Defining culture, heritage and identity in Fijian Context

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Abstract

Culture and tradition form an individual’s identity, the values instilled by the culture is a reflection of how people tend to live their lives. In Fiji, the value of tradition has passed through stages of change from the pre-colonial era to the post-colonial era and the present. The main aim of the research is to highlight the views of 6 individuals on culture, heritage and identity. The opinion expressed by them on the topics was achieved by a questionnaire (Appendix B), oral interview and informal discussions. The 6 participants are highly qualified professionals from Fiji who work in a firm operated by the United Kingdom (UK). The participants are a mixture of ethnicities, marital status and gender. The questionnaire has been analyzed with the use of sub topics and the views and thoughts are elaborated with relevant examples. The article concludes by giving recommendations expressed by the individuals.

Keywords: cultural maintenance, preservation, individual identity, tradition, cultural values
Introduction

Fiji is a country which is blessed with various cultures; the lives of many people are bound by the values of their traditions which establish their identity. However, many factors are contributing to changes in each culture. These changes are having immense effect in the maintenance and preservation of culture, heritage and identity. This essay outlines how individuals value their culture, the different aspects of the culture which they have experienced to be changing as well as discussing the ways of maintaining the significance of one’s culture which is a challenge presently.

Furthermore, there have been various shifts in the cultural aspects, some of which include, dress code, hair style, eating habits, languages as well as dialects, special functions such as funerals and weddings. The findings reveal that individuals are concerned with the drastic changes that come about daily. However, suggestions and recommendations made during the research will provide insight into how the challenges faced could be dealt with.

Bakar (2011), has stated that even in a country such as Malaysia that has experienced modernization and globalization to a much greater degree than many other Muslim countries. This statement by Bakar (2011), has given some insight into changes in family values and traditions in a country like Malaysia which is something similar to the views expressed by the participants that will be discussed and examined at length in this essay.

Value of Culture

In the research, it was found that all the participants stated that they valued culture in all aspects. One of the participants stated that ‘I value my culture for giving me identity; it gives me a sense of definition and also enables me to gauge my presence in my society’. Moreover, another participant who is 23 years of age has stated the value of culture by approaching it from a direct point of view and says ‘I value my culture by the way I dress, speak and how I present myself to other people’.

In addition, a participant had chosen to explain how he values his culture by giving an example, he states ‘I value my culture in the sense that it sets me apart and gives me a sense of identity and uniqueness, example when visiting a village for the first time, you bring a ‘sevusevu’ this is a form of introduction and this also enables the visited village to know their relationship with one and how to behave towards that person’. This highlights that even though modernization has taken place, people value traditions such as these to the highest level.

Finally, a participant had taken a rather different approach showing how she values culture by explaining that they watch and listen to the I-taukei talk shows. It is interesting to note the
opinion expressed as it informs that, for people who are unable to practice their culture make use of the modern technology in making every little effort in valuing their roots.

**Changes Observed**

There have been many changes observed by individuals within their culture and traditions; these will be discussed in detail under the following sub topics, dress code, hair style, eating habits, language, weddings and funeral.

**Dress code** - In Fiji, the dress code is distinct to signify the different ethnic or cultural background a person belongs to. The participants entirely agreed that there has been a shift from traditional dress code to a more westernized style. Three of the respondents highlighted that the dress code change has occurred most with the women than the men. One of the participants has emphasized on the changes that have taken place for women and states “especially for women, there is a shift to modern or western dress patterns. Traditional clothes are being reserved for religious or major cultural events nowadays”. However, one of the respondent’s has stated that even though there has been a shift in dressing styles, the dress code for men is becoming acceptable and states ‘dress code are not strictly adhered to, men can wear vest and even shorts at village gatherings’.

**Hair style** - it was interesting to note that all the respondents had a similar view about the hair style people have today. Most of them explained that now people tend to follow a westernized style and the traditional ‘Bui-Ni-Ga’ (Appendix A) is slowly fading away. A respondent says ‘the famous “Bui-Ni-Ga” which was unique is slowly fading away and it is due to the latest fashionable hairstyles’. A similar view is expressed by another respondent who states ‘girls prefer to have straightened hair instead of the i-taukei “Bui-Ni-Ga”’.

**Eating habits** - during the research it was found that due to westernization, even eating habits have been altered to an extent. People find a combination of dishes better and not the usual or traditional meals. Eating using the hands is being replaced by knives and forks for a lot of families and also in functions for example, weddings or receptions. A respondent has explained the reason for the change of habits and states ‘a lot of English and Chinese meals practiced in most households which also influences the buying of easy to cook food’. In fact, the view of the respondent is true in various ways one of which is to do with the convenience of buy precooked food rather than cooking. Furthermore, another respondent explained that the eating habit has completely changed the purpose of fishing and presently people are opting to buy fish from the supermarkets than to go out on fishing trips as a family or even in villages.

**Language** - the respondents had mixed opinion on this topic, 50 percent have stated that there has been an absolute change and people are forgetting their mother tongue whereas the remaining 50 percent have argued that people use code switching where possible. The
respondents also stated that people presently combine the English language with the mother tongue in most situations. One of the respondents has remarked that ‘the language is a fusion of many dialects and other languages, very few people know their mother tongue’. A similar thought is expressed by another participant who says ‘very little of the mother tongue is used nowadays’.

It can be often observed that due to the concept of high prestige and low prestige, people find that those who speak less of their mother tongue and more of English are considered more intellectual. This concept gives rise to parents urging their children to focus more on the English language than their first language. One participant adds ‘fewer children speak i-taukei language in their own homes and schools’.

Weddings- traditional weddings have gone through various stages of change from marriage proposals to the actual wedding ceremony. Two of the respondents share a similar idea which is the concept of ‘couple elopement’. The first respondent says ‘in the past weddings were scare and important; an occasion which the two families looked forward to. Nowadays, it is made easy for couples and some even end up eloping’. Similarly, another respondent adds ‘before it was protocol to ask a father’s approval before marriage, now there is more elopement’.

The opinion and thoughts expressed show that the value of marriage has changed so much. Another respondent has explained on the same issue and points out on the engagement before the wedding. She states ‘usually the groom’s family would ask the bridegroom’s family for permission in a traditional way but this is not common these days. Nowadays, couples usually get engaged and married as they please without permission from their parents as the western culture teaches them to be more independent’.

People tend to have more pride in the manner in which the wedding ceremony is conducted. For example, a participant emphasizes that today weddings are more for friends and less for families ‘lots of modern weddings, they have them in hotels and not in the villages furthermore, less family members are invited to weddings than friends’. In addition, one of the respondents has also commented on the dressing style at weddings and says ‘people now prefer suits and dresses instead of ‘masi wear’’.

Funerals- different arguments were highlighted on this topic; some have commented on money matters whereas others have explained on cross cultural changes. A participant has stated ‘before the service was elaborated but now more shortened’. Another respondent adds a similar statement saying ‘people cut short funeral protocols to save money’. The concept of saving money has led to some important aspects of the funeral protocol to be observed briefly or to in some situations not observed at all. For example, in Hindu culture, some families need to perform final funeral rituals for 13 to 16 days. However, some families tend to keep the final rituals to only 3 days therefore they rush through some very important traditions that need to be
performed. In addition, one of the participants states that even though the funeral is conducted traditionally, there is the strong influence of Christianity.

Lost Traditions

There are many traditions which people used to appreciate in the past but these are slowly losing its place in the community, the society or as individual families. One of these would include; having extended families which was a common norm in the past. As times change, the move from extended family to nuclear family is becoming conspicuous. The aim of traditional families was to have the grandparents around to share their knowledge about the culture, religious values as well as be a pillar of guidance. Bakar (2011) adds, given the family and societal values embedded in the traditional roles of grandparents and near relatives, it is important to redress the problems arising from the loss of the traditional physical nearness in the relations between the family and near relatives by looking for some forms of compensation for this loss that modern life and its facilities could provide. Furthermore, Bakar (2011) elaborates, that it is a difficult problem to solve, but finding a replacement for the loss in question is worth trying since the family institution and therefore society as well as have suffered a great deal from the consequences of this loss.

In addition, participants explained on some traditions which they used to have during their childhood but have now disappeared. Two of the respondents explained about ‘Vakatatalo’ which is explained as playing toys with other friends and mixing with the children from neighbours or in the village. This used to be done collectively and by the will of the children. Furthermore, both the respondents have stated that children nowadays spend more time on the internet and playing video games than socializing with kids in outdoor activities which they valued while growing up. A few of the participants highlighted on different celebrations such as; the celebration of a new born baby and New Year’s Day. One of them has explained that celebrating of New Year’s Day was mostly in the villages but that has shifted to towns and hotels now.

Factors Contributing Towards the Cultural Changes

The reasons for the cultural changes or the contributing factors have been similar with all the respondents. All the 6 participants have stated westernization/modernization as the major factor which has led to the various changes in individual cultures and traditions in Fiji today. However, one of the respondents has stated intermarriages as one of the contributing factors towards the changes affecting culture and identity. The respondent has stated on intermarriage that ‘we are not sure which culture to adapt, lots of mixed feelings’.

In addition, migration is also of the factor that has resulted in the younger generation being unappreciative of their culture. In the South Indian community in Fiji, there is a famous folk
dance called ‘Ti-ri-ku-tu’ which means stories from the religious books told through dance and song. However, the language used is ‘Tamil’ the mother tongue of most South Indians. Since the veterans who were masters in such art migrated to other countries, the folk dance is dying a slow death presently.

Moreover, it was also highlighted by 60 percent of the respondents that employment also contributes significantly towards the changes. The employment sector in Fiji has accommodated the English language and the western work style in many aspects from dress code, team dynamics, operations and to time management and so on. As the employees spend most of the time working, they comprehend the ethics followed at the workplace and adapt that similarly at their homes.

Effectiveness of Culture, Heritage and Identity Maintenance Today

The most important fact that needs to be considered with the various shifts and changes occurring with the culture is maintenance. It needs to be mentioned whether or not there are enough opportunities for the maintenance of our culture, heritage and identity. Many of the respondents have argued that not enough is being done to main the culture and they have sighted many reasons for that. One of respondents has put the onus on leaders of the society; she states ‘in the South Indian context, we do not seem to have many strong leaders who could direct and support the learning of the South Indian culture and tradition. It will take a lot of effort and if individuals are committed in making a change’. The opinion expressed by her is directed towards the leaders and it is justified as the leaders have an authoritative approach which can encourage maintenance of the culture.

To add, a respondent has stated that due to modernization people are not able to appreciate their culture thus leading to a decline in maintenance. He states ‘people nowadays are focused more on being westernized and do not really appreciate the uniqueness of their individual cultures. There are just some schools which have culture in their curriculum but not all’. Interestingly, another respondent has given a different view on cultural maintenance and shares that it is an oversight on the government’s part. The participant when asked if enough was being done to maintain culture, heritage and identity explained ‘no, because the government has tried to enforce unity as a nation more compared to cultural identity, and given that this has been done at policy level gives little hope to how we as a society or as a family can maintain our identity in time to come’.

Recommendations

The essay has examined the various aspects of culture, heritage and identity which is valued by individuals and society as well as those aspects which have been lost and also on maintenance. Furthermore, all the respondents have provided significant recommendations
which will benefit everyone in facing the challenge of preserving and maintaining our culture, heritage and identity. These are as follows:

- Accordingly to Bakar (2011), more studies and research need to be taken on contemporary challenges faced by the family institution; a national research institute is perhaps needed that is dedicated to the pursuit of intensive research on Islam and family values and the family institution. Even though reference is being made to the Islamic community this applies to Fiji as well. If more research is focused on family values it will lead to a wider coverage of the traditions to continue and provide great understanding of preservation. Furthermore, one of the respondents has stated that even though Fiji has a few cultural centers, it needs to be made more obvious. She states ‘make our cultural centers more obvious and prominent and more active marketing. Incentives should be given to people for joining cultural events’.

- Awareness is vital in promoting and maintaining the culture and 80 percent of the respondents have elaborated on this. One of the participants states ‘create more awareness for example hosting cultural events where anyone from any ethnic group, age group can participate to learn and eventually understand the importance of culture, and our identity’. A similar view was expressed by another respondent and she states that ‘there should be more marketing and teaching about our culture. If we lose it now, the next generation will lose them all’.

- Furthermore, education is also a factor to consider in inculcating the significance of one’s culture. Many of the respondents have recommended making culture classes compulsory in schools. A participant explains ‘all schools should be encouraged to have culture as part of their curriculum’. Another respondent adds ‘vernacular languages and classes on traditional dances and ceremonies should be introduced as a priority in all schools. Conduct workshops to educate all Fijians on their own culture and traditions’.

- Bakar’s (2011) recommendation is that socio-economic policy makers need to be more sensitive to the safeguard of family values and the virtues of the family institution in their pursuit of socio-economic development. A view similar to Bakar’s has been explained by one of the respondents and he states ‘I believe that perseveration of culture should start from policy level, governments needs to realize that our identity makes us unique. Fiji should quickly install everything that the i-taukei and Fiji Indians hold sacred’.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the research has brought light to significant issues that are being faced by parents, the society and the nation in inculcating our culture, heritage and identity. Bakar (2011), comments, the strongest defenders of the traditional family are known to come from among the faithful followers of the traditional religion. We can therefore say that the future of the traditional family will depend to a large extent on the strengths of the traditional religions. The recommendations highlighted in the research, will provide various insights into how the struggling issues can be resolved.

In addition, further research would be able to give more details on how the culture could be preserved in generations of all the ethnic groups in Fiji.
Reference


Appendix

Appendix A:

The Buiniga:

Source: Mere Gaunavou, Project Coordinator at Projects Abroad Fiji. Dated: 24th October 2013
Appendix B: Questionnaire

Defining culture, heritage and identity

What are culture, heritage and identity?

*People learn and are influenced by the place and the people around them. In a country like Fiji so many people have learned from stories told to them. These stories carry information and ideas about life and living and shared customs, traditions and memories from parents to children. However, this tradition is changing.*

Name: ____________________________

1. Please state in what ways you value your culture? Use examples where necessary.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. What have been the changes that you have observed in your culture that has taken place over time? Please use the following list and add your own if you like.
   a. Dress code-
   b. Hair style-
   c. Eating habits-
   d. Language-
   e. Weddings-
   f. Funerals-

3. What are some of the traditions or celebrations that you observed when growing up that have lost its value today?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. What are some of the factors which have contributed towards the changes in your culture?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. Do you think enough is being done by parents, schools, and the society in maintaining our culture, heritage and identity? Please give reasons.
6. What are the things that you feel can be done to preserve our culture? Please give specific examples where possible.

Thank you for your time and contribution towards this research.
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