

Celebrating Difference

by Michelle Elvy

I am sitting cross-legged on a mat woven from *voivoi* leaves with Watsoni, the village chief of Makogai Island in eastern Fiji, eating a Sunday lunch of crab, cassava and coconut cream. The cream is so good that it's not enough to dip my crab legs and cassava into it; I want more. So I reach for a spoon in the middle of the mat, halfway between me and the Chief's daughter, and dip it into my bowl and bring the rich white cream to my lips. As soon as I do it, I realize my mistake. The daughter is eyeing me across the mat with an inquisitive look. "I love the coconut cream," I offer, but it's not an adequate explanation for my breach of luncheon etiquette. Her eyes grow brighter, and her mouth forms a wide grin, as if to say: "You silly *kaivalagi*! Why are you using a spoon when it's easier to just drink it right out of your bowl?"

We have lived on our boat for eight years. We've spent the last three months in Fiji. Makogai is the fifth Fijian village we've become acquainted with, and our simple but sumptuous meal with Chief Watsoni is at least my twentieth meal sitting cross-legged on a *voivoi* mat. By now, I feel somewhat acclimated to life in Fiji. I've become enchanted with the friendly people of these islands. I know how to wrap my *sulu* modestly around me before entering the village boundaries. I have learned how to grate coconut and make *lolo*. I am a connoisseur of *kava*. Even my children have come to crave the taro-leaf-coconut-cream standard meal in these parts. But no matter how much we embrace the culture, I am acutely aware in the moment I bring that spoon to my lips that there's still no getting around the basic fact that *we are different*.

Meal etiquette is one way the differences come into sharp relief. I've sat with women on the floors of houses all across the South Pacific and prepared meals. The typical tool is a dull but strong knife

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/michelle-elvy/celebrating-difference»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/michelle-elvy/celebrating-difference)

Copyright © 2010 Michelle Elvy. All rights reserved.

which they employ as can opener, carver, and shucker. A machete is more common than a butter knife, and more essential. Silverware is non-essential, as I've seen demonstrated time and again. A few weeks ago when three women from Koro Island's Nabuna Village spent a day on our boat fishing, they insisted at lunchtime that they prepare the meal. They had carefully packed taro root and cassava from home, already cooked and ready to eat. The only thing they required for the meal was a large pot, in which they boiled the fish whole with chili pepper and lime. When the meal was ready, I reached for bowls for individual servings, but they shook their heads: *No, we don't need those*. They fished out the largest specimens from their catch of the day, a dozen or so small reef fish averaging about five inches, placed them carefully into four bowls for us, and poured the chili-lime broth over top. I gingerly picked at the paltry specimen looking up at me from my bowl, trying to pull the miniscule bits of meat from the fragile skeleton (*with a fork!*). Meanwhile, my husband and daughters took their cue from our Fijian friends, who settled themselves comfortably into our cockpit and proceeded to devour their share with their hands from one large bowl, sucking and slurping at the bodies, heads, fins, tails, and bones till there was nothing left but the juicy broth. This they consumed by passing the bowl around and sipping loudly, each in turn. Clean-up was simple that afternoon.

On another occasion, a group from Nabuna Village came to our boat to spend an evening. We drank grog and rum and told stories long into the night. They insisted on providing the entertainment, too, in the form of Fijian Music. We were excited about this: I had visions of ukuleles and drums and rhythmic handclapping. Instead, one of them produced a CD from a stained and sandy bag and asked me to put it into our player. I could barely tell which side was up, so mutilated was this once shiny disc. In no time, however, our new friends were swaying and beating their hands to the reggae-like music, wholly unaware of the scratches, pauses, and skips in the line-up. Our new friends were happily humming along to "their"

music — which ranged from UB40 to a local band who had recorded their music in Koro Island's recording studio — and they were proud to be sharing with us.

This led me to reflect on the pragmatism of these islanders. Everything they do is supremely practical. They make grog bowls out of old mooring balls and recycle large squares of wrapping paper for interior wall decorations. They have no use for shoes — Chief Watsoni of Makogai told us that he moved back to his island from the city of Levuka (a town of about 3000 residents) because, among other things, he was tired of wearing shoes (he tossed aside his watch too). They even reuse old DVDs and CDs, making them into shiny adornments on their trees. Furniture is deemed unnecessary — all major activities happen on the mat, either inside or outside, as evidenced by the permanently bruised, swollen, and calloused talus, a telltale sign of a lifetime of sitting cross-legged. A clear indication that we are from a different world.

Indeed, everything about the way these islanders move sets us apart. They seem deliberately slow in speech and contemplative to a degree that tries even the most patient of souls, but can climb a coconut palm before you can even utter the short syllables, “yes, please.” We notice that even our children, who are fairly adept at swinging, swimming, and scaling vertical things, look ponderous and awkward in the presence of Fijian children.

But I do not mean to paint a single-sided, romantic picture of the “simple island life,” and your typical First World-Third World dichotomy would be misleading. Fijians have whatever 21st century technology they can get their hands on: cell phones, radios, televisions. They eagerly accept any movies we pass along. They rely on diesel-powered generators until 9 o'clock at night, after which the cell phone becomes even more important because of its accessory flashlight. Yet even though we come from a technologically advanced place, it is not *our technology* that draws

them to us. What interests them about us is that we are *culturally and socially different*. And they welcome us into their lives precisely because of that difference.

I find myself reflecting on Robert Dean Frisbie's letters to his friend James Norman Hall, written in the early 1940s.[1] Frisbie lived during the 1920s as the only white man on the island of Puka-Puka (in the Cook Islands) for many years, having married an islander and raised a family there. He spoke the native language, swam on the backs of turtles, and understood the strange and complicated ceremonies constructed around island beliefs. He was *immersed* in island culture. And yet he understood that he was not one of them, and that he should not try to be, for the special nature of his relationship to Puka Pukans was defined by his very difference. "A white man in these islands must not go native," wrote Frisbie:

It is a pleasant thought to dally with in civilization, a disastrous one to put into practice. When a white man goes native, the people brand him as being no better than themselves. Now, probably, he *is* no better; but if he goes native he will not be as good, and he will soon find that the natives look down on him. Why shouldn't they? He cannot compete with them in their own culture. He cannot catch fish as well as they, climb coconut palms, plant taro, catch a great turtle in the open sea — he can perform none of their tasks as well as they do. If he tries to do these things he makes himself ridiculous. Plainly, he is inferior to the natives.

I can relate to that. When it comes to reef fishing, tree climbing, or even just hiking around the island, we get sorely beaten every time (even with our rubberized protective footwear). We are not bendy like they are. We have a great big spear gun, but they catch more fish. We *feel* ridiculous quite often, even in the most modest challenges. We haven't even attempted catching a great turtle.

But even as we might feel awkward or ridiculous on their turf, we also sense a mutual respect, something Frisbie observed, too:

Natives want to be proud of 'their' white man, as they call an epicurean like myself. They are disappointed if their white man does not live up to expectations. They want to admire him, brag about him, serve him in the grand manner.

Now this doesn't mean that we have to flaunt our western ways — they are revealed even without us trying. But it's true that islanders are just as curious about our ways as we are about theirs. We “brag” about our encounters to our friends back home, and they do the same. We noticed the gleam in the eye when, one after another, our new friends took turns at the helm when we sailed to a nearby anchorage together. Later during our visit, Mele confided that they usually do not board the visiting yachts in their bay, that we are the first people who stayed long enough to get to know them and invite them to our home. I can understand why this was special for them; just as we like visiting their homes and seeing their lives up close and personal, they were given the chance to peer into ours, too. We opened our home to them, which broke down one barrier between us. But at the same time, I'm sure we nevertheless “lived up to expectations” in our *kaivalagi* ways. I liked the reciprocity here, and our extended visits with each other allowed them and us to view the “otherness” of our lives firsthand.

Frisbie chronicled the colorful differences between his own heritage and the native culture he adopted as his own. But he also wrote about the *meaning* in the exchanges across cultures. He pointed out that islanders' pride in “their” white man is a reflection on their own self-worth:

...it is of the utmost importance that a white man never ridicule the natives; never sneer at them or in any way humiliate them. If he

does this, he is lost. He must remember that, in the last analysis, they are not glorifying him but glorifying in themselves.

I feel an immense sense of well being from our encounters in South Pacific villages, and I wonder if it's because I sense on a rather basic level that we are each seeing the other culture, extending our respect, while also recognizing the good in our own. Our time in Fiji has been a *cultural exchange* in the best sense of the word. We are all a little richer from these interactions. Our close proximity to each other has laid open a path to appreciating another culture while at the same time honoring our own.

Frisbie's writing is of course dated, and our brief encounters with island culture do not compare with his nearly native existence. But I like the overall sentiment here, and I think about it every time I crumple myself awkwardly on the floor or instinctively reach for a spoon when I'm meant to drink from the bowl. I feel silly and inwardly admonish myself for my cultural clumsiness. I am constantly aware of my "privileged" heritage and tread lightly on what I perceive to be fragile Fijian turf. I often find the sharing of western wealth around these parts distasteful, dripping in a kind of cultural imperialism and superiority that I try my best not to perpetuate. I even shy away from the typical *kaivalagi's* predilection for colorful *sulus* and tattoos and flowers behind the ear — I recognize it's an attractive and easy way to express appreciation for something beautiful, but I also perceive it as a kind of cute fetishization that makes me wary. I don't want to see island life as a novelty for me to wrap up and take home.

But then I think that perhaps what Frisbie was saying was this: that just as these encounters are special to us (and we proudly proclaim it with our flowers and *sulus* and tattoos), they are special to the islanders too. Because we are *different*. Because I ask them about their history and they ask me about my family. Because we wonder about the Good Friday Coup and they never wonder about

any leader outside their village. Because we can't remember all their children's names and they say, a little sadly, "only two?" when they meet our daughters. Because we ask to hear Fijian radio and they turn it on and play Michael Jackson. Because my five year old asks why they are brown and they in turn want to pinch her soft pink cheeks and stroke her straw-blonde hair. Because they think it's a pity we don't have cassava and taro where we come from, and I realize I favor a life filled with books over all the taro fields in Fiji. Because I regret that I can't climb a coconut tree, and still prefer using a spoon to sip my soup.

And because they boil bananas and I fry them. I can still hear Louisa's good-natured guffawing as she passes the plate of fried banana fritters on to Manini, and then Kalesi, and then Liti. Each time they tell about the crazy *kaivalagi* cooking up the bananas in a pan, they laugh harder.

I don't admit that I eat those with a spoon, too.

[1] All quotations from Robert Dean Frisbie's letters taken from James Norman Hall, *The Forgotten One and Other True Tales of the South Seas*.

