

Fiji Time: 8:25 AM on Tuesday 13 December

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## For peace which is true

Sashi Karan

Thursday, September 29, 2016



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A presentation at this year's Rewa Day where descendants of indentured labourers were welcomed as sons and daughters of Rewa. Picture: JOVESA NAISUA

Sashi Kiran, chief executive officer of FRIEND, an NGO based in Lautoka has been instrumental in the peace process that led to the adoption of descendants of indentured labourers as part of the vanua of Rewa. Below, Sashi answers questions different people have asked about her peace journey.

1. All citizens belong to Fiji, so how

does Rewa Province adoption of the

descendants of indentured labourers

change anything?

We are fortunate to be citizens and hold Fiji passports. This Government has given all of us a common name. In every way possible we do belong. Any event in Fiji starts with a Fijian traditional ceremony in recognition of the vanua. In each ceremony we realise we belong to this country but we are still outsiders as far as the people of the land are concerned.

As the head of an organisation when a sevusevu is presented, awkwardly I am referred to as vulagi or visitor. When my iTaukei colleagues visit a new community they immediately identify themselves from a place and they have a relationship as kai, tauvu, naita and I always used to think how wonderful these relations passed down through generations connected the people of the land.

I had never imagined that one day I will be able to have a cavuti, a chiefly ground to be associated with; Vunisalevu na Ratu na Turaga na Tui Noco and Burebasaga na Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi.

Since Rewa Day all my organisational sevusevu has acknowledged the chiefly ground of Noco. The week after Rewa Day, I was in Ra. There was a queue of people welcoming me as their naita.

I have a relationship with each village visited and the iTaukei people have been generously educating me. It's a totally new leaf being turned. I have worked in many of these communities and have not been received like I am now.

When we say we belong it means we are a part of the vanua, we have relationships with the people of the land that is based on their identity system.

What's your understanding

of the vanua?

I think it refers to identity, genealogy, customs, relationships with land and its people. Vanua has systems of conservation — tabu, totems where certain things were protected to conserve for future generations.

It has its own governance system, unique specialisation of duties (eg mataisau — carpenter) that have focal points of integration. I think vanua is a strong body of wisdom that we all can learn from — governance, conservation, connection of people and all that sustains them.

Does being part of the vanua for you

mean trying to claim ownership of

land as well?

It is well known fact that landowners are custodians of resources to ensure they are conserved for future generations. The iTaukei people also have to lease land from their mataqali if they wish to use these resources for themselves. So the question of owning resources does not even arise. We have received so much more than whatever we could ever ask for.

We hope that we do justice to the faith the Tui Noco has placed in us by so openly accepting us his people, giving us the honour of using his people's cavuti and also that of the Roko Tui Dreketi.

Can you briefly explain your peace

journey, why you started on this path?

We did not realise this journey would take us to Rewa. From 1879 to 1970, for almost 100 years Indentured labourers were discouraged by law to go to iTaukei villages and there was punishment meted against offenders. So narratives emerged which became stereotypes of each other.

Fiji has been independent for only half those many years.

We work well together but there are strong underlying suspicions. Having worked with the two communities I have realised that there are so many commonalities and strengths and if we are able to genuinely work together we can move mountains so we have been searching for common grounds where the two people came together without any barriers.

When the Syria ran aground, iTaukei people jumped in and saved our ancestors even though they must have looked strange and couldn't communicate with any common language so we went out on a journey to learn more.

This search led us to the Tui Noco, Ratu Isoa Damusamu. He received our tabua and shocked us by saying "we belonged" to his vanua by virtue of burials of our ancestors in his chiefly ground. We were shocked in silence as for the first time we heard from a chief that we "belonged" to a vanua! Something like when we won gold at Rio — you know — tears, joy, and speechlessness!

At this year's Rewa Day celebrations he presented us to the people and the paramount chief of Rewa and in her generosity the Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi, Ro Teimumu Kepa, and her people have accepted us as kai Rewa. Now we belong to the vanua of Rewa and we hope we can genuinely work together for peace and prosperity of vanua of Viti.

What are the next

steps in this process?

We have been receiving requests from people who genuinely wish to learn about the iTaukei language and culture and vice versa so there is opportunity now for adult education institutes to offer language and culture courses.

The majority of people of Indian origin have never stepped in an iTaukei home or a village.

The iTaukei have been much more versatile because of sugarcane cutting and other businesses and many speak Hindi because of Bollywood movies so they are able to understand our protocols better but we have a lot of work to do.

We need to create many platforms for cross cultural learning in fun and practical ways. These could be at workplace, schools and communities. We are working towards partnering with organisations to create these spaces of intercultural learning until we can have truly sustained peace!



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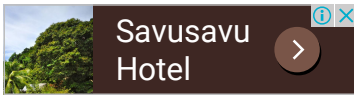





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