



Hon. Laisenia Qarase

Prime Minister and Minister for Fijian Affairs,
Culture & Heritage and Minister for National Reconciliation & Unity

Remarks at the official opening of the Fiji Arts Council 2003 Combined Craft Fair

Upper Foyer
Civic Auditorium, Suva

Tuesday, July 8th, 2003
10.00am

The Honourable Minister for Women, Social Welfare and
Poverty Alleviation;

The Chairman and Members of the Fiji Arts Council;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As Minister for Fijian Affairs, Culture and Heritage – and
as someone who believes strongly in the importance of
preserving our Fijian heritage – I thank the Fiji Arts
Council for asking me to open the 2003 Combined Craft
Fair.

My wife Leba, of course, also has a deep interest in preserving and promoting Fijian arts and crafts. About this time last year, while I was hosting a very large meeting of African, Caribbean and Pacific leaders, Leba took on the job of looking after their spouses. The programme was left to her to decide.

Some of you will remember her arriving at the National Craft Fair, in Nadi's Dominion Gardens, leading a group big enough to fill two buses!

It was a good choice. Everyone in her party thoroughly enjoyed the experience. As with many overseas visitors, they were fascinated to see that traditional craft skills are still very much alive in Fiji, painstakingly passed on from mother to daughter, and father to son, as the modern world speeds by.

Together with our chiefly system, our mekes, yaqona ceremonies and other traditional rituals, these skills are part of what makes us the people we are. Great care, therefore, must be taken to ensure we do not lose them – to do so would be to lose a vital part of our uniqueness.

The danger is very real. Important traditional skills have disappeared from most parts of our provinces within my lifetime. The Fiji Arts Council is sometimes asked to introduce skill revival programmes in order to re-establish them. That is why this Fair, and others like it, is so important.

The people who have their work on display here can be very proud of their special talents. They are able to fashion objects not only of usefulness, but also of great beauty, from basic natural materials such as leaves, wood and clay. Items entered in the competitions are identical in every respect to those made by our ancestors.

Our craftspeople bring our past to life, and make it something we can see and touch. Often, they are also mines of cultural and historical knowledge. We are very fortunate to find so many of them gathered under one roof. For this special South Pacific Games year, the annual craft fairs of the Central, Northern and Western Divisions have been combined, and there is the bonus of exhibitors from Rotuma.

Around us are weavers, wood carvers, potters and specialists in masi from all over Fiji, each with the finest examples of their particular craft. Their presence here tells us another of Fiji's ancient traditions has been preserved – the coconut wireless still works as well as ever!

No matter how far off the beaten track our craftspeople might live, word always seems to reach them that the craft

fair is on, and that their presence will be greatly welcomed!

Coming from an island in the Lau Group, I am pleased to see my own people so well represented. Like myself, many Lauans have settled in other parts of Fiji, and those you find here have brought with them their traditional craft skills.

I look forward to seeing how they have fared in the competitions this year – they usually do rather well. In a moment it will be my pleasure to hand out the prizes according to the decisions of the judges, so we will soon find out!

The Fiji Arts Council is quite strict on what is acceptable for entry in the competition sections. They try very hard to ensure that all items are totally authentic. A basket traditionally made purely from voivoi, for example, but

decorated with masi, would not be allowed. To some people this may seem harsh, but it is done in the interests of preserving our culture intact.

Should you choose to buy something here, you are really buying a museum piece. Remember also the person selling it is the person who made it. The money goes straight to where it rightly belongs.

Ladies and gentlemen, with your permission, on behalf of us all, I would like to express our appreciation to the exhibitors, in their own language, for giving us this opportunity to see and admire their work.

Ni sa tiko saka na Marama kei na Turaga mai na veiyasai Viti.

Au gusui keimami tiko yani ena neimami vakavinavinaka vei kemuni yadua sara ena nomuni mai vakaitavi ena

vakaraitaki cakacaka ni liga, ka tekivutaki tiko ena siga nikua.

Keimami sa qoroqoro ka taleitaka na totoka kei na maqosa ni nomuni cakacaka.

Au vakaraitaka tiko ena noqu vosa na kena bibi ni nomuni i tavi kei na cakacaka. Esa i yau talei vakaitaukei, ka sa dodonu meda vakamareqeta ka taqomaka. Me vakaga na noda i tovo kei na i vakarau vakaitaukei, na veika eso eda rawata ena noda vakayagataka na taledi sa solia vei keda yadua na Kalou, sai ukuuku ni noda bula nai Taukei ena noda Vanua lomani oqo ko Viti.

Vinaka vakalevu.