Obama Leader bridges culture and climate leadership through storytelling

John Taukave draws on Rotuman stories to guide Pacific climate leadership and inspire communities globally.

John Taukave stood in a storm on the deck of a cargo ferry somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, two days into a three-day journey to Rotuma. Around him, 250 passengers huddled in one large room as rain slammed the deck and waves tossed the boat.

Then he heard it: traditional chants, which had been passed down through generations.

“In that moment I listen, I find comfort. I find peace,” Taukave recalled. “I found it OK, despite what’s happening around me, around the ship. I found solace in the voices of my aunties and my grandmothers. They may be singing lullabies for the babies to sleep, but they’re actually comforting me along the way.”

That 2018 voyage home to Rotuma, a remote island north of Fiji with a population of 1,300, marked a turning point. Taukave, a 2025-2026 Obama Foundation Asia-Pacific Leader, was returning as a performing artist and scholar on a mission to collect stories from elders and bring that knowledge to the halls of international power.

Today, Taukave works as a cultural ambassador ↗ and technical advisor for Pacific delegations at the International Maritime Organization in London, where nations negotiate shipping regulations and greenhouse gas emissions from maritime shipping.

He does this by bringing to the room the culture, practices, and identity of Pacific nation residents —descendants of the world's most advanced ocean voyagers.

"We're bringing that in terms of open sharing, cultural practice, and sharing in terms of building coalitions, but also having the space to challenge other states in that room," he said.

Using Culture To Change Policy

Ten years ago, even five years ago, negotiators couldn't even say "greenhouse gas emissions" or "climate change," Taukave said. But today, through his work, and the work of countless others like him, Pacific nations are leading efforts to establish frameworks for decarbonizing the shipping industry and ensuring developing nations aren't left behind in that transition.

“What we’re trying to do is we’re trying to take what we’ve done within spaces like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, but also in other spaces, and try to apply those measures within this space and make sure that our voices are incorporated into those frameworks,” Taukave explained.

It’s an unlikely path from the church choirs and performing arts stages of Fiji to the conference rooms of the United Nations. And for Taukave, the work is urgent. Pacific Island nations contribute the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, yet face the most severe impacts of climate change. And for too long, he says, colonial structures have silenced Pacific voices in the very spaces where their futures are decided.

“This particular space, despite its known value about what it does in maritime negotiations, was also a space that held a lot of colonial roots,” Taukave explained. “And so what this meant was a lot of Pacific voices were left behind. They were not being represented enough.”

His solution is simple. Bring the Pacific—its stories, its ceremonies, its way of knowing —directly into those negotiations.

From Fiji To The United Nations

Taukave was born and raised in Fiji on Rotuma, where his father served as a church choir master and his mother sang alto. Music and dance surrounded him. For 15 years, he performed with a Fiji-based performing arts company, traveling to international festivals and sometimes even to nightclubs where patrons sometimes threw beer bottles at the stage.

“We would perform at the biggest climate conferences, but we’d also perform at the grassroots,” he said. “It taught us a lot about what it means to perform anywhere. That’s given us thick skin, but it’s also made us very confident.”

Still, something was missing. Taukave had grown up hearing stories about Rotuma, but didn’t fully understand their deeper meanings—the lessons, values, practices, and ceremonies embedded within them.

“I was an insider in the sense that I was Rotuman by blood, but I was an outsider because I did not know what the stories were,” he explained. ”I listened to those stories, but I did not know the real meanings behind them.”

When he began his master’s studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in Honolulu, Taukave explored that gap. He focused on a single subject: the Armea bird, which is the Rotuman name for the Rotuma myzomela, an endemic species of honeyeater found only on Rotuma.

“There are a lot of our stories that really surround this bird,” he said. “This bird has a lot of symbolism within our cultures and our stories. And so what I did with the company, I started to explore more about this bird and use this bird as a form of reconnection.”

The research required him to return to Rotuma, not just to visit family for Christmas, but to live with elders, to fish with them, to sit on mats for hours listening to stories, and to participate in creative sessions that would inform new performances, or as he put it “to really touch the knowledge of the land.”

Over five years, Taukave created performance pieces with his elders. He documented everything. He wrote songs. He eventually performed his master’s thesis in a collection of nine or 10 performance pieces that told the story of his reconnection. But the most profound moment came after graduation in 2022, when he returned to Rotuma one more time to thank the chief who had guided his research.

After lunch with the chief, Taukave walked to a secluded beach rich with stories about some of the first voyages to the island. He read a book and fell asleep in the sun. When he woke, the Armea—elusive bird he’d spent years trying to understand—sat on his belly.

“It’s there for a few seconds, and I go and tell my chief, and my chief just bursts into tears,” Taukave recalled. “And he says that’s your full-circle moment. The chiefs have given you their blessings, but that moment with the bird is almost like where the land has really now given you its blessings.”

The chief told him something Taukave carries with him daily: “Whatever you do from here on out, you’re taking the whole island with you. It’s not only going to be about you anymore.”

But during the 2025-2026 Obama Leaders Asia-Pacific cohort, a fellow leader, Kresna Hatta, from Indonesia said something that challenged Taukave’s entire approach to his work: look after yourself.

“And for me, it’s something very strange because everything is for the community. All I do is make sure our stories get out. It’s not about me. It’s about my community, my ancestors, and what kind of ancestor I want to be for the next generation,” Taukave shared.

Taukave learned that if didn’t take care of himself, he couldn’t serve his community effectively. The program also taught him about hungry listening and paying attention not just to words but to body language, facial expressions, and the small gestures that reveal deeper truths.

“As a performer, you listen, but you also be hungry to listen more,” Taukave explained. “You’re seeing, you’re envisioning, you’re smelling the whole process of what they’re sharing.”

Talking To The President

Taukave shared the emotion when he was selected to ask President Obama a question during a group session with 200 Obama Leaders.

“I was about to cry,” he admitted. “Just that moment alone was something that I will never forget, and I’ll always keep with me forever. I think that was a highlight of my year.”

President Obama’s advice reinforced what Taukave already knew but needed to hear: Stories are essential to humanity, but it’s equally important to make space for different perspectives on those stories.

“The more we talk about stories, the more we share stories about who we are or about certain issues like climate, I think the more we start to understand what it feels like for those at the front lines,” Taukave said.

Pulling Weeds, Leading

Taukave is pursuing his doctorate degree, researching what he calls “story living,” or how Pacific Islanders embody their stories through ceremony, practice, and performance, rather than abstract learning.

“It’s just part of who we are. And so I had to find a word to satisfy academia, to really embrace what it meant for us living in the islands to really reconnect and what it meant for us, especially with nature,” he shared.

Taukave is currently focusing on a writing workshop, working on the first chapter of his doctoral thesis. He attends Obama Leaders sessions every Saturday morning and he never misses one,

“I’m going to make it,” he said with a smile. “Because it’s beautiful.”

In a few months, Taukave will return to Rotuma to continue his creative sessions with elders, this time focused on international diplomacy rather than the Armea. He’ll sit on mats. He’ll listen to stories. He’ll, as he puts it, pull weeds, which comes from a Rotuman saying: ″Hathat se puku, hå’hå’ se ”pupu″ — meaning read the books but pull the weeds.

“It means you can read all the books, you can go to school, you can get your career, you get all the best degrees, the best money, opportunities, and all, but you find time to humble yourself and go back home and pull the weeds with your people,” Taukave explained.

His father, who passed away in 2013, taught him to perform with pride even when people laughed. His mother, who passed away recently, worked for the U.S. Embassy in Fiji for 11 years and showed him the power of building bridges across cultures. His brother now runs his own performing arts company in Brisbane, Australia.

The family’s humble beginnings, singing in broken tin-roof sheds before ever seeing a recording studio, keep Taukave grounded. And wherever Taukave goes, he carries the island with him. Not just as a memory but as a practice, a way of being in the world that honors ancestors while creating space for future generations.

“I’m absolutely grateful for all the time and for all the space that they’ve given me,” Taukave says of the Obama Foundation Leaders program. “And I hope to come out of this as a better leader for my communities, both back in the region and for our communities here in Europe as well. And again, with all that, I’m still going to go back home and pull the weeds.”