

Fijian Art: Traditional Roots, Contemporary Expression, and a Source of Livelihood

Emma Scanlan  
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Advisor: Jakki Leota-Ete  
Academic Director: Taomi Tapu-Qiliho  
**Abstract**

This research study presents a comprehensive overview of the art scene in Fiji and explores the ways in which art in a small scale society acts as a vehicle for expression and social change. The term “art” is one that is not easily defined as it is highly personal and subjective to artist and patron alike. There has been a cross-cultural and ongoing debate in trying to answer to question “what is art?”. However despite this it is unanimous in belief by those with an affinity for the arts, that the expression of a society’s people in any form creates link to cultural heritage and a sense of identity. Viewing a society through an artistic lens allows for a pure look into the shared ideologies of a culture. Through familiarizing myself with Fiji’s art scene and local artists, I have formulated a series of conclusions remarking on this sector. I have broken up my research and paper into three distinct sections:

- 1) Traditional Fijian and Pacific art
- 2) Fijian Art Today: A look into the Vasu Exhibition
- 3) The Flip Side: Art as Livelihood- Notions of tourism art and legitimacy

While each section describes a different aspect of the art culture within Fiji, it works overall to present a picture of how art is transcending boundaries in the rapidly changing society. I work to explain how art has a variety of functions in a small scale society like Fiji- as a cultural reminder of one’s heritage, as a way to express contemporary ideas and issues, and as a way to bring in an income. I come to conclude that while art is an extraordinary way to extend oneself, there are issues related to exploitation of the culture, compromised integrity of one’s work and authenticity that come in tandem with being a developing nation heavily dependent on the tourism industry. It is my hope that throughout this paper, one will gain a fresh perspective on the variety of ways in which

art is utilized by both artist and patron, and the significance it holds for a country beginning to come to terms with its quickly changing social order.

### **Contacts of Resources**

Fiji Museum  
Ratu Cakobau Road, Suva  
[www.fijimuseum.org.fj](http://www.fijimuseum.org.fj)  
(679) 331 5944

CreatiVITI Gallery  
Queens Road, Nakava, NadI  
[Creativiti@connect.com.fj](mailto:Creativiti@connect.com.fj)  
(679) 672 7070

Oceania Center for Arts & Culture  
USP's Laucala Campus, Suva  
331 3900

*To my family, who nourish my creative growth, and to anyone striving to reach out and make an impact through their artwork in today's world.*

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## **Introduction**

“A man’s art is the essential expression of himself and his society, his record for the world to see; his communication down through the ages of his innermost feelings, his joys, his sorrows, his passions, his wonders, of all the most refined and treasured-up tangible things that set him apart

from his fellow beasts and make him a man.” (Dodd, Polynesian Art {1969:31})

One of the most defining aspects of a culture is its art. It can come in the form of a series of fluid, movements as in a dance, through spoken word or poetry, in paintings, sculpture and song. Regardless of the form it takes, a culture’s art is an expression of its people and a strong identifying marker. Therefore, viewing a society through an artistic lens is often a useful tool in gaining insight on issues that affect the artist and culture as a whole. While this artistic-based methodology of cultural exposure can surely be done in any society, the findings are more poignant if the culture is in a period of rapid change and self discovery. Fiji, the socially developing and multicultural nation that it is, is in the very midst of redefining itself. There has been an abundance of very recent history stemming from the nation’s three coups accounting for and adding to issues of racial divide, gendered tension and issues related to cultural belonging and heritage. As an art history major with an affinity for feminist art, and more importantly art with a “cause“, it seemed only natural for me to view Fiji through an artistic lens. It is my belief that art is one of the only pure ways a person is able to express themselves; issues for the artist are addressed without hesitation, fear of judgment and with passion and vigor. However, throughout my research it became increasingly more evident that for some of the contemporary artists within the arts scene in Fiji, “art for art’s sake” is not always the case- it is a source of income, a livelihood- something all-consuming in a developing nation like Fiji.

Through this study I would like to present a variety of perspectives from within the art scene in hopes to shed light on how art may function as a vehicle for social change and expression in Fiji. In an effort to set up the reader with beginning background

knowledge of Fijian art and then move to issues related to that of contemporary art and the tourism scene, I have divided the paper into the following sections:

- 1) Traditional Fijian and Pacific art
- 2) Fijian Art Today: A look into the Vasu Exhibition
- 3) The Flip Side: Art as Livelihood- Notions of tourism art and legitimacy

First, I will explore traditional Fijian arts and handicrafts which are the foundation for the culture's current art scene and an invaluable historical touchstone for Fiji, in addition to being utilized today in an effort to preserve historical and cultural meaning. Secondly, I will present a view from within the contemporary art scene, focusing on Fiji's first all women's exhibition- 'Vasu- Pacific Women of Power'. This section will explore how art in Fiji has been able to serve as social commentary, a network of support, and an expression of contemporary ideas. I will bring in issues of identity here- both related to notions of being a woman or a Fijian/ Pacific islander, and how their artwork has definite roots in traditional style further serving as an identifying marker. Lastly, I will touch upon the reality of art work as a means of financial support for artists in Fiji. The notion of Fiji as a small scale society and the fact that it is heavily dependent upon the tourism industry in order to sustain itself is the backbone-theme to the third and final section of this report. I will explore how artists conform to idealistic and generalized "outsider" views of Fiji as an "exotic" and primitive land in order to appeal to tourists and make a profit. In this last section my concern will be to focus on the artist's intent and its effects on a small scale society like Fiji- is it preserving its cultural heritage, or preventing it from moving forward?

Fiji's dense and layered multiculturalism combined with its ever increasing pace of social

change makes for riveting time to explore the arts scene. It is my hope that throughout this report I will have opened up a new way to think about art in the Fijian context and how it is serving the artists, their community and culture.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Bure*: Fijian term for a tradition style house

*Bure Kalou*: Fijian term for the home of a Priest

Candlenut Tree: Tree found in the Pacific, utilized for its oils and extracts to dye the *masi* cloth

*Dakua* Tree: A tree found in the Pacific, often burned and used for its soot to stain *masi* cloth

Iconography: The interpretation of symbols within images

*Masi* Cloth: A stylized bark cloth made from the mulberry tree

Non-utilitarian: Designed for aesthetics and not practical use

Pandanus Leaf: A leaf found in the Pacific used within mat weaving

*Voivoi*: Fijian term for the Pandanus leaf

*Sevuseuv*: Ceremonial preparation and consumption of *yaqona*

*Tapa* Cloth: Term to describe *masi* cloth outside of Fiji

Traditional: Customary or habitual (for the intents and purposes of this study, in reference to Fiji pre-European impact)

Utilitarian: Designed for practical use

*Vasu*: Fijian term for one's maternal lineage

*Waqatabus*: Fijian term for a double hulled canoe

*Yaqona*: The pulverized root of the *Yaqona* tree mixed with water creating a narcotic beverage, Fiji's "national drink"

### **Methodology**

Initially my objective for this paper was to examine Fiji's art scene and contextualize the production of art work with what current issues of Fijian society exist and are pertinent to the artists. I wanted to take a look at what sort of a sect there was for artists in Fiji, how through creative efforts and collaboration they were able to use art as a vehicle for expression, social change and outreach, and as a way to preserve through continuation of traditional artistic methods, a cultural heritage. What I learned however was that the reality for fine artists here in Fiji is that there has been (until recently with

the Vasu exhibition) an almost nonexistent sphere for artists to revel in. In Suva the gallery or available space for one to showcase artwork simply does not exist- and the one that had been in operation quickly closed down due to lack of financial stability. Ask any anthropologist, sociologist, historian or enthused supporter of the arts, and they will tell you that a people's culture has its foundation laid in the arts- be it fine, performing, or musical. It seems, then, that in order to preserve, honor, and fully understand a culture's traditional existence and set of basic principles one would be quite interested in funding and showing interest in the arts. Unfortunately, the opposite is often the case, and craftsmen and artists alike often fall through the cracks of society in terms of having the support and means of stability they need to make a profitable and secure lifestyle for themselves. Thus, when I saw an advertisement for the *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* Exhibition being held at the Fiji Museum in Suva, I decided to utilize it as a starting point for my research. Surely where there is artwork being exhibited, there are artists willing to engage in a dialogue with me about their compositions, their motivation, and experience.

After having visited the exhibition on several different occasions once with the company of my advisor and one of the co-curators of the show, Jakki Leota-Ete, I discovered the real groundbreaking significance the exhibition had for the women who had partaken in it. (In the second section of the paper which discusses *Vasu* at length, I will go into detail about the collection and its participants, specifically how monumental such an opportunity for women in Fiji it was). Some thematic similarities that most of the art had in common were as follows- a recalling of a traditional Pacific heritage, a commentary or expression spanning a variety of contemporary and historically rooted

issues, and/or a visual nod to a potential tourist's passing glance.

It was from here that I decided to evaluate art work based on these three cornerstones of thought process and production, and discover how it affected the artist's from the beginning to completion of an art piece. Because I was familiar with the work in the Vasu exhibition (and as it was some of the only exhibited art around Suva in a formal gallery setting) I chose to focus on artists from that collection, and picked two to interview. Marita Brodie of Suva and Maria Rova of Nadi represented opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of locale, technique and compositional style. I traveled to both interviewees homes, with the opportunity to view original works and observe the process by which each woman created her pieces. The interviews were helpful in the sense that it enabled me to get a first hand perspective into what life is like for a Pacific-island artist, and what conflicting points of interest arise due to this lifestyle in a small scale society.

In terms of limitations, I had difficulty finding an abundance of scholarly research on purely Fijian arts. Many of the articles, books and journals I utilized were broad in the sense they dealt with traditional art of Oceania, and not exclusively Fiji. In addition, there is very little documentation on the art market and contemporary artists within Fiji, so most of the research I conducted and findings I based my conclusions around were from the interviews I had and a few choice resources. Fiji's art scene is up and coming, so the process of writing a research paper on a topic that has barely been researched proved a bit challenging. That being said, I hope that this study will aid in further and future research, and perhaps begin to expand the sphere that exists for artists.

### **Traditional Fijian and Pacific Art**

It is critical to have a basic knowledge and understanding of traditional

Pacific/Fijian arts for two reasons as will be discussed in this paper: to have a grasp on what traditional Fijian culture is rooted in artistically, and to be able to visually recognize these elements in contemporary art as a means of interpretation. The verdict is out on what a universal understanding of “art” really is. It is a highly personal, subjective and loaded question, continuously up for debate and discussion.

As Anderson brings up in Art in Small Scale Societies, a deciding factor in the distinction between art versus non-art lies in the categories of nonutilitarian and utilitarian- whether or not the objects are created to serve a purpose or aid in the completion of a task.

(Anderson, 9). As the following brief introduction to traditional Fijian arts will show, much of what I have deemed art falls into the utilitarian context, they are functional, however there is a specific care taken and affinity for the ways in which they are created.

Anderson also helps to bridge the gap between the art and non-art sector by listing four properties he believes art to possess. They are as follows: 1) Culturally Significant

Meaning- the objects represent something relevant, reminiscent or telling of its culture.

2) Style- “styles are shared traditions within cultures but they are ultimately distinctive to time and place” (Anderson, 11) thus the objects share a similar quality as defined and

influenced by its culture. 3) Sensuous, Affecting Medium- “Art is often beautiful, but even when it does not prompt a pleasurable sensation it nevertheless engenders powerful

feeling of one sort or another” (Anderson, 11). 4) Special Skill- something that is “art” as

defined according to these four terms would then be created by someone who possesses an ability that sets them apart from the rest of society. That being said, the following is a

condensed overview of what I have chosen to include for this paper as traditional Fijian arts. This will familiarize the reader with the traditional artistic roots of the culture and

allow for interpretation of contemporary art and issues present within society.

For the intents and purposes of this paper, the word traditional is used when describing what art was like within the Fiji islands and Pacific around the time of first European contact- before much of a Western influence had set in.

It has been described that Fiji's art was "almost always practical rather than purely aesthetic" and "never a 'thing apart'" as it is in the West today" (Ewins, 2). We see this best throughout their material culture. It should be noted that the production of Fiji's traditional material culture at the time of pre-contact and still today was dominated by women. Fiji's paternal and male dominated society reinforced the gendered notion of craft production. Women took care to create what is now essentially stigmatized as the "feminine" crafts (like weaving and *masi* making) while men engaged themselves with the more macho of tasks, like the creating of the *waqa tabus* (double hulled canoe). Following is a background to those traditional art forms, broken down into these categories: *masi*, pottery, *voivoi* weaving, and wood carving, architecture and body art.

### ***Masi***

Perhaps one of the most inherently Fijian art forms is that of the *masi*, a stylized bark cloth made from the mulberry tree. It is utilized in other areas of the South Pacific as well, and referred to as *tapa* cloth. *Masi* traditionally was an integral part of day to day life for Fijians and was developed out of the need to produce clothing for men, women and children alike. (Troxler, 3). Besides clothing, *masi* cloth served a variety of other functions. It was used within *bures* as a way to provide partitions while simultaneously providing decoration. It was such a staple of traditional Fijian life, that it developed strong cultural significance and was integrated into social ceremonies. In

traditional times when a child was born their first encounter is with that of *masi* cloth. (Troxler, 8). As a ritualistic practice, the umbilical cord was wrapped in the *masi*. It is also used in coming of age ceremonies, marriages, for trading, gift exchange, as a sacred part of worship (the *masi* strip that hung down in the shrine in traditional *bure kalou* (home of the priest/house of the gods) was what god descended upon while the Priest held contact with it with the worship place).

This is one of the Fijian art forms that is surely dominated by women. It is a skill that is passed down from female to female, and continues to operate that way today as well. It is made by having the bark of a mulberry tree scraped, rolled and soaked and scraped again to obtain the pure white inner bark. This bark is then beaten in order to stretch it out, and to be combined with other sheets of *masi*. After several rounds of the layering of the *masi* and after having dried in the sun, the cloth is created. To decorate, it was traditionally stained or smoked as well as painted to obtain its coloring, but today is most often stenciled. Stenciling often carries symbolic meaning, different styles and pattern combinations held different significance. When the *masi* is painted, the paints used (ranging from rust colored to pink and black) are made from an infusion of candlenut and mangrove bark, red clay and soot from the *dakua* tree.

### **Pottery**

First introduced to Fiji by the Lapita people, Fijian pottery is unique in its method of production which yields a trademarked Fijian style (Tausie, 11). The clay is beaten into shape by wooden paddles of all shapes and sizes, while the form is held into place by a pebble anvil, or steady holder. The pots are laid out to dry and then fired outdoors on a blaze of coconut husks, varnished as a way to provide a protective sealant with extract taken from the *dakua* tree. Another functional item, pottery was created for a means of

storage- most importantly water vessels. Much like the *masi* cloth, the utilitarian item was also decorated with a variety of different markings, giving it an aesthetic quality while it was still first and foremost an item of functionality.

### **Weaving**

Pandanus-leaf (known in Fijian as *voivoi*) weaving was also done primarily by women. The tradition of once again passing the skill of weaving from woman to woman yielded a production of hats, mats and baskets. The leaves of the Pandanus tree are cut and laid indoors to cure, stripped of spiny edges, boiled and then dried. To blacken them traditionally they were buried in mud and then boiled again. Once the leaves are completely dried and colored if necessary, they are made flexible to allow weaving by scraping them with shells. They are then stripped into 1-2 cm width strands and woven.

### **Wood carving**

Wood carvings are one of the material culture crafts which are still largely kept alive due to the tourist trade and not for their practical use in today's culture, as opposed to *masi* cloth and weaving skill, where they still serve a relevant function. Nonetheless, wood carvings are a traditional Fijian art and originated to serve utilitarian purposes- mainly as spears, clubs, bowls. Wood carving is also responsible for the creation of important objects utilized in ceremonies, such as the *tanoa*, a drinking bowl used as a part of *sevusevu* ceremonies where *yaqona* is consumed.

### **Architecture**

The traditional architecture of Fiji can be summed up in one main form, that of *bures*. Preceding the age of concrete and brick, these thatched dwellings were traditionally low to the ground, rectangular, and composed of timber poles, split bamboo

and grass/coconut leaves. Decorative effects were achieved through use of the dyed cord lashed in stylized patterns around the bamboo. Bures were cheap to construct as the materials were local and readily available. The know-how of production was one passed down from father to son, thus marking one of the few skill trades rooted in masculinity.

### **Body Art**

Tattooing and face painting in Fiji was a practice mainly done to males. The parts of their bodies that were most frequently chosen for tattooing were ones that were exposed and visible to others. Women were seldom tattooed, or less frequently so as compared to men. When a woman was tattooed, it was on the buttocks, upper thigh and legs- areas less shown. There is also a historical tie to indigenous Fijian body paint which was done on both men and women, on a daily basis in a series of stripes, zigzags and spots as a way to promote perhaps social hierarchy within a village, and for aesthetic purposes. The paint was made from natural bases- turmeric, burnt candlenut, fungus spores, and charcoal. In the even of special ceremonies or war, the face painting patterns took on more complex designs, often carrying specific meanings.

### **Fijian Art Today: A look into the *Vasu* Exhibition**

There is no doubt that what people regard as a “traditional” Fiji, (Fiji pre-colonial contact) is a much different reality than what exists as the current culture. British rule, missionaries and the rampant spread of Christianity, indentured labor and the introduction of Indian culture into the Fijian scene are all components to the rich diversity of what makes of Fiji today. Fiji has come a long way socially, technologically and culturally since the days of “traditional” Fijian life, however, there is still a strong connection to

and nostalgia for that “inherent” and “pure” Fijian way of life. Perhaps it is because of the relative new freedom the country has relished in since 1970 that creates a sense of reinforced desire to display one’s inherent cultural identity. Identity through expression in addition to expression of contemporary social issues is one of the ways art has served as both the artist and patron. It has always been my understanding that contemporary art was the artist expressing what they felt compelled to convey to a greater public, and that audience reaped the benefits of that idea in the sense that they became a part of something greater, a unified whole. The flip side to this however, which we will discuss in the final section, deals with the “what if” the artist’s work is compromised in terms of its content in order to fulfill an ulterior motive, such as profit. For this section however, I will focus on contemporary art here in Fiji through examining the *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* exhibition. I will explain the role this kind of art plays in social change and empowerment, and how despite the current modernism of the exhibition, many of its aesthetic roots are in Traditional Pacific style, harking back to that notion of displaying identity.

Truly a breakthrough in the Pacific art world and certainly for Fiji, *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* was the first all woman exhibition ever for the country. The exhibition took place this fall, at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture from the 24<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> of September, and then at the Fiji Museum through the month of October. The exhibition featured 46 women ranging in age from 18 to mid 60’s, 32 of whom are Fiji based while the other 14 are overseas in neighboring Pacific countries. The idea for the exhibition had been in the works for years, and finally came to fruition showcasing a variety of genres: dance, short film, print making-pottery, sculpture, multi media, poetry, and

music. The term *vasu* is a Fijian word, meaning “maternal lineage”. Today in modern context the word *vasu* has negative connotations; used in some spheres as derogatory slang for those with mixed heritage. It was one of the intents of this exhibition and its controversial title to “reclaim” the word and in essence the notion of female empowerment in the traditionally paternally rooted origin culture of Fiji. The concept of the exhibition was to provide a ‘safe space’ for women to express themselves in a venue that was completely female dominated, a notion almost foreign to women in the Pacific, as it is such a paternal society. Through uniting 40-plus women and providing them with a literal space to display their creative efforts yielded confidence, and with confidence comes power. As so appropriated quoted in the curatorial essay within the *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* catalogue, “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group remains together” (Hannah Arendt 1972). This was exactly the hoped outcome, a “strength in numbers” mindset, a women’s collaborative to join forces and express issues that were pertinent to them, and no doubt other women. “{This exhibition} is a very significant development for our region not only because it champions women’s development, but also because it draws attention to the importance of Art as a form of expression for Pacific women,” (Konai Helu Tbaman, *Vasu* Catalogue, 8). The themes of the exhibition were varied, but all tied to a general notion of promoting unity amongst women and addressing contemporary social issues that effect them. At the foundation of identifying as a Pacific woman is identifying and having pride in being a Pacific islander. This is at the heart of almost every piece in a different way, most easily seen through the use of traditional Fijian and Pacific

iconographic qualities to the contemporary works. The intent of the exhibition was to in a sense transcend ethnic boundaries and work to promote overall unity amongst Pacific island women. As described in the exhibition catalogue, “The work featured in this open-themed exhibition and catalogue explores sexuality, environment, militarism, spirituality, displacement and mixed heritage. Art is portrayed here as a personal and political statement,” (*Vasu Catalogue*, 11).

I had the opportunity to visit the collection at the Fiji museum. What stood out was an overwhelming shared voice among a series of multi media pieces that had a unique story to tell and message to convey. Images like Luisa Tora’s “These boots are made for walking” (2008), an image of a black female silhouette donning combat boots clearly exerts power and strength. Margaret S Aull’s “*Taki*” (2008) is a collage of sorts (acrylic on masi) depicting a mix of Fijian words and images- “*taki, taki taki*”, an image of a wooden mask, flower petals, and sporadic red, spray paint markings crossed over images. The composition is chaotic, forcing the viewer to internalize the words, their meanings and juxtapose them with the images. It is without a doubt an observation and comment on the contemporary social issues mixed with a root in traditional Fijian lifestyle.

While many of the pieces in the exhibition that have strong contemporary social messages, there are others that focus more on the visual recalling of old traditional styles. This still is still a voicing of opinion, just in tandem with making a statement related to notions of belonging and strength of culture. Ann Tarte’s “*Liku*” (2008) is an acrylic on canvas painting of the backside of a dark skinned woman with intricate traditional Fijian tattoo markings on her buttocks. Mereoni Mataika’s “Fruits of Life: Sanity” (2008) has

distinct *masi* cloth patterns as the background of her canvas.

It was obvious after my first visit to the *Vasu* exhibit that this was a tremendous breakthrough for women in Fijian society. It had provided them with the space to comfortably voice issues of relevance while simultaneously creating a safety net of like-minded individuals who could offer support and stability. I had the fortune to interview two women who had work showcased in the exhibition, Marita Brodie and Maria Rova.

Marita Brodie, a South African born woman who has been living in Fiji since 1979, is a self-taught artist who began oil painting in 1997. Her home in Toorak was a shrine to her paintings (much to her chagrin, as she explained lack of display space in and around Suva forces her to hang them mainly in her home). Her works are as diverse in style, content and media as a Van Gogh is from a Monet. From oil paintings, watercolors, to pieces made completely of shredded leather, Marita pushes the boundaries and keeps things interesting for herself, painting what “she feels that day”. Many of her pieces are traditionally Fijian in theme- images of idyllic village scenes, *bures*, *masi* patterns, and the alluring nude Pacific woman. She explained the roots of women’s importance in the traditional Pacific art scene and attributes that fact to one of the reasons why women in the Pacific are able to control this sphere. It isn’t so much that women *artists* are subordinate in an art culture, it’s more that women in Pacific culture in general are subordinate to men. She explained that art didn’t fit in with a Pacific man’s “macho” agenda, and that a small sector (like wood carving) of the arts is what stereotypically and acceptably exists for men. The *Vasu: Pacific Women of Power* exhibition provided Marita with a space and group of people with whom she could share artistic ideas and collaborate with. She called the exhibition “progressive” and was thrilled and honored

to have been a part of it. “I am now really home. I am now a part of Fiji”, she said.

Maria Rova is of American origin but has been living in Fiji since 1989. While living and working as a freelance visual artist in Nadi, Maria and her husband have been helping to jumpstart and stabilize a community arts center CreatiVITI (formerly known as the Western Arts & Crafts Society) since 1993. While simultaneously working to keep CreatiVITI afloat, she is creating her own artwork. Silk painting with a *masi* background is her signature style and “what sells“. She was, like Marita, quite honored at the invitation to exhibit in the *Vasu* show. “Although not born here, Fiji has become my home; I have lived in this place longer than any other. The rich cultural traditions that are part of my children’s heritage are major source of inspiration to me”, she remarks. As far as creating work in a space delineated for women, she was thrilled that the opportunity had arisen and considered it a benchmark and a giant leap forward for women in Fijian society. “I am looking forward to what will come next, as it seems like the beginning of something great”.

While issues of reclaiming a feminist ideal and power within Fiji was certainly at the forefront of many of the pieces within the exhibition, it held another significant for Maria and Marita. It seemed first and foremost important for both women to express a sense of cultural identity, connection with and affinity for the Fijian way of life. I speculate that because neither woman are of Fijian “blood”, they choose to represent the culture through their works in the traditional manner that they have, because this one of the ways that they have connected with the spirit and culture that is Fiji. By acknowledging that artwork is an extension of oneself and by creating artwork that is a traditional in the Fijian or Pacific stylistic sense, these women are in the process of self

identification, which was one of the principal motives for the *Vasu* show. This then supports the idea of contemporary artwork as a means of expression, even if the subject matter is rooted in something of traditional value. The *Vasu* exhibition and the notion of an all female collective display was a leap forward in Fijian society, proving the ever changing attitude and turn toward progressive thought that Fiji has come to embrace.

### **The Flip Side: Art as Livelihood- Notions of tourism art and legitimacy**

In this final section of the report, I will work to explain another reality for many artists- making a livelihood out of their art. I will work to define Fiji in terms of a small scale society in combination with the tourism industry that Fiji has embraced as a means of financial support and stability for the country. Through talking with Marita and Maria I was able to obtain an insider's view of the tourist art market in Fiji and how this has had an impact on their lives as artists. Some questions I presented to them were what conflicts of interest arise when catering to the tourist audience, and how the integrity of the art is compromised or affected? In the end, I obtained a varied perspective on this issue, highlighting the complexities that lay beneath it all.

When one visits the handicraft market in Fiji, what stands out is an overwhelming collection of traditional Fijian artifacts- *voivoi* mats, *tanoas*, wood carvings. I can even recall seeing a carved wooden mask that had a striking resemblance to the style of east African wood carving I've studied previously- surely something not inherent to Fiji or Fijian tradition or culture. These "cultural artifacts" are targeting a tourist audience and are created for the purpose of sale. Some of the crafts are surely rooted in a traditional Fijian past- the mats and fans, *masi* cloth, pottery, etc. However others perpetuate the stereotype of a "primitive culture" something often times associated

with small scale societies like Fiji. Fiji has an air of mystique to it. Its small size and deserted location in the middle of the South Pacific certainly aids to the curiosity and inexplicableness felt by those who encounter it. Combined with this is a history many people generalize and don't fully grasp, but associate with a past of savageness, cannibalism and an untouched and virginal society separated from the outside world and unaffected. Of course, this couldn't be further from what is the reality for Fiji today. While yes, it is a developing country in the midst of transition, it is a far cry from being an uncivilized unsophisticated. However, these ideals of a "primitive" culture are what stick and are often times reinforced unintentionally- case in point, the masks which have no connection to Fijian heritage whatsoever.

The notion of Fiji as a small scale society means it is self contained- small in population size, there is a societal emphasis on and a connection to the land, and many of its people are supported by what is around them, there isn't a lot of dependence on outside resources. Like most small scale societies, the change "much more slowly than Western/larger scale societies". However, there is an incorrect and assumed/stereotype that small scale societies are "changeless" (Anderson, 33). In tandem with this comes romantic ideals about "primitive" culture, unaffected, timeless and often referred to as "traditional".

The problem with the notion of "traditional art"- what is meant when thinking "traditional" usually comes along with this connotation of unchanging, static and unaffected art form (Tausie, viii). However, societies are constantly changing and evolving as is the art work. "For what may be traditional today may not necessarily be tomorrow" (Tausie, viii). In an outsiders in perspective on a culture (I.e. a tourists view

in on a foreign small scale society like Fiji) one may assume or expect “traditional” culture- in the arts and otherwise.

The tricky issues here is, however, how does one represent a “traditional” idea or affinity for their heritage without completely misrepresenting Fiji? Certainly not every painting with a hint of *masi* stylistic-design or depicting a village scene is being done to enhance the likelihood of a sale. The question at hand is at what point does the artwork no longer benefit the country’s image? There are many aspects to art produced in small scale societies that play to this outsider’s view of such a country. An artist will create what sells, and if what is selling are pieces that misrepresent the status of a country and its people, I believe they are doing a disservice. What good comes from perpetuating a stale idea of a country trying to make its way in a fast paced world? It is in my opinion that art created with this intent compromises its integrity and holds the country back.

Related to this issue of art as defined by economics I quote another woman who took part in the *Vasu* exhibition, Ema Tavola. “If good art is defined by that which sells, all art that doesn’t measure up against the established benchmark can and is undervalued and missing from what contemporary visual arts representation of Fiji’s complex socio-cultural landscape”. In essence, if an artist is creating only with intent to sell, they have to play to likes of the buyer; in the case of Fiji, tourists from other countries. If what the tourist wants to buy is a serene and idealized image of Fiji and not something that speaks to the current socio-cultural relevance of the time, what good comes of it for either party? Who is fooling whom?

There are no easy answers or remedies to this issue, which I found particularly disheartening as I wrapped up my research. While exhibitions like that of the *Vasu* are

tremendous leaps forward for a country like Fiji, there is still the reality that many of those artists create for a living, and at times do not have much of a choice financially.

While interviewing Marita Brodie and Maria Rova, the issue of tourist art and authenticity was a large part of our discussions. Each woman had a different take on the situation. Marita, based out of Suva where there is less of a market for tourist art buyers had a different perspective than Maria who is based out of Nadi, an area frequented by tourists. I will describe each woman's view point in an effort to explain some of the controversy and differing attitudes that exist within the art scene here in Fiji.

Marita Brodie was sitting on her porch, paintbrush at the easel, when I came to interview her that morning. She was at work and that was her studio- the small deck space which became even smaller when she drew the rain flaps down to protect her work during the shower passing overhead. Cat in lap, coffee cup in one hand and paintbrush in the other, we talked. I asked about the art scene in Suva, and what the opportunities for an artist in the area were like to exhibit and sell their work. She seemed unenthusiastic and somewhat cynical about it all. Suva isn't really a place that attracts a wide range of potential clients looking to buy Fijian art work. Her home is proof of this; there is literally no wall unadorned with her own work, and it is not for lack of skill or ability! Marita is regularly exhibited at the ANZ sponsored Arts Club exhibition and the National fine art exhibition, both in which she has won a few awards. However, as Suva is not known for its art buying clientele, most all she can do is exhibit it, receive some praise, and take it home. This is not to say that she does not sell any work at all, she remarks that most of the buyers are ex-patriots. This being said, selling her artwork is not the main source of income for her household. She explains that while it is an added bonus to

have some revenue with the sporadic pieces she sells, she and her husband are dependant on his job and the income he generates to support the household.

Despite all of this, I asked her if she ever felt the need to play to the eyes of the tourist- if her compositions were dictated in terms of subject matter and style in order to enhance the chance of a sale. “I don’t need to paint Fiji to be a good artist. I paint what I feel that day. Maybe I feel like painting the female form because of its symmetry and forgiving curves. I do that until I want to do something else”.

A week or so later, I took the time to visit Maria Rova, a freelance artist living in Nadi. Maria has a unique relationship with the art market and local indigenous Fijian population. These are spheres in which she tries to make a living through while simultaneously giving back to the community and working towards preserving ingenious Fijian art traditions. While her artwork started as a “kitchen table affair”, it has in recent years bloomed into a way of life for Maria and her family. When the company her husband was working for went through a difficult time, Maria remarks, “That’s when the paint brushes came out in earnest! With children to feed and a mortgage to pay, there has been a lot of midnight oil burnt”.

Maria’s craft is working with silk painting. She creates an outlined image onto pure white silk, and then later fills in the blocks with special dyes. At first this was a solo-affair, but once her artwork took off and attracted a fan base so did the need to produce more than was capable by Maria on her own. It was a step forward for her newly budding business. She expanded the bottom level of her home in Nadi into a three-room studio with two full-time assistants and several part time apprentices. Both Maria and her husband are involved in the production of the silk paintings, while Maria is

now more of a project overseer and her husband, Ron, focuses on marketing and administration. Her paintings are vibrant in color and depict the natural environment which Maria accounts for as her main source of inspiration. “I have sought to celebrate that which is uniquely Fijian, often represented symbolically with shapes that are intrinsic to the Taukei way of life”. As Maria has been in Fiji, she has clearly been adapting to the lifestyle here, identifying and becoming one with the culture and heritage. One of her other favorite mediums to work with is the *masi* cloth which is “a great canvas”. “I love the rough, hand-made quality of it, and its earthiness as a natural product, made by woman in outer-island villages, and it’s good to know that *masi* is an environmentally-friendly art resource. My mother-in-law hails from Vatulele, so our suppliers are aunts and cousins. Knowing that, in a small way, we are helping to keep a tradition alive by buying rolls of *masi* from our family in Vatulele on a regular basis, is very satisfying”.

Maria and her husband now not only work through artistic means to keep their family supported, but have also been working to provide other local artists with the same opportunity through the CreatiVITI center for the arts. Ron and Maria have been involved since 1993 in helping jumpstart and create a sound base for the center. It is a self proclaimed support group for local artists and crafts people and as a registered charity involves itself in numerous projects which focus on income generation and promotion of local talent. The main purpose of CreatiVITI is to “promote the development of arts and crafts in Fiji” and “provides a much-needed focal point for art development in Fiji’s tourist belt, enabling us to be an effective force in empowering Fiji’s artists and craftspeople” (CreatiVITI brochure). Based out of Nadi the center is in the tourist hub of the nation. It attracts a wide clientele in search for quality art, exactly

what CreatiVITI's brochure promotes: "Looking for quality art and craft products with a unique local flavor? We can put you in touch with many of Fiji's 'hidden talents'". The center's intent is good, to reach out to local craftspeople and present with the opportunity to be seen as a local artist, representing Fiji's traditional arts and crafts. CreatiVITI is certainly helping to put Fiji's local artists on the map. Maria remarks, "At CreatiVITI we are advocating an integrated solution that involves a community art center that serves as the public face for Fiji's art scene, right here in the heart of the tourism belt, where our main customers are. The center would make a collective approach to marketing our art, enabling direct contact between artist and buyer in a colorful, contemporary setting that is of international standard". By reaching out to artists in villages who don't have the opportunity to be exposed, CreatiVITI bridges this gap for them. In addition, CreatiVITI charges its members a fee to exhibit pieces, and takes a percentage of the profits collected, all in order to help the center afloat. "Most of us do not have the luxury of being able to create art for the sake of it- we can only continue to paint, carve, weave, etc if we can make a living from our creative talents. The local art market itself is quickly saturated, especially in times like this when everyone is holding on tightly to their purse strings. But tourists provide an enormous buying power that continually regenerates as the visitors come and go. Much can be done to enable more of our artists and craftspeople to tap into the opportunities that are out there", Maria said. While Maria is an advocate for utilizing tourism as a way to bring in a profit, she also struggles with the issue of authenticity. Maria's painted silk compositions and other small projects (painted *masi* bookmarks, small wall hangings) are done not done solely by Maria, rather with the aid of her apprentices and hired assistants. While she is outlining the image, in an effort to

increase productivity she has her employees paint, dye and fine-tune what is essentially the finished product. Often times there will be several compositions of the same pattern, which is done by the use of a stencil, or stamp, which she can reuse to increase mass production. In order to combat the issue of illegitimate art, she explains: “All my paintings come with a Certificate of Authenticity that acknowledges the influence that the life and scenery of my husband’s village in Taveuni has had on my art”. She is working to make that connection with Fiji, which she feels is a way to honor her craft.

CreatiVITI bridges the gap and helps to put traditional art and craft in a modern context. In turn, it provides revenue to people who may need it most. On the surface, this seems like a logical and charitable thing to do, yet I am still left wondering at what point does exposure turn into exploitation? By commissioning local artists to pump out 100 carved *tanoas* biweekly to distribute to Jack’s Handicrafts Market, yes, you are creating employment for those in need- but is the artistic value, integrity and honesty being removed through mass production? More over, while the traditional roots of a society are indeed worthy of honor through artistic representation, those roots are only half of what makes up a society. By not presenting the outside world with art that speaks on a contemporary level and makes a statement, the society and progression of a culture is being held back.

### **Analysis/Conclusion**

This study opened my eyes as to the importance of art in a culture’s identifying nature. A link to one’s culture gives them confidence and a way to find a source of strength and community among others. I am a strong believer that people everywhere all over the world crave a sense of belonging and kinship which is essentially what a culture

can provide. The arts are a visual, verbal and tangible expression of a culture and one of the most effective ways of promoting it, both to its society's people and to the rest of the world.

Fiji is a country where heritage is huge, and today with its mixed ethnic population, it is even more poignant when the various ethnic groups unanimously identify as one country.

I have looked at the way art in terms of crafts and in the fine art scope have served as cultural identifiers and both as cultural expression. As was present in the *Vasu* exhibition, there is a strong recalling of traditional Fijian style and iconography that lingers in contemporary art. While contemporary art is important in that it works to showcase issues related to the society now and is a form of activism, it also is linked with a traditional past with a traditional Pacific island style. I have come to find that contemporary art is expressionist and telling of current events, of society. An exhibition like *Vasu* served as a way to display creative efforts by individual artists, yes. However, it more importantly was a form of activism- a way for women to find a network of support and strength in a society traditionally dominated by men. It was a leap forward, a telling sign of Fiji's social change.

While the *Vasu* exhibit certainly was evident of Fiji's progress as a country, it is still very much a developing country that depends heavily on the income as generated by tourists. As I spent my time interviewing Maria and Marita I came to realize the flipside of art from activism to a means of livelihood in a country like Fiji where economic times are hard on everyone. Producing art is a job for many of these artists struggling to support a family, and when it comes down to paying the bills and feeding your children, that comes first before being in complete touch with creative style and interpretation. I

am conflicted about the work artists create purely to appease an outsider or tourists eye- it does not seem as pure or authentic as art that is created for the sake of art. Yet as Maria put it, many people in Fiji don't have the luxury to create art for art's sake. CreatiVITI certainly has its best interests in the local craftspeople and artists it promotes and hosts in their gallery, however the work is then being judged on another plane, dictated by economics, skewing the sake of production and motivation.

There are no easy answers to solving the issue of "inauthentic" or "illegitimate" art, because it is overall, affected by something much greater than can be controlled by the artist. NGOs like CreatiVITI have the right idea to promote a local talent, however, it's the promotion that can easily fade into exploitation of a culture and spiral into representing a false or generalized view of a culture often pinned as "primitive".

It is in my opinion that some of the best art is that created for art's sake, for the pleasure of the artist or as a means to convey something greater to it's audience, not something purely created for the sake of making a sale. The stories behind this kind of art is the real Fiji, and while producing something reminiscent of a traditional culture is important in that it strengthens identity, this is sometimes overwhelming and can take over.

Through living here and conducting my research it has become increasingly more apparent how rich Fiji's diversity is and what a and strong affinity for their cultural heritage the people have. This then directly attests for the Fijian artists and their willingness to showcase their identity throughout their art work. Art has transformed from traditional utilitarian handicrafts to an expression of contemporary culture, as well as a means to make a living- by selling. While realizing the complexities underlying a

simple painting or wood carving and how it may speak to greater socio-political aspects of society, we look at art a new way. Art is expression, healing, tradition, a connection to culture and a means of support. As long as we uphold the standards of good art and are able to provide a sphere where art is accepted and nourished, we are preserving a culture, both old and new.

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