelāsiga then sails down the eastern coast of Vitilevu in his canoe hewn from the namako tree. He settles at a place that has uneven terrain. Upon hearing Romelāsiga's final settlement, Rokomoutu visits him there and notices the uneven terrain. He asks Romelāsiga whether this really was his final choice. Romelāsiga is convinced without a doubt that the choice was final. Rokomoutu returns to Verata and directs all the women in Verata to fill earth into baskets so as to fill up the uneven terrain. When this is done, Rokomoutu remarks to his younger brother that he is king over land that was carried on the backs of Verata women. The indigenous word *dreketi* means "something that is carried on one's back." The word for king or chief is *tui*. Romelāsiga is overlord of his new place. The words *tui dreketi* mean "king of the carried," so Romelāsiga changes his title from Rokoratu and becomes Rokotui Dreketi, now the paramount title of the Burebasaga confederacy.

In analysis, legends and myths are coded stories that, though they may seem incredible, are ways our ancestors creatively preserved

facts pertaining to governance, links, and relationships. Whether the women of Verata actually carried baskets is irrelevant. The crucial issue is that the chiefly households of the Verata and Rewa chiefs are traditionally related. This is further demonstrated in the existence of *yavu*¹⁴ in the old site where Rokomoutu and his siblings settled. People and chiefs who originate from Verata are known by the name of their *yavu*. The Rokotui Dreketi's *yavu* in the old Verata site still exists and is called Burebasaga. Moreover, the Rokotui Dreketi's traditional envoy also exists in Verata. His house is called Namanā,¹⁵ and he is called Mataki Burebasaga (envoy to Burebasaga).

Though many more stories exist, the legend retold above is a representative example of an open story¹⁶ from within the *matakiverata*.

14. House mound in a village site upon which one builds one's residence.

15. *Manā* (stress on the second syllable) is commonly known as the swamp or mud lobster and is found mostly in Rewa province.

16. In the traditional knowledge system, there are stories and knowledge that can be shared openly and those to be kept closed from non-clan members.

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