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## Early Suva Fijians – A View Through Sere Makawa<sup>1</sup>

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### Prehistoric Suva

Prehistoric Suva or Suva *makawa* (old Suva) has traditional beginnings at Nakauvadra, mythical home of Fijians in the Ra province in north-eastern Vitilevu. The modern city of Suva takes its name from its original inhabitants who, according to tradition, migrated over the interior headwaters of mainland Vitilevu. This migration eventually settled on the peninsula where modern Suva is located, inhabiting high elevations as fortresses. A folklore predating the settling of Suva holds that when the ancestral god of Verata, Rokomoutu, and his younger brother, the ancestral god of Rewa, Romelasiga, were drawing up boundaries, they named a boundary denoting the end of Verata's jurisdiction and the beginning of Rewa's as *suvasuva*. Whether the name Suva is a derivation of this is unknown but it underscores a meaning in the name.

The original Suva people settled at Nauluvatu, close to where the Australian Chancery is and thence later to where the Thurston Gardens, Fiji Museum and Government House are now located. History tells of the siege and sack of Suva in 1843, which later led to the Bau–Rewa war, the longest battle ever in the annals of Fiji history. By the time the capital was shifted to Suva in 1881, the original Suva dwellers had relocated to a new location – Suvavou meaning 'New Suva'.

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1 Translated as 'Old Songs' to generically categorise songs from the early colonial period.

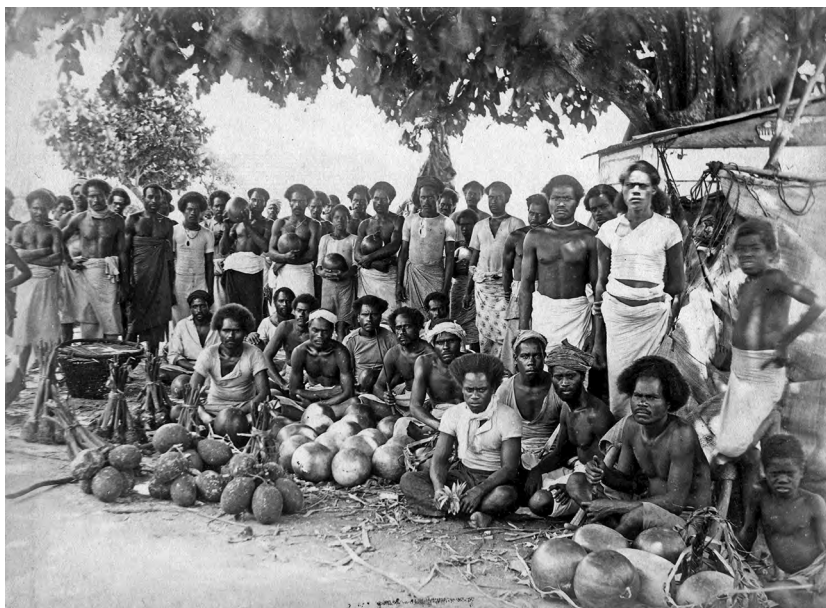


**Figure 5.1: 'In native village near Suva – Fiji' (probably Suvavou), 1884.**

Source: Burton Brothers, P32.4.138 Fiji Museum.

## Early Modern Suva

When Suva was established as a town in the late nineteenth century, the bulk of the indigenous Fijian population were still confined to their communal subsistence way of life in the villages. The iTaukei Fijians were restricted from travelling and had to obtain a pass if one wanted to move away from the village in search of opportunities in Suva. The early iTaukei in Suva thronged from nearby provinces of Rewa, Naitāsiri and Tailevu. Using traditional and kinship ties, the early Suva Fijians from Vanualevu, Lomaiviti and Lau connected with villages such as Tamavua and Kalabu (Naitāsiri), creating communities like Tacirua, Nabua, Turaki, Baniwai, Draiba and Nasova. The latter two community names were direct imports from the old capital. These early communities around Suva's periphery were mainly people who had gone to Suva in search of menial paid jobs and possibly to escape from the harsh *lala* system of crop taxation. Suva in the early days was still relatively underdeveloped. Alcohol consumption was still forbidden to the early iTaukei, and schools were not especially established for iTaukei in Suva until the mid-twentieth century.



**Figure 5.2: 'Early Suva: Fijian market. Vuniivi tree, c. 1892'.**

Source: Basil Thomson Collection c. 1892, P32.7.no1 Fiji Museum.



**Figure 5.3: 'Early Suva: Fijian market, c. 1892'.**

Source: Basil Thomson Collection c. 1892, P32.7.no2 Fiji Museum.

For the early Suva iTaukei communities, the place where things ‘happened’ was known as the Naiqai (the crusher). This is where Carnarvon Street is in present-day Suva and like iTaukei in the past, places were named according to something perceived to be iconic to that place. Hence Naiqai indicated that there had been a sugar mill in the vicinity, which gave rise to its local nomenclature. Naiqai then had a few cottages, one of which still stands today as an eatery, and these were known as kava bars or grog saloons. Little is known about who owned them or how many there actually were, but what is known in local folklore is that these grog saloons were venues for kava consumption, the *serenicumu* and for socialisation, as alcohol was expensive and forbidden to locals.

## Serenicumu

*Serenicumu* literally means ‘bumping songs’, a genre of popular music that is widespread throughout Fiji today and is performed in villages as well as at local resorts and hotels. These songs are covers of, or influenced by, styles from Europe and America, other Pacific Islands or the Caribbean (particularly reggae). They are often performed at informal *yaqona* drinking sessions and are also associated with informal dance types broadly termed *tauratale* or *danisi* (from the English ‘dance’).

The exact origin of the genre is obscure. *Serenicumu* is said to be associated with the first legally allowed sales of beer to indigenous Fijians in the 1920s in Suva, and suggests it originated at parties where men bumped their drinking glasses together. One particular piece of lore adds that this music was originally *sere ni cumu saqā* (stress on 2nd /a/) (*saqā* meaning barrel or tankard), and that it referred to the practice of Fijian men sitting in a circle at a table and resting their heads against their tankards of beer.

Many *serenicumu* songs still performed today date from World War II – an intense period of creativity for this genre – when soldiers from the US, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia interacted extensively with Fijians.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, musicians distinguish two main styles of *serenicumu*: trio and sere bass (also called *sere makawa* or ‘old songs’, even though they may be 15 or more years old). Sere bass performance features a large group

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2 See Appendix 6 for rendition of a US nursery rhyme, believed to be heard from US soldiers, into local ‘Finglish’.

of bass vocalists (bass/*besi*) in addition to three solo voice parts: *tatabani/tatabana*, *domo tolu/vakababa* and *lagallagalaga* in descending order in terms of their vocal range. Only the three solo parts are heard in trio. The types and roles of the instruments, their tuning and playing techniques have also changed over time. The technique of *vadivadi* (plucking) that characterised sere bass guitar performance in the past has been replaced by various ‘scrumming’ (strumming) for the rhythm guitar, and a range of left- and right-hand techniques for the lead guitarist. The only chords used in sere bass were *dua* (tonic), *rua* (subdominant) and *tolu* (dominant), whereas trio also featured warning (seventh), minus (minor) and flat (supertonic) chords.

Anyone can participate in sere bass performance, which makes it ideal for use at large social gatherings. Trio performers are expected to perform to a high standard and are usually heard at small social functions such as *yagona* drinking sessions. The tempo tends to be slower, and the overall pitch lower in sere bass when compared to trio. Sere bass, being closer stylistically to *meke*, tends to be preferred by older people (those in their mid-40s and above) and provides them with a means to connect with and celebrate their cultural roots. Trio, which tends to be popular with those in their 20s and 30s, exhibits a greater degree of Westernisation than sere bass, but is still regarded as being part of the *serenicumu* oral tradition that has been passed down through the generations and that continues to change as new songs are continually added to the repertoire and old ones fall into disuse.

## Early Suva iTaukei Seen through Folksongs

The folksong ‘Isa ko Suva’<sup>3</sup> is a popular tune from the 1960s. Its composer is unknown but the lyrics of the song mention Naiqaqi, Draiba (the current site of the *Boselevu Vakaturaga* complex) and Turaki (Toorak, one of the first suburbs of Suva). There are places like Nubukalou, which is the waterway that still runs alongside the MHCC shopping mall, but in the song lyrics, it could probably refer to an actual residence close to the waterway. This generic reference to a place using permanent features in nature indicates the indigenous penchant to placenames is always in

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3 Translation by the author.

reference to a natural land feature even though its equivalent street name may exist. Valenimate and Nuku‘alofa too are mentioned but no longer exist. The latter two were probably house names belonging to the early Suva dwellers of that era.

**Table 5.1: ‘Isa ko Suva’ in iTaukei with English translation.**

Original iTaukei Lyrics	Translation
<i>I. Isa<sup>a</sup> ko Suva ena gauna sa oti</i>	Isa Suva in the days gone by and by
<i>Kena italanoa dau kena idivi voli</i>	Its lovely stories have never lost their charm
<i>Veivale ni yaqona ena kena dau soqovi</i>	All the kava bars and the people always thronging
<i>O Nubukalou e dua vei ira oqori</i>	At Nubukalou ‘twas one endearing place
<i>Tini na kaloko ni dau qiri na lali</i>	Ten o’clock at night when the bells begin chime
<i>So era cabe cake tu ki Turaki</i>	Some begin to travel up to dear old Turaki
<i>So era tube bilikani tu ki Naiqaqi</i>	With their billy cans the remainder to Naiqaqi
<i>Yaco ki vale ra sa baci lose tale</i>	Mixing <sup>b</sup> again when they do arrive at home
<i>itale</i>	chorus
<i>Oiauwe<sup>c</sup> na lasa ga eke</i>	Oiauwe such fun was there to see
<i>Au na sega ni moce, sega ni moce</i>	I would never doze nor slumber
<i>Ke levu na noqu gade</i>	Such adventures oh there were so many
<i>II. Ko Draiba kei Valenimate nodra koro na gone tagane</i>	Now at Draiba and Valenimate the habitation of all young men
<i>Isa Turaki kei Naiqaqi e cake na vanua e taleitaki</i>	Isa Turaki and upwards to Naiqaqi so endearing were these two places
<i>III. Isa na wekaqu Jiupili kei Luisa ko Sanaila, vata kei Titilia</i>	Isa my kinsmen – Jiupili and Luisa, and Sanaila of course dear Titilia
<i>Veivakalasai ena bogi kei na siga</i>	Happiness and fun, by night and by day
<i>Ki Nukualofa mera lai vakasigasiga</i>	At Nukualofa for fun till the break of day

Source: Author’s translation.

Notes:

- Isa* is a Fijian word whose meaning and emotion is quite difficult to capture in a single English word, but it is uttered aloud denoting deep yearning and nostalgia.
- ‘Mixing’ here denotes the mixing of *yaqona* in cloths.
- Oiauwe* is believed to be a Polynesian derivative with similar meaning to *Isa*.

Another folk song from the same era is titled ‘Isa my dear’ composed by Nailaga Ba-born Mr Percy Bucknell. The lyrics of the song go:

**Table 5.2: ‘Isa my dear’ in iTaukei with English translation.**

Original iTaukei Lyrics	Translation
<i>I. Daumaka dina Adi na cila ni vula</i>	Perfect my dear lady is the shining of the moon
<i>Nida dau yaba ya rua</i>	As we gently tarry along together
<i>Isa lei marama cava tale o nanuma</i>	Please dear lady do tell me of your thoughts
<i>E noda koro levu oqo ko Suva?</i>	about the yonder sight of Suva city?
<i>itale</i>	chorus
<i>Isa my dear moni taura na ligaqu</i>	Isa my dear grab hold of my hand
<i>Dreta noqu vinivo balavu</i>	Tug at my flowing long dress
<i>Au na rai kivita na icavucavu ni yavumu</i>	Your stepping I will follow
<i>Sa iko dear na noqu salusalu</i>	You my dear are my salusalu
<i>II. Daumaka dina nodra roka na marama</i>	A beauty bevy of colours worn by the women
<i>Vulavula kei karakarawa</i>	The shining whites along with the blues
<i>Nida dau raica e boiri na matada</i>	And upon beholding fainting is so easy
<i>Vu ni noqu mai moce tatadra</i>	Falling into sweet fantasies
<i>III. Ono na kaloko ni lutu na yakavi</i>	As twilight falls at six in the evening
<i>Tokara na isulu ni yaviyavi</i>	The evening wear then comes adorning
<i>Na isulu ni cabe cake tu ki Turaki</i>	Clothes for the stroll up to Turaki <sup>a</sup>
<i>Dui tubera nona kabani</i>	Each partner hands clasped together
<i>IV. Ni suka na vude meda veitauriliga</i>	Frivolity now concluded hands held together
<i>Me yaga mada na cila ni vula</i>	The shining moonlight never must be wasted
<i>So e cabe cake tu ki Kaunikula</i>	Some will continue on to Kaunikula <sup>b</sup>
<i>So e sisi sobu ki Draiba</i>	Others slither downwards to Draiba <sup>c</sup>

Source: Author's translation.

Notes:

- Toorak: an early suburb of Suva that was established by the founding fathers of Suva from the Melbourne Polynesian Company.
- Another early Suva suburb, also known as Flagstaff.
- This was a community settlement of the early iTaukei who had come into Suva when there were no residential allotments yet. It is the site of the current Ministry iTaukei Affairs and Ministry Foreign Affairs/Ministry of Lands.

Ovini Baleinamau was another composer in the early twentieth century in Suva. Though hailing from Lekutu in Bua, he had settled in Tacirua outside Suva and had formed a string band by the name Caucau ni Delai Seatura.<sup>4</sup> One of his compositions subtly alluded to segregation in Suva's bars, when local iTaukei were not allowed to enter bars and clubs. In the song titled 'Vale ni bia' (Beer brewery), the lyrics sing of indulging in beer when in actuality, home-brewed beer was being served (illegally) but the drinkers nonetheless fantasised that they were actually drinking the beer that was the reserve of the colonial establishment. The lyrics to the first verse go:

**Table 5.3: 'Vale ni bia' in iTaukei with English translation.**

Original iTaukei Lyrics	Translation
<i>Vale ni bia kamikamica</i>	The beer brewery 'tis so sweet
<i>Vale ni bia kamikamica</i>	The beer brewery 'tis so sweet
<i>Lei vale ni bia kamikamica</i>	Oh the beer brewery 'tis so sweet
<i>Bameti o Vilimaina</i>	The bar maid is Vilimaina
<i>Gone ni Ba ra kasou kina</i>	The guys from Ba get drunk there
<i>Nodra ilavo e sa cagicagina</i>	All their money begins to slowly fly away

Source: Author's translation.

## A Brief Socio-Analysis of the Lyrics

A social analysis of the song lyrics reveals the boisterous life of the early iTaukei community in Suva. These were people drawn from all the provinces and villages in Fiji who sought some form of paid employment, or to escape the harsh communal life of the *lala*<sup>5</sup> of the chiefs, or both. The frivolity and excess consumption underscores the rigidity of the cloistered life in the traditional communal village setting. There is hardly anything written in literature about the growing dissention of the common iTaukei in the villages as this was glossed over with the usual clichés of 'paradise, swaying palm trees and the idyllic life'. It was also not the norm for the iTaukei to be seen in open contention with their chieftain or the established status quo. Nor was there any intimation of the class struggle not only between the ordinary iTaukei and their chief, but also

4 Translated as Mists atop Seatura Mount, a mythical place in the Bua province, Vanualevu.

5 *Lala* refers to a directive from a chief to his people to carry out an undertaking.



between the iTaukei and the ruling colonial class. Access to the towns for the early Fijians was restricted, likewise saloons, bars and alcohol were regulated and only for the British colonisers and their circles. The early Fijians in Suva were unaware that the restrictions they were subjected to was their Pacific version of apartheid. The consumption of *yagona* or kava in the traditional setting reserved it only for the chieftains and the upper hierarchy of Fijian society. It was not for the common people to indulge in and even if it were a social event in the village, it was not open to frivolity and exuberance. The Fijian chiefs had already become part of the existing colonial structure through membership of the Great Council of Chiefs that, in reality, mirrored the British aristocratic gentlemen's club – all paid for by the Colonial Government and borne by the common iTaukei through a ruthless crop taxation. The iTaukei communities in the rural areas were still reeling under the cumbersome demands of crop taxation from the Colonial Government and development of the iTaukei society was impeded as a consequence. One was the imposed orthodoxy through the sitting of the Native Lands Commission in 1905 and 1947 – an exercise stacked against the local traditions concerning ownership of land and titles. Added to this was the establishment in 1940 of the then Native Lands Trust Board, now iTaukei Lands Trust Board. The backdrop to all this was Governor Gordon's policy for the native Fijian lifestyle not to be disrupted – thereby denying access to commerce and business for the early iTaukei, the effects of which are still discussed today. There were no public primary and secondary schools in Suva for the common iTaukei. The Hindu organisations of the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharm had their own schools, likewise the two mainstream Christian denominations – Roman Catholic<sup>6</sup> and Methodist.<sup>7</sup> Queen Victoria School was still deemed as the *vuli ni turaga* (school for the chiefs) and Adi Cakobau School was initially set up to prepare girls to be wives to Fijian bureaucrats who were schooled at the Queen Victoria School and drawn from the cream of young chiefs whose ancestry was tied to the Deed of Cession and the Great Council of Chiefs.

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6 For Catholics it was Suva Street, Saint Felix College and Saint Columba, later becoming Marist Brothers High School for boys initially, and Saint Philomena's, Saint Anne's, Saint Joseph Primary and Saint Joseph's Secondary for girls.

7 For Wesleyans it was Suva Methodist Boys, Dudley Primary & Intermediate, Annesley Infant and Ballantine Memorial School or Dudley High School initially.

Further to this backdrop of early Suva, the colonial establishment and the ruling oligarchy of the eastern chiefs stifled, exiled or jailed local iTaukei such as Apolosi Nawai<sup>8</sup> and Mosese Dukumoi,<sup>9</sup> whom the locals saw as their champions. The early iTaukei of Suva managed and dealt with their version of modernist angst with the only tools they had – singing, dancing and the unreserved consumption of kava. The places mentioned in the folksongs – Draiba, Turaki, Kaunikuila, Naiqaqi – were not only saloons for open consumption and exuberance, but also key places of solidarity or empathy – safe places where iTaukei could be themselves, how they wanted to be. These were the people who dared to break out of the norm in their bid to try and create something for themselves, but the entire formal and traditional system was not in their favour.

The frivolity and behaviour extolled in the song lyrics was in subtle defiance to the established status quo. This was not a political backlash but rather an outlet for the preservation of the common collective sanity. Had the powers that be paid attention, these ‘cultural outlets’ of singing and collective frivolity could have been harnessed and grown to make Suva not only a commercial hub, but also a cultural and artistic hub of Fiji. The early Fijians in Suva were cut from the old traditional cloth of the grand cultural festivals and exchanges or *solevu* that had begun to wane in local history. This was the same period that artistic expressions began to evolve from the traditional chanting or *vucu* to the *sigidrigi* style, then to the quartet or trio style, singing without any formal musical or vocal education. This period of unhindered expression was the rich backdrop from which outstanding composers and poets in Fijian culture emerged. The changing of venues in the songs for continuation of the *vude*<sup>10</sup> indicated the disposition and energy for music composition, singing and dancing using stylised choreography drawn from the traditional *meke* and other activities. In fact, dancing in early Suva to *serenicumu* music was thought to have been adapted from the *butukai*<sup>11</sup> – pacing around on

8 Apolosi Nawai (1876–1946), known as the King of Fiji, was a charismatic Fijian leader who challenged British colonial rule. He was held by the Fijian Government.

9 Also known as Mosese Dugumoi and Navosavakadua who was born in Ra in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was considered a rebel by colonial authorities but a prophet by those who followed him.

10 A term denoting a local style of music and dancing.

11 *Butukai* was a style of dance originating in this period. The moves of the *butukai* mirror the actual movements of diving for freshwater mussels where the feet pace around rhythmically on the riverbed feeling for mussels. Freshwater mussels are synonymous with Naitāsiri and Rewa provinces in Vitilevu.

a river bed searching for fresh water mussels (*kai*). The transition from the river to kava saloons with *serenicumu* naturally gave rise to a form of dance expression by the same name.

Running parallel to this backdrop was the localisation of the Methodist Church from its Australian administration. This saw the establishment in 1935 of the Centenary Church in Stewart Street, Suva, named in commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of Wesleyanism or Methodism in Fiji. Prior to the concrete structure that still stands, the building was a simpler wooden house known then as Mission Hall. Singing of hymns and choral songs in the Western major and minor scales were still in their infancy, but groups of iTaukei had banded together in their newly established communities on the peripheries of Suva churning out songs in the *sigidrigi* style. These communities included Nabua (with its Bua ni Lomai Nabua group), Turaki (with its Voqa kei Turaki), Tacirua (with its Caucau ni Delai Seatura group originally from Bua in Vanualevu) and Samabula (with its Seniwaka ni Samabula Noca vocal group). Other groups not confined to Suva's early Fijian communities rallied under a common guild of sorts like the Southern Brothers – a group of Kadavu men returning from World War II with its leader and composer Manu Korovulavula. Caucau ni Waimanu was another *sigidrigi* group whose members had origins in Sawani, Naitāsiri. Another group calling themselves the Phoenix Choir was led by Sir Josua Rabukawaqa. This was a small a cappella choral group adapting *sigidrigi* folksongs into choral arrangements. The group would eventually begin singing Methodist hymnodies under the same name as a precursor or benchmark for the newly established Centenary Church Choir. Thus Fijian society and expression was gradually ushered into choral singing and the Western major and minor scales. The *sigidrigi* style of singing had evolved into quartets, trios and eventually sacred choral singing.

By the turn of the 1970s, Fijian society had settled and grown in and around Suva. The baby boomers from post–World War II had become integrated into contemporary Suva through education becoming more accessible to all. It was this generation that became the new bureaucrats of Suva, serving in education, health and other government ministries. It was also this generation that were subjected to the heavy-handed policies from the New Zealand educators who imposed regulations against

the indigenous language and its cultural expressions. It was considered shameful and inferior to promote the indigenous language in schools or to express oral traditions and history openly.<sup>12</sup>

Now as we look back from the twenty-first century, the predominant sources of information for the early Suva Fijians was the *Na Mata* (*The Herald*), a government quarterly published in the iTaukei language but whose content was a mix of history and government notices. Its accessibility was also restricted to those within government circles. The *Fiji Times* had begun printing a weekly Fijian paper, *Na iLalakai*. Radio broadcasts from the (then) Fiji Broadcasting Commission's (FBC) Radio Fiji One were predominately in English with an hour a week devoted to a Fijian program. This did not change until the mid-70s when FBC would broadcast songs, jingles and government programs in the Fijian language from 6 am until 8 pm in the evening, when English programs would resume.

## Conclusion

As Suva progresses into the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the world has shrunk with digitisation and globalisation, and in the process, a great bulk of our indigenous collective memory, be it from the early Suva Fijian communities or the overall collective from the villages, has been almost suppressed into oblivion. Attempts to capture slivers of history from these people and communities still presents challenges. Even earlier, the arrival of Christianity in 1835 set the stage for the colonisation of the land and the mind leading up to 1874. What we see today in contemporary iTaukei society is the fruition of colonisation, beginning way before Suva was established, taking us right back to Cession in 1874, a major turning point historically and culturally.

There is an opportunity for folksong lyrics to be used for local ethno-music study in the school curriculum and at tertiary level. The *serenicumu* and *sigidrigi* lyrics are replete with local history, kinships and romances, using poetry and style from a time when formal education and modernisation had yet to make deep imprints on the Fijian psyche. In fact, drawing from the tradition of *vucu* or sung poetry, song lyrics of the *serenicumu* and

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12 See GB Milner, David George Arms and Paul A Geraghty, *Duivosavosa: Fiji's languages, their use and their future*, Bulletin of the Fiji Museum no. 8 (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1984).

*sigidrigi* rhyming schemes and verses in themselves provide a window onto early literary forms or poetry in the iTaukei language. Bear in mind that being an oral society, traditional oratory was the height of oral expression and not only was it diplomatic, but also was full of idiomatic expressions and figures of speech. These oral expressions found their way into the *sigidrigi* and *serenicumu* lyrics.

In moving away from the traditional village lifestyle and settling in Suva, the early Suva Fijians had inadvertently created a new music and dance form – the *sigidrigi/serenicumu* and the *butukai*. This is a social reality that the iTaukei today must appreciate and give more respect to. It is Fiji's original musical expression that had its beginnings in the traditional *vucu* and *meke* chants. By interrogating the lyrics, history from the perspective of the locals can emerge as the slivers of history on early Fijian society in Suva, upon which the books are as yet silent.

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