

FIJIAN CEREMONIES OF WELCOME

TRADITION · RESPECT · HOSPITALITY

Understanding our traditions, strengthens our relationships.
Welcome to Fiji.



FIJIAN CEREMONIES OF WELCOME

(iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture 2016)



1 Tama

As the honoured guest arrives, the assembly greets him or her with the tama, a solemn acclamation reserved for chiefs.

2 Vakasobu

If the guest arrives by motor vehicle, rather than by sailing vessel as was previously the custom, the first ceremony is the presentation of a tabua - a polished whale's tooth, the ultimate symbol of wealth in Fijian society - with words of assurance that the visitor is welcome. (You will find more detailed notes about the presentation of tabua below). This tabua is called the ivakasobu, meaning a presentation on the occasion of the guest's descending from the vehicle. The guest takes the tabua, then hands it to his matanivanua, who expresses his gratitude and returns the compliments offered.

3 Qaloqalovi

A parallel ceremony is the qaloqalovi, literally 'swimming out to', if the presentation was traditionally performed on board a visiting vessel at sea. In days of old this was literally done at sea. It consists again of the presentation and acceptance of a tabua with the same words of assurance that the visitor is welcome.

4 Vakamāmaca

Another echo of the days when guests usually arrived by sea, vakamamaca means 'drying' and consists in a presentation by the womenfolk of clothes to change into and fresh sleeping-mats and bark-cloth. This is done because in the olden days, visitors who travelled by sea were soaked and needed to change into dry clothes. The articles may be presented along with a tabua, in which case the matanivanua will make a formal speech of acceptance.

5 Sevusevu

Na i valavala vakavanua oqo e dau meketaki kina A large yaqona plant is presented, and accepted by the matanivanua, who kneels beside it with his hands placed on it while making the speech. Yaqona - 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 in water to make Fiji's national drink.

6 Yaqona Vakaturaga

This is the heart of these ceremonies of welcome. A tanoa (wooden bowl carved from the 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 an ancient chant is taken up by a group seated behind the tanoa to the accompaniment of a wooden drum (lali) - note the close harmonies, a distinctive feature of traditional Fijian music. The man preparing the yaqona then raises the strainer and wrings out the drink to allow the matanivanua to judge whether the consistency is correct. If more water is needed, the matanivanua says «wai» (water). If not, the word is «donu» (correct).

The yaqona-mixer then hands, or sometimes tosses the strainer to a man 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 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 guest's bilo, the guest claps 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 small 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 the order of precedence, usually by a matanivanua, but sometimes by anyone who wishes to honour the individual who has just drunk.