



## Cultural Ceremony of Welcome

This scenario note has been prepared in order to better appreciate the significance of the Fijian Welcome Ceremony to be performed at 9:00 am on Monday 5 June, 2017 in the United Nations General Assembly Hall.

Before the ceremony begins, all guests are expected to be seated and observe silence. In the Fijian culture, standing up, loud conversations or walking in the venue where the cultural ceremony is being performed is considered as highly disrespectful and extremely insulting. In the Fijian tradition, warriors in full ceremonial costume and armour would be posted at strategic positions to guard the dignity of the ceremony and ensure there is no disturbance from the moment the cultural performance begins until it ends.

During the ceremony, the chief or honoured guest says little, if anything. He or she is accompanied by a spokesman, a hereditary position known in Fijian as *matanivanua*. Those involved in the ceremonies of welcome are also silent and seated on the floor as it is disrespectful to raise themselves above the chief or honoured guest.

The heart of a Fijian traditional welcome ceremony is called the Yaqona<sup>1</sup> Vakaturaga<sup>2</sup>. A tanoa (wooden bowl) carved from a trunk of the vesi (Intsia bijuga, a very hard wood with chiefly associations) is placed in front of the honoured guest at a respectful distance, with the sau (cord of plaited coconut fibre with white cowry shells attached) extended towards the position of honour. Men in traditional dress are arranged around the tanoa; the positions vary in different parts of Fiji, but there is always one seated directly behind the tanoa whose responsibility is to prepare the yaqona.

Water is poured, usually from a traditional earthenware vessel or bamboo container, and grated or pounded yaqona placed in a bundle of vau (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) fibre through which it is strained. At some point a chant is sung by the group seated behind the tanoa, on occasions to the accompaniment of a wooden drum (lali). The person preparing the yaqona then raises the strainer and wrings out the drink to allow the matanivanua to judge whether the consistency is

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<sup>1</sup> Yaqona (pronounced 'yangonna') is known in other parts of the Pacific as 'kava' and scientifically as '*Piper methysticum*' is a large shrub, the roots of which are pounded or grated and then infused with water to make Fiji's national drink.

<sup>2</sup> Accorded respect as those accorded to Chiefs and honoured guests.

correct. If more water is needed, the *matanivanua* says “wai”, and if not, the word is “donu” (good).

The *yaqona*-mixer then hands-over or sometimes tosses the strainer to a person behind who shakes out the dregs and returns it to the mixer, who uses it to wipe the rim of the *tanoa*, announces that the *yaqona* is ready, and claps three times. Fijian clapping (*cobo* or *obo*) is done with hollowed hands as a sign of respect.

The *yaqona* is now ready to be served. The Server coils back the *sau* (coconut fibre cord), picks up the *bilo* (coconut shell cup) and holds it over the *tanoa* to be filled. He then turns, arms extended holding out the *bilo*, and sways and steps towards the honoured guest to the rhythm of the chant. The chant ends abruptly, he fills the chief guest’s *bilo*, the guest claps with cupped hands and drinks the *yaqona* slowly, in one draught, to the clapping of the chanters. When the guest has drunk, he or she places the cup on the mat, and all present clap independently. Next is the *matanivanua*’s turn to drink, followed by a select number of other guests and their respective *matanivanua*. The mixer announces that the *yaqona* has been drunk, claps and so ends the *yaqona vakaturaga*.

Much of Fijian culture is grounded in the concept of equilibrium that all things are done in pairs. This is why for every cup of *yaqona* drunk by a guest of honour, a corresponding cup (*rabe*) is drunk which does not count in order of precedence, usually by a *matanivanua*, but sometimes by anyone who wishes to honour the individual who has just drunk.

A more specific program outlining the sequence of proceedings for the Cultural Welcome Ceremony will be available in the General Assembly Hall at 9:00 am on Monday 5 June.

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