

Archives connecting with the community

Opeta Alefaio

The National Archives of Fiji, Fiji



CC BY 4.0 2016 by Opeta Alefaio. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract:

Archives should be about community. The value of archives lies not just in the ordered management of its resources, but especially in the use of those resources by the people. However, there are considerable obstacles undermining efforts to maximise archival use by the public, especially for resource poor archives in the Pacific. Harsh tropical conditions, natural disasters, low societal understanding of the role of archives, inadequate storage facilities, very low funding levels, lack of a career path leading to high staff turnover rates, and unavailability of capacity building opportunities are all issues confronting Pacific archivists and records managers. These concerns can and do force archivists to concentrate their efforts internally, on matters they feel they “can control.” But it is an archives ability to be outward facing, to engage with others which has the greatest potential to allow it to address its ongoing issues over time. If we do not build relationships and hunt for opportunities to demonstrate our value to the community then we will have a difficult time convincing them that we are worth investing in. This paper will examine how the National Archives of Fiji has attempted to utilize engagement to 1) find solutions to long term problems, 2) improve access to information by physically taking archival services to the community, 3) and utilise salvaged media and social media to connect with the community in powerful new ways.

Background

The National Archives of Fiji (NAF) was established in 1954 as a Branch of the former Colonial Secretary’s Office under the name Central Archives of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission. It was a joint depository for the records of the Colony of Fiji and of the Western Pacific High Commission. The Central Archives gained departmental status in 1966. When Fiji Gained independence in 1970 all the records of the W.P.H.C. and those of its territorial governments were transferred to a new Archives and the Central Archives and the Western Pacific High Commission was renamed the National Archives of Fiji.

NAF administers two Acts. All our roles and responsibilities stem from these. They are 1) the *Public Records Act (PRA)*, Cap 108 of the laws of Fiji and 2) the *Libraries Act*, Cap 109 of the laws of Fiji.

The Department has two main objectives spelt out in law:

i) Evidence & Education – Making Fiji a Knowledge Based Society

To acquire, preserve, and make accessible in accordance with access regulations a) important *archival records*, and b) all *publications* printed and published in Fiji. Together the *archival records* and *publications* comprise a large part of the nation's collective memory.

The *archival records* act as the corporate memory of government which informs policy formulation and enables evidence based governance, and for the general public they offer proof of decisions and activities thereby supporting their rights and entitlements are safeguarded.

The *publications* compliment the *archival* holdings, and together they stand as a vast reservoir of information for a wide array of users from professional researchers, lawyers, and policy writers to students, farmers, and villagers.

ii) Government Recordkeeping – Good Governance

By convention, national archives bodies are the recordkeeping authority of their country. This is so for Fiji. The PRA directs the Archives to examine and advise government agencies on the safe and systematic management of their records (corporate memory). Authentic, accurate, accessible records provide the foundation for the efficient and effective conduct of government business. NAF meets this obligation through records surveys of agencies and the conduct of recordkeeping training through the year.

These considerable responsibilities come with a particular set of challenges which are deeply ingrained and very common to archives in the South Pacific.

Pacific Problems

Unfortunately, the South Pacific Region is not a very friendly environment for recordkeepers. There are issues hampering overall development, which in turn has a direct bearing on recordkeeping, and then there are concerns which are specific to archives and records management which continue to undermine Pacific records professionals.

Primarily, the biggest problem for Pacific archives is the low level of awareness of the value of records in modern society. Records are not recognized as strategic assets, and recordkeeping is

not usually reflected in national development plans. This unawareness is also reflected in the assigning of recordkeeping responsibilities to very junior officers, who often take on a records role in addition to their primary role. Under these circumstances it is entirely understandable that such officers eagerly look for opportunities in other fields. The absence of a career path, poor working conditions, and severe under-resourcing results in extremely high staff turnover, which means that national archives and other recordkeeping bodies are not able to see the fruits of any meagre training they may have provided for such individuals.

The weight of these problems routinely force archives to face inward as they seek to exert some control through processing of consignments and document conservation works. These efforts are important as they are geared at the long term accessibility of documentary heritage but they can reduce an archive to being perceived as a warehouse, or the place old records go to die. Under these circumstances it is difficult to demonstrate value, or persuade funding bodies to provide the resources to begin addressing our long standing challenges.

Public engagement and demonstrating value

In 2012 the NAF began to look for different ways to connect with the public. It was apparent to us that we could not wait for people to come to us, so we started to look for opportunities to take archives holdings out to the community. At this point we did not have an allocation for public engagement, and needed to make sure our efforts had as big an impact as possible so we prioritised engagement opportunities which allowed us to collaborate with other organisations on important themes. Our first such opportunity was World Book Day, celebrated in the rural hinterlands of the Tailevu province. The positive feedback our outreach team brought back from the event, emphasised the need to prioritise public engagement as key strategy to demonstrate value and connect with the community.¹

"It is satisfying and heartening to see so many people, especially students flocking and asking historical questions at the National Archives booth"
(Taito Raione, NAF's outreach team leader, March 2012)²

We continued to make community outreach a priority by diverting any funds we could spare to producing very basic pamphlets and brochures and information products to make our presence felt. A total of four public outreach exercises were carried out for 2012. The following year (2013) the Ministry of Finance gave us a new "Public Awareness" allocation of twenty thousand (\$20,000) Fijian dollars (approximately \$ USD10,000). While this is not a very big amount, it was certainly enthusiastically received, allowing us to increase to eleven (11) outreach exercises in 2013, then fourteen (14) in 2014, and twenty four (24) in 2015. Consequently, our public awareness allocation has been increased to fifty thousand (\$50,000) Fijian dollars (approximately \$USD25,000) for the year 2016.

¹ <http://www.parbica.org/news/world-book-day.aspx> accessed June 3rd, 2016.

² Ibid.

Not all outreach opportunities are created equal. The growth of our public engagement programme is built on three tiers of outreach. The first and most common is outreach in urban areas which support a theme, such as careers expo at one of our universities.³ The second is outreach is approached in the same way but situated in peri-urban areas,⁴ and the third tier is targeted at isolated rural communities. This third tier is the most powerful.

Three examples of the impact of outreach in isolated rural communities are listed here:

1) **Rotuma Day**

Rotuma is an isolated Polynesian island situated at the very north of the Fiji group. It takes two days to reach by boat. NAF joined the Government Roadshow to the island taking with us i) land records, ii) genealogical records, iii) copies of the islands annexation document with the British crown, iv) historical photos, and v) historical audio visual footage. Rotuman's had never seen these records. This was the very first time that they were given access to their documentary heritage.

They were very eager to engage with their records, forming a large que at the NAF tent putting pressure on the event organisers to speed up the launch of the roadshow so that they could access their information.



³ The National Archives of Fiji exhibition at the University of the South Pacific Open Day <https://www.facebook.com/NationalArchivesOfFiji/posts/798900480243473> accessed on June 3rd, 2016.

⁴ Girmitya day celebrations in Nausori <https://www.facebook.com/NationalArchivesOfFiji/posts/823850034415184> accessed on June 3rd, 2016.

“SDG 16.10 Access to information”. Rotuman’s seeing their land records for the first time.



“SDG 16.10 Access to information”. Happy to know their heritage is secure and accessible.



“SDG 16.10 Access to information”. Heritage accessed by all ages.

2) Pacific Indentured Labourer Records

On November 2014, the descendants of Pacific Indentured Labourers celebrated the 150th anniversary of their forefathers arrival in Fiji. This community endured considerable hardships during their period of indenture and long afterward.

Over time these people had come to view their history negatively. They were a composite of various ethnicities who had been forced to come together as a matter of survival. Some of them had come to mistrust their oral histories. But when we took their records to them, they were overcome with emotion to know that authentic archival evidence shows who their forebears were, and where they came from. Their 150th commemoration was an important occasion for them, and NAF’s participation added a dimension to proceedings that they did not envisage.

“Without the presence of National Archives most of the descendants will still rely on the verbal history relayed to them through stories. They are now confident that what they know is something that was recorded during that time then and there and are reliable information. Many of them were so moved they had tears in their eyes when they returned from your tent.”⁵

⁵ Organising Committee Chair Mr Pateresio Nunu, Interview January 2015.



“SDG 16.10 Access to information”. Descendants of Pacific Indentured Labourers at the NAF tent.



“SDG 16.10 Access to information.” Routine government business records which become archives can have big implications for understanding identity.

3) Namosi Highlands Outreach

Equally as important as text based records such as land and immigration records are photographic records. Taking historical photographs out to the community has a particularly visceral effect. This can connect the public to persons they have not seen for decades, captured in a picture they did not know was available. We get lots of feedback of the community enjoying this newly found access to their history, but in the case of the Namosi outreach in 2015 a camera crew happened to be on site to film one such reaction. This interview is now available on the National Archives of Fiji youtube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ia2s94QfvPM>

“I was very surprised to see this photograph, very surprised indeed. My father passed away in 1990, and from then till now I haven’t found any pictures of him. I feel blessed today to finally find a picture at this event. This picture was taken in 1966, and I was only one year old at the time. I feel very happy and blessed to have found this photograph, when I saw it I felt so overwhelmed that I actually kissed the photograph of my late father. I feel very grateful and especially blessed to find this photograph of my late father which I have been searching for a very long time.”⁶

The potential of historical media is considerable. Unfortunately they tend to be ignored in the Pacific as there is no local expertise on how to deal with at risk media. However, if such holdings can be restored and made accessible they can help a collecting agency to demonstrate value and win new audiences.

Fiji’s Historical Audio Visual (AV) and Photographic Collection

In 2006 Fiji’s official historical AV and photographic collection consisting of two thousand (2,000) hours of AV footage and two hundred thousand (200,000) historical photographs was brought to NAF for “temporary storage.” In 2012 the NAF assumed full ownership of these materials. A new team was established to start working on the photographs, and professional advice was sought from the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audio Visual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) who put us in touch with the Australian based digital assets and film management firm DAMsmart. Using feedback from SEAPAVAA and DAMsmart, NAF was able to secure one million (\$1,000,000) Fiji dollars (approximately \$USD500,000) to restore and digitise the footage.

DAMsmart won the contract to restore and digitize the footage through the Fiji government tender process. They were able to restore ninety seven percent (97%) of the holdings, which was digitized and installed in a Media Asset Management System commissioned onsite at NAF, along with the restored originals. Redundant copies are currently stored off site with DAMsmart in Australia, with plans to relocate them to off site storage in Fiji.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ia2s94QfvPM> accessed June 3rd 2016.

Following the successful conclusion of the project in December 2013, NAF formed a partnership with the agency which created the footage to enable the curation and repackaging of the footage into a digestible educational programme called “Back in Time” which is broadcast on free to air television. This ensures that the public have ready access to their heritage at no cost to themselves nor us. The programme has been very positively received, and is exposing the public to facets of their heritage they had no idea existed. This footage contains many cultural practices which have passed from everyday life, or which have become totally dormant.

“This is important, as people of this land, we need to know how our culture has evolved over the years, and the developments that have taken place, and why they did that in those days and why they are not being done now. So those are interesting questions that need to be addressed. I know there is a Government move to try and preserve culture and some of those traditions, and I think that’s an on-going process, but unless you know what happened then, which is recorded by the video, we wouldn’t know, because people have died, people who knew, who had the knowledge and probably the skills have gone, but the film has got it all recorded, so we can watch it and learn and probably try and revive it.”⁷

The footage is now being used by the Ministry of Taukei (Indigenous) Affairs to revitalise such practices in the community. Back in Time is about to enter a third season, to run over 40 episodes. The first two seasons ran over 70 episodes.

Social Media

Mid way through 2015 we knew the impact of our outreach was deep, but we wanted to increase the breadth of that impact. We looked for ways to increase the numbers of people who we could serve through our rural outreach. To do this we used our Facebook account to announce any upcoming rural outreach, and we looked for good historical images from the area the outreach was to take place to attract social media users. While we do not expect rural Fijians to have ready access to Facebook (though some do) we do expect their family and friends in urban areas to have access and expect them to send out the message to their contacts in “the bush.” The results were more than we could have hoped for. The community took full ownership of the historical images we posted, and started adding precious metadata to them. These photo’s came to us in a very unorganized manner. Along with the footage, they were un-ceremonially dumped, in disarray and in an advanced state of decay. This meant that we had little to no metadata. But through the Facebook posts the public are commenting on who are in the photographs, where or when they may have been taken, and how they are personally connected to the images. In short, the public are “making history.”

⁷ Nemani Delaibatiki, Editor of the Fiji Sun speaking with Small World Stories, 2015.



For example, to commemorate International Biodiversity Day (May 22nd), whose theme was “Maintaining Biodiversity; Sustain People and their Livelihoods,” we posted this image of a traditional fish drive on the island of Beqa. For such a great image there is likely to be prompt and animated feedback, but discussions ran deep with people from different parts of Fiji describing how their village practiced something similar, and what they named it. Then one user gave a full description of the cultural significance of such a fish drive, the parties involved, practices put into place 2-3 years before the fish drive to ensure the success of the drive and the sustainability of marine resources, and naming the special occasions the catch was used for.

“To give you all an understanding how the Qolikubu -Yavirau - is done in Beqa. The Tui Sawau will call on the Daulevu (Head fisherman of the Qonedau) to hold a Fish-drive (Yavirau). This will be done for a special function, or a birth of a chiefly child, or kali (weening) or a chiefly child or the 100 nights of the Last Tui Sawau. The Daulevu will then organize everything from fixing Na bunegowe (The hand made net) and get they will go and get about 1000 plus meters of vines which will be prepared along with the long sticks. Once everything is ready, then the Yavusa of Sawau will be called on to go to the reef. (Please understand that the area that will be used has be under a tabu (no fish order) for 2-3 years, this will ensure plenty of fish for the Drive. This is not done nor planned by just anyone for any function as it would clear the reef of Fish. At the reef, the main boats will position the net, this net is very big and the old net is due to be donated to

the Fiji Museum for a permanent display along with Vilavilavevo (Fijian Firewalking). The Vines will be then stretched out in a circle with people standing and holding the vine and a long stick. They will then beat the ground with the sticks and a group will start to pull the vine. The Gonedau is the one in-charge and calling out instructions. Once they get close like in the photo most people are off on the side, and the net is filled up. It is an amazing sight as you see fish swimming to the net. One thing you will see is the small fish will be able to swim past the net, so only the larger fish will get caught. The amount of fish caught will be plenty, and once it is taken back to Dakuibeqa village it will be divided between everyone, with the best fish mainly the White fish (Kulabo) is given to the Tui Sawau and his family as it is their fish. I know other parts of Fiji do the Yavirau but I can only speak about this one as I am from Dakuibeqa, Sawau, Beqa and from the Mataqali of the Tui Sawau. Vinaka (Thank you).⁸

According to Facebook this post received over seven thousand seven hundred likes (7,700) and reached over one hundred thousand (100,000) Facebook accounts. That amounts to an engaged audience approaching 1 percent (0.85%) of Fiji's population and a total audience of eleven percent (11.11%) of Fiji's population. And this post is not even among our 4 most popular posts.

According to Facebook our most popular post reached 162K, and was liked by 13.8K people. That's an overall audience of about 18% of our population and an engaged audience of 1.5% of our population.

⁸<https://www.facebook.com/NationalArchivesOfFiji/photos/a.130663223733872.25868.121739194626275/817259288407592/?type=3&theater> accessed 7th July 2016.



National Archives of Fiji added 19 new photos.

[Like Page](#)

Published by Opeta Alefaio [?] · 9 October · 🌐

Happy Fiji Day weekend everyone! Tomorrow Fiji turns 45. Here are some images from our birth day. God bless Fiji.



162,820 people reached

[View Results](#)

[Like](#) [Comment](#) [Share](#)

Vika Waradi, Sulu Daunivalu, Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua and 13,582 others like this.

633 shares

[View previous comments](#)

47 of 129

Social media has also enabled us to build alliances and “discover” Fijian heritage which are stored abroad. We have an established relationship with the Fijian Art Research Project jointly hosted by the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, to post on the NAF Facebook page Fijian heritage in their collection for Fijians in Fiji. This enables us to give Fijians access to cultural items that are stored very far away. This can at times become very confronting because various cultural manifestations and designs have passed from contemporary practice, so much so that Fijians do not recognise them as being Fijian and at times strongly questioning their authenticity.



National Archives of Fiji shared Fijian Art Research Project's post.

Published by Opeta Alefaio 191 · 2 June · 🌐

A couple of months ago we shared an image of a magnificent piece of masi from the Fijian Art Research Project (FRPA). The design is unique and has passed from contemporary masi making practice (like other cultural practices). So much so that it caused many to question it's authenticity. Here we have more examples of such designs with clarifications from FRPA. Enjoy!



Fijian Art Research Project added 9 new photos.

2 June · 🌐

Out of all of our posts, there seems to be one thing that gets everybody really excited: masi!

Much like the restored AV footage, through these collaborative efforts we are able to (re) introduce Fijians to their heritage in a very real way. Where we would have no hope of being able to pay for such large collections to be brought home for temporary exhibitions, social media grants us the means to find and make these items accessible to our people. If Archives and other collecting agencies are unable or unwilling to take some risks by looking beyond our long standing difficulties then it becomes increasingly difficult to demonstrated value, and build new relationships which can be leveraged for the benefit of our communities.

Conclusion

Archives are about community. If the community does not know you exist, and see you actively justifying your existence then it will be very difficult to address traditional archives challenges. Through our increased efforts at public engagement we have secured a “public outreach” allocation which was then boosted by one hundred and fifty percent (150%). Our increased visibility helped us garner support to deal the “problem” national historical AV and photographic collection which were in an advanced state of decay and in the case of the AV, on the cusp of being lost for all time. This has enabled Fiji to begin (re)educating its population about waning and dormant cultural practices through free to air TV programming, as well as take a targeted look at revitalising dormant cultural practices in the communities where they originated. The new communication channel of social media combined with the restored historical photographs are exposing Fijians to portions of their past, and providing them with a platform to have involved discussions on it. As well as providing a means of finding “lost” heritage to be brought before our communities to discover more about themselves. Engaging with the public, and finding ways to demonstrate unique value in expected and unexpected ways will go a long way to increasing sustainability and proving power of access to information.