

A Personal Perspective by Joni Madraiwiwi

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The book *A Personal Perspective* is a record of speeches by Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, who is a lawyer, statesman and an eminent public speaker. The book is a first attempt to publish his thoughts on a plethora of topics touching life in Fiji. These speeches are bound to elevate him further in the public eye as an intellectual - a status he is reluctant to be identified with. Public intellectuals are usually academics, statesman and writers, who rise up to speak at critical times to the people and through their speeches and writings affect the thinking of their community or humanity as a whole. They can speak truth to power them with their increasing public status; intellectuals can use this as opportunity to advance human freedom. *A Personal Perspective* is a perfect instance of this.

I have not seen any review of this important book and therefore felt it necessary to review it in order to draw attention to it. Although Madraiwiwi has been speaking to us frequently over the years, apart from commentaries in the daily papers, there is no published book to chronicle all his speeches. This book is an attempt to share with a wider audience what he has aptly called his personal perspectives.

The book covers a range of subjects that touch on present day Fijian life. The Fijian decree passed recently by the Bainimarama government that classified all ethnic groups in Fiji as Fijians finds significant support in the book. Madraiwiwi has always regarded people of Fiji as one. He addresses issues that affect all people such as ethnic identity, politics and governance, economic problems, human rights and education as well as philosophical subjects such as death, love, forgiving and caring.

Madraiwiwi strives to interpret Fiji to us the way it was, the way it is and the future directions in which the country is moving. He is frank and honest in his thoughts and pronouncements. He is always clear in his de-

livery; he can be passionate and persuasive when necessary. These are the true qualities of a committed intellectual.

One particular subject that Madraiwiwi is most anxious to communicate to the reader is the subject of ethnic difference and how we relate to one another. It is evident from his speeches how he has endeavoured to bridge the barriers between the two main ethnic groups in Fiji - the Fijians (iTaukei) and Fiji Indians. Although he comes from a chiefly background (relations with the Cakobau family), Madraiwiwi has attempted to understand all classes of people who have called Fiji their home. He reflects, 'Some measure of cultural bonding is essential to our sense of nationhood'.

As already suggested, the book covers a range of topics; I will however focus on three speeches so that the readers can get an idea of the quality of his thought and writing.

In a speech titled 'Cultural Bonding and Nationhood', Madraiwiwi expresses his perspective on Fijian identity. We tend to associate ourselves mainly with the respective ethnic communities to which we belong. People in this country are still uncomfortable with the idea of Fijian as a term for all citizens. Madraiwiwi disagrees with the exclusive treatment in saying that 'our respective cultures have affirmed our respective identities at the cost of keeping us at arm's length from each other. We have lived side by side rather than with each other.' A profound statement that accurately points to the source of current ethnic tensions in Fiji. There is a need for the people of Fiji to have meaningful engagements with each other. In this, Madraiwiwi reveals his broad idealism that permeates the entire book.

Madraiwiwi's unique perspective resonates in all the pages as he seeks to build bridges over the divided seas of ethnic conflicts. He also speaks eloquently of the need to preserve the national language for 'in this era of globalization, Fijian will not long survive if sustained efforts are not made to protect it'. He asserts that a common language would be a fitting place to build a sense of nationhood. Madraiwiwi's vision transcends narrow language assertions because he understands that it is imperative to interact with each other more frequently through vernacular languages to dispel myths we have about each other. Madraiwiwi is optimistic that the younger generation will be more open and flexible in their attitude to vernacular languages.

Another subject that Madraiwiwi is passionate about is reflected in 'Human Rights, Pacific Values and Traditions'. He gives particular attention to consideration of the local context. He realizes an abstract concept

like human rights should be clearly understood when one deals with relationship between government and the governed. His views were shared in 2006 and it would be interesting to know how they have changed in the current political situation. He upholds trust in people with utmost honesty and abhors nepotism; cronyism, favouritism and incompetence-- public ills that seriously undermine organizations and governments alike. 'Those in authority need to distinguish between opposition to the concept per se, and criticisms about implementation'. These are fine distinctions designed to provoke critical analysis of our present situation and make positive improvements in future. In this chapter, Madraiwiwi has also raised issues on the notion of land ownership, a volatile subject that is touched on sensitively in his reflections. Human right in Fiji is a work-in-progress as reflected further in Madraiwiwi's words. Always for him decency and fairness are the great challenges for all governments and citizens.

The final part of the book is a collection of philosophical thoughts and is aptly illustrated in a eulogy for Savenaca Siwatibau, another of Fiji's bright intellectuals. According to Madraiwiwi, Siwatibau's rise to head Fiji's financial institution came with much sweat and sacrifice. In his essay, Madraiwiwi sheds light on Siwatibau's personal as well as public views. Madraiwiwi says Siwatibau opposed the 1987 coup and the exploitations of it, and felt deeply for the country that he loved and served so faithfully. In this moving recollection Madraiwiwi gives account of one of the most painful journeys of a loyal civil servant. Though Siwatibau left to serve other regional countries, his contribution to Fiji had been heroic.

These are just a few illustrations of Madraiwiwi's narratives, that can legitimately be called literature. His convincing approach is quite refreshing, touching on diverse topics with wit, insight and intelligence. The book is a fine demonstration of Madraiwiwi's ability with language and universal sympathy, qualities required in a worthy writer.

The book was released in 2008. Much has happened in Fiji's political and public life since then; it would be interesting to turn to Madraiwiwi for his personal perspective on subjects that preoccupy many of us who cannot see the future too clearly. Let's hope *A Personal Perspective* is just the beginning, that we will see many more books by this very erudite and exceptional Fijian.