

## Chapter 6

# 'The Story that Came to Me': Gender, Power and Life History Narratives—Reflections on the Ethics of Ethnography in Fiji

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I was well into my fieldwork in Fiji when Vasi, a young Fijian woman, came to visit me. My research into the social construction of gender in Fijian society had been going well. I had travelled to several of Fiji's larger islands, including Koro, Vanua Levu, and Viti Levu, and established a wide network of contacts with men and women in many of their villages. I had conducted interviews with a number of women involved in *Na Soqosoqo Vakamarama*, the National Fijian Women's Organisation, and helped with the organisation of a village women's co-operative store. I had acquired a sound understanding of the routines of daily village life, and attended weddings in several coastal villages and the interior. My trips to the capital, Suva, to conduct archival work had been successful. I was nearing completion of a kinship survey and had identified a preferential marriage rule: when a woman of one generation from Clan A marries into Clan B, then one of her daughters or classificatory daughters in the descending generation from Clan B would then marry, in turn, into her natal Clan A. A marriage rule. Exchange relations. My notebooks were filling up.

Vasi first approached me in a village store where I had occasion to volunteer, and asked shyly if I would teach her to sew. I had offered to teach sewing to women in the local women's organisation, so it wasn't an unusual request. Vasi (a pseudonym) was a young married woman with a small child in tow. Yes, I knew of her; she had married into the patrilocal clan located nearest the store and came from a village in an adjacent district along the coast. Yes, I could place her. I could see her sitting in the doorway of her mother-in-law's kitchen, peeling cassava. She smiled warmly and waved whenever I passed by. I knew who her mother-in-law was—an energetic woman who walked briskly past my house on the way to her gardens in the morning, machete over her shoulder. I could place Vasi socially. Well, yes, I could teach her to sew, I told her, but not this week. I was off to the coast on Friday, the busiest day for the markets. I could buy some cloth for her there. Maybe later next week, we agreed. Impatient I

was, still so much research to do. This paper is about this woman's visit; about the story that came to me.

We busied ourselves when Vasi arrived at my house, this time without her children. I threaded the sewing machine I had borrowed from a neighbour; she smoothed the crinkled tissue paper pattern with her hands and spread it out on the floor. I had sent my husband off earlier that morning to the men's house, through the pouring rain. The clan's ceremonial field was deserted and houses around its perimeter were closed up against the rain. Water splashed over my door sill onto the floor and onto our fabric. I shut the door, a normally unacceptable thing to do in a Fijian village. Unsociable, draws suspicions. Passers-by couldn't call in their greetings, glancing in and about as they passed. People performed witchcraft behind closed doors, mixed and drank *yagona*, or kava, alone—directing invocations to their ancestral spirits, *na nitu*, against their enemies. I spread out Vasi's fabric, carefully smoothing the edges. 'I came to talk to you', she said, in a quiet tone. 'Yes', I thought to myself without looking up. 'I know who Vasi is, married in from a nearby village, small child, robust mother-in-law', I recalled. 'I came to talk to you', Vasi repeated, and this time I stopped, something in her voice, mentally noting her clearly spoken English for the first time. I looked over at Vasi. She began to talk.

Rain pounding on the corrugated tin roof of my small house set up a sound barrier, a deafening protective frame within which a story of forced marriage was told. Noise silenced this narrative to all but one. But one who by trade was compelled to tell. And one who, in listening, was able to see—see both the invisible self and the invisible force applied upon this self. To retell a story delivered in silence is to cast a voice outside its protective frame ... possibly to invite the visibility of force. This paper explores ethical issues underlying the ethnography of narrative, self, voice, gender and power.

Vasi told me that when she was younger, she had worked in a town on the coast in a restaurant catering to tourists. She had talked to many visitors to Fiji and had learned to speak English quite well. And she had a few years of secondary education. She had had a boyfriend, and they intended to marry. On one occasion she had gone to visit him, and was staying with him overnight at his garden house. And that is when they came to get her. Her uncles, as she described them, using the English kin term to describe their relationship to her. These men were, in genealogical terms, her father's older and younger brothers and his parallel same sex cousins, all same generation members of his patrilineal clan. According to the Fijian kinship system, these men—her father, father's brothers, and classificatory father's brothers—were all classed together and referred to using the same kin term, *momo*, meaning father. Her father's brothers, she explained, were men she had grown up with, close kin who had raised her. They came to the garden house and called out for her. She was to marry her

mother's brother's son, or cross cousin: when a woman of one generation from Clan A marries into Clan B, then one of her daughters or classificatory daughters from Clan B would then marry, in turn, into her natal Clan A. A marriage rule. It had been decided by her fathers and ritually confirmed by the presentation of *tabua*, or whale's teeth, which had passed from the groom's family to the bride's kin. *Tabua* are highly prized as traditional Fijian exchange objects: they allow men to do what Micaela di Leonardo has described for women as 'social work'—connect kin groups, make alliances, and confirm political pledges.<sup>1</sup> They are coveted, and someone who receives a whale's tooth will not readily give it back, I have been told.

Vasi had not wanted this marriage. She had not thought they would really force her, she explained. She was going to marry her boyfriend. From outside, they called out to her. 'We were afraid', she said. 'What were you afraid of?' I asked. 'We were afraid of the men outside', she said. After some time, her boyfriend left—she used the word *tuba* to describe his actions, meaning to flee or run away, to escape. 'They stayed outside the house a long time', she explained. 'I was alone, and I was very afraid. I was afraid of them. It became dark and I was alone in the house. They yelled out; they called out to me. They waited. Finally, I left the house. I was afraid. I went with them.' There was a pause. 'Why?' she asked plaintively in a soft voice, tears falling. 'Why did my uncles do this to me?' I heard in her voice fear, and I saw on her face sadness. This is the story that came to me.

Did anyone know she had come to talk with me? She had asked if I would teach her to sew. No suspicions. We were sewing. We cut and pieced as we talked. The sound of the rains enclosed Vasi's narrative in secrecy. We were only sewing.

Her story was one through which Vasi related her traumatic experiences as a narrative and revealed to me as only she could her understanding of self and her social position, her narrative serving as what Riessman terms a 'text of identity'.<sup>2</sup> And yet, as Vasi had asked for a sewing lesson, it appeared to me that she had set up a ruse. This spoke to me, the academic, of agency. This was not so much a story to be told as a story to be heard. The story of a life, a sequence of events, to be heard by someone who was, in this village, understood to be inquiring into and interested in learning about the lives of women. This struck me, even at the time, as ironic, for I was the ethnographer after all; the one who actively sought out women to interview and work with. Yet this story had been brought to me. And this woman, who prior to her visit had represented to me only one of many possible informants, this woman had interjected her voice in my ethnographic enterprise; hers was an experience she wanted included. There was a certain strategy in her telling. By bringing her story to me, her tale would help to construct what it was that I was to understand as her

culture and what it was I knew about the lives of women in Fiji. I hadn't anticipated this collaboration.

Vasi's story had moved me. Her narrative conferred upon the events of her life and the male kin involved in the forcing of this marriage a meaning: conveying unequivocally that relationship of power within which she was caught. Her story revealed the trust she had had for those close kin whom she assumed would provide for her as a woman as they had when she was a child. This was a meaning she asserted; it was critical to my understanding of who she was, how she was socially and politically situated as a woman and emotionally constituted as an individual. Through this narrative, I had been drawn into her social world and her point of view,<sup>3</sup> sharing through the course of her narrative in the lived experience of her fear, betrayal, despair, and sadness. Vasi related what Riessman has described as a truly 'moral drama',<sup>4</sup> or in this case a countering drama, one in which she set her male kin and their expectations for her obedience—her acquiescence and emotional denial—as the immoral cast. This re-orientation of value was immediately apparent, but her motives were not so clear. What did she hope to accomplish in bringing me this story? 'Why had she come?' I wondered. How was I to understand this visit and her goals? Why did she want *me* to know about her life? How did she understand my project? Why did she trust me? What was her intent: did she offer this as a representation of self, a voicing of the life she has been forced to live? Or as a representation of collectivity: as a single example of the multifarious exertions of power that women are subjected to, through which men control and dominate their lives? What motive underlay her narrative strategy? Was it revenge? Yet her voice relayed only sadness and resignation, and spoke of anger defused. Was it therapeutic? To lift and throw off the weight of silence? Was it to find solace? To seek out a community of comfort, even if only a community of one?

And if, as it certainly appeared to me, we had to speak in private, that she still lived her life in fear, what was I to do with this story and what would the consequences be for her if I wrote about her life—if I *represented* her as it seemed she intended me to do? To represent her would be to expose her. Or should I even be bothered by the consequences? Who in the village would ever know that I had written up her story? And should I even care? Publish or perish.

The story Vasi offered had moved me and it also disturbed me intellectually for I had already inquired about this. The women themselves had told me that they were free to marry whomsoever they pleased. Young women had told me this. Perhaps they spoke only of themselves and I had assumed they spoke for others, though I had asked the question directly. And my kinship charts had certainly not spoken to me of forced marriage, of fathers' betrayals, of fear. Although, on reflection, I did wonder at the perfect alignment of all those circles—what had it taken to put each in its place, to put each woman in her

place? Rather than providing a story which simply set out 'one's life within its social context', as narrative has been described as doing,<sup>5</sup> this story actively challenged that context and engaged me in its reexamination, interfacing not only 'self and society',<sup>6</sup> but also self and social analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Vasi's narrative has expanded substantially my understanding of what I had taken to be, in the anthropological sense, the nature of marriage and the lives of women. I would no longer read with detachment about sister exchange, preferential marriage, generational marriage exchange, marriage rules or compensatory exchange. Not only did this story 'reconstitute' the person I thought I knew as Vasi; the meaning of kinship had also been remade for me by its telling. I could now envision the people who put into practice these inter-generational alliances: I could hear them calling out in the night. This narrative became for me not only a story about self, but also a story about power, about how it is that those in power insert young people into the relationally appropriate places of their kinship systems.

In the course of further research, I learned of two other cases of forced, 'preferential' marriage for young women, though I was unable to record, in these individual cases, how these marriages were realised or what pressures were applied; which is to say, the social contexts within which force, or the immediate threat of force, had become visible. And I heard the story of Sura (a pseudonym), a woman from an inland village who, some years ago, had married a man from another island. She had been killed by her husband in a domestic dispute. To resolve her murder, one of the murderer's sisters had been required to marry into the dead woman's clan in return, as compensation, and her young daughter had been returned to her now deceased mother's clan. There appeared to be a cultural patterning in all this: women exchanged, lives and stories within a matrix of power. The story of Sura's death was related to me by her then 11-year-old daughter.

Vasi's story stands as one of a number of narratives I recorded which have contributed to the ongoing record of truth that I, as an ethnographer, have been engaged in collecting in my pursuit of an understanding of the culture of Fiji, recognising that any recorded truth emerges from the compilation of numerous truth claims. Other forms of narrative I have collected reflect a range of genres: life stories, mythology, and performance. In their various forms, they constitute attempts to make sense of experience—making sense or creating meaning being a transformative process by which meaning is given to, that is asserted and attached to, experience. Life stories such as Vasi's may seemingly be individually cast, reflecting more on a narrator's personal and unique circumstances than on cultural practice. But given the broader range of narrative I met with in this Fijian context, I came to comprehend that collectively they present a discourse, a running collective commentary on gender and power which speaks to the

nature of gender ideologies in this hierarchical context.<sup>8</sup> Narratives such as Vasi's life story, along with women's mythology and dance performances, which I have analysed in other contexts, constitute forms of stories that are counter-posed in relation to dominant culture, a variety of what have come to be called countering narratives. In dominant representations of gender in this culture, authoritative images of male power and superiority are presented, a spatial order that symbolically—and in real terms physically—elevates men above women is instituted, and a dominant system of ritual knowledge that excludes women through the institution of the men's house is practised. Women's representations stand as narratives that people 'tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives by going against the grain'<sup>9</sup> and resisting prevailing hegemonic understandings. In this sense, narrative represents a site of discourse for both the circulation and contestation of ideas regarding the nature of society, about lives lived, about subjectivity as the experience of positioning within a stratified society, and about power practised. I consider the various narratives of Fijian women I have collected to be forms of counter discourse: some of these simply describe the conditions under which women's obedience is extracted, while others record the subjective experience, the feelings and tensions engaged in the construction of self in the context of political domination. Some of these form part of what has come to be known in anthropology as a subordinate discourse,<sup>10</sup> while others of these constitute forms of what I have called 'insubordinate discourse'—a term which captures the subversive quality that certain women's narratives and performances carry. All express disaffect; all find their place along what Ari Sitas has called the 'continuum' of resistance.<sup>11</sup>

As ethnographers, we must ask where and how dominant meanings are formulated within culture. We must show how they are inscribed, validated and upheld, and alternatively, how they are contested and debated. This brings us to consider the role women play in cultural production, either as consumers of certain versions of reality or as 'generators of signs',<sup>12</sup> asking in precisely what arenas do women contest, contradict or resist dominant ideologies of gender? And we must also ask how and why certain versions are silenced.

How can we understand the significance of a contemporary life story such as Vasi's to history, and Pacific history in particular? How do they intersect? Vasi's story seems removed from the course of historical events we know from our reading of Fiji's colonial past. Or does it? What of the colonial regulations forbidding Fijian women from leaving their villages to visit coastal towns that were being established at the turn of the century? What of petitions that were made by Fijian men to have their kinswomen brought back to the village? Could this seemingly isolated narrative of Vasi's forced marriage relate to a wider and

ongoing discourse on the social control of women? On the politics of gender, space and movement?

As an ethnologist, where do I go with a story such as this, recognising as I do the continued vulnerability of this woman and the circumstances that allowed only enough privacy to let her tell her story to me. Do I deny this risk to my informant—I have collected records that tell of women having been killed—how do I gauge this risk, the risk posed to her by her exposure, her potential identification? Villagers would certainly know who she is; they would know who told me this story. The relating of this narrative is an act which at once recognises the structures of power that surrounded us as Vasi told her story in the privacy of my house, while also revealing the fear she had for her kin, and potential consequences of her telling. Yet this story also spoke to me of her initiative in engaging me as an audience. I have come to appreciate that my ethnographic understanding of how lives are lived within this culture would have been incomplete without this woman's tale, I humbly admit, no matter how thorough my kinship charts and surveys might have been. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps,<sup>13</sup> in their review article 'Narrating the self', have argued that a narrative, in its telling of the experiences of one life lived, provides 'an opportunity' [for the narrator] to insert and 'impose order on [what might otherwise appear to be] disconnected events'. In the course of hearing and trying to understand the significance of Vasi's story, it has become evident to me that it was her narrative that *inserted reality* into the events surrounding this case of preferential marriage, into what came to be my understanding of this society's 'imposed' kinship order.

In trying to understand Vasi's story as a narrative of self, constituted within relations of power, I have reflected on this woman's initiative in bringing me her story, as well as my responsibility in both recording it and relating it, which, as a feminist anthropologist, is problematic any way I look at it. Would it be unethical, or ethical, to leave her story in her village? This is a question which must be posed as we collect our narratives: what are the consequences of telling Pacific lives?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Micaela di Leonardo, 'The female world of cards and holidays: women, families, and the work of kinship', *Signs*, 12: 3 (1987), 440-453.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Kohler Riessman, 'Strategic uses of narrative in the presentation of self and illness: a research note', *Social Science and Medicine*, 30:11 (1990), 1195-200.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1197.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Reed-Danahay, 'Introduction', *Auto/Ethnography: rewriting the self and the social*, ed. idem (Oxford and New York 1997), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, 'Narrating the self', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25 (1996), 19-43.

<sup>7</sup> On the topic of gender, self and society, see Martine Brownley and Allison B. Kimmich (eds), *Women and Autobiography* (Wilmington 2000); Peter L. Callero, 'The sociology of the self', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29 (2003), 115-33.

<sup>8</sup> Glynis George, 'Contested meanings and controversial memories: narratives of sexual abuse in Western Newfoundland', in Michael Lambek and Paul Antze (eds) *Tense Past: cultural essays in trauma and memory* (Toronto 1998), 45-64. See also Sally Cole, *Ruth Landes: a life in anthropology* (Lincoln 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Molly Andrews, 'Introduction: counter-narratives and the power to oppose', special issue, 'Culture and Counter-Narratives', *Narrative Inquiry*, 12:1 (August 2002), 1-6. See also Liz Stanley, 'On auto/biography in sociology', *Sociology*, 27:1 (1993), 41-52; and Julia Swindells, 'Hanging up on Mum or questions of everyday life in the writing of history', *Gender and History*, 2 (1990), 68-78.

<sup>10</sup> Brinkley Messick, 'Subordinate discourse: women, weaving and gender relations in North Africa', *American Ethnologist*, 14:2 (1987), 210-25; Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: women, men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison 1989), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Ari Sitas, 'From resistance to co-operative alterity: South Africa's labour movement and the negotiated revolution', plenary paper presented at the International Sociological Association's (ISA) Research Council Conference, Ottawa, 29 May 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston 1969), 496.

<sup>13</sup> Ochs and Capps, 'Narrating the self', 19.