

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Fiji without Snorkelling: A Report from the First Fiji Literary Festival **Gillian Dooley**

In the balmy days of early October, one hundred or so people met at the Namaka campus of Fiji National University for Fiji's first Literary Festival, 'Creativity across Communities: Imagining and Imaging the Pacific'. Fiji has three universities, the well-established University of the South Pacific, the newer University of Fiji, founded in 2005 and the new kid on the block, Fiji National University, formed only last year from a merger of a variety of institutions. All three universities cooperated to organise this festival. UniFiji's Professor Satendra Nandan, pioneer of Fijian literature in English, chaired the organising committee, which included his wife, Associate Professor Jyoti Nandan, also of UniFiji, well known short-story writer Professor Subramani from FNU, and Professor Sudesh Mishra from USP.

Presenters hailed from all three institutions as well, with a scattering of overseas visitors – returning expats among them. There were prominent novelists, poets, academics, students, teachers, critics, artists, dancers and musicians, creating a glorious week of cultural and intellectual exchanges on everything from soccer to Mahatma Gandhi, from the future of Fiji Hindi to the history of Rotuman migrants to Torres Strait.

It was wonderful to hear from the people with established international reputations: readings from Fiji's best and brightest, like performance poet Daren Kamali, and poet and academic Sudesh Mishra (not to mention his scintillating daughter Mira, aged eight), brilliant lectures by scholars of the calibre of ANU's Dr Debjani Ganguly and former Fijian High Court judge Nahzat Shameem, and an absorbing talk by painter and poet John Pule. But it was perhaps even more exciting to witness the blossoming scholars of Fiji seizing this rare opportunity of presenting their research and writing with flair and confidence, and fielding questions from leading academics with poise and grace.

The festival – really both a conference and a festival – covered six crammed days, with social occasions every night, often with entertainment from local performers. A highlight for me was the male voice chamber choir, from the Lautoka Campus of FNU, which sang at the final dinner: wonderful strength and subtlety in the performance of music of the Pacific Islands – just thrilling. Add to that the delight of reuniting with old friends and meeting new ones, animated conversations continuing well into the night with the gentle tropical rain falling outside the open window.

I know the First Fiji Literary Festival is intended to be the first of many. I'm sure there will be a second next year, and I hope that more international visitors will be tempted, as I was this year and I surely will be again, to come and see that Fiji has a great deal more to offer than snorkelling, golf and cruises.

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