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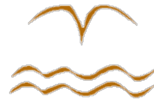

Patterns of the Ancients: Fijian Tapa cloth
A traditional art form meets
20th Century economics

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Thump, Thump.

Thump, Thump.

The sound echoes through the plantation dispersed with coconut palms and banyan trees.

Thump, Thump.

Thump, Thump.

It is not the clear ringing sound of wood tapping wood. The sound seems dampened somehow. Resonant but curbed as a damper would mute the vibrating strings of a piano. It surrounds you and for a moment you are uncertain of where the tones originate. And then you come nearer to the source. Patterns of light filter through the canopy of palm fronds and leaves of the raintree.

And beneath the cool shade of a raintree sit three generations of women: daughter, mother, and grandmother each working casually in the warm afternoon air, chatting and laughing, serious yet lighthearted as they perform their mystical craft. Numerous children surround them alternately playing and fetching what is needed by the women at their work.

There is not a house to be seen for at least a mile around. Only fields of squash grow around them under the shade of the rows of coconut and banana trees providing other fruits of nature while protecting the plants below from the near equatorial sun. And yet the women work along, methodically pounding and turning, pounding and turning, as they work a coarse fiber into a

softer cloth. There they sit in the middle of nowhere and everywhere, their presence in that space as much a part of the scenery as the fabric they create is a part of the trees from which it is taken.

The women take turns working the coarse natural fiber that they are making into masi, a fiber used for clothing, for decoration, for ritual. A few pieces of the pounded barkcloth hang from a makeshift clothesline tied between trees. Lunch and water await them in a nearby thermal plastic jug, a reminder of the incongruous mix of modern and ancient technologies.

Although I am an outsider to the Fijian culture, a Kai Valagi (euphemistically: foreign white person), having lived on the main island of Viti Levu for six years from August 1991 to July 1997, the descriptions here are based upon my own observations, research and personal experiences. The scene described above was from a visit in 1993 to the island of Tongatapu in Tonga, a near neighbor to the South Pacific islands of Fiji where this ancient tradition is still practiced. Its importance to their cultures is as great as the ceremonial drinking of yaqona (or kava: a chalky slightly narcotic drink made from the pounded root of the plant piper methysticum) and the presentation of the tabua (whales tooth). It is an integral symbol of wealth and respect used in trade or ceremony even today in the everyday life of Fiji and Tonga.

Though worn for outward adornment, the patterns and textures of the tapa cloth itself take on a presence evoking a consciousness of the depth of history in the ceremony being performed. It is as if, through the patterns, one can ÒreadÓ the stories of the ancients who followed the same rituals in times not too long past. When the voices rise from the participants, the voices meld with the individual elements of the ritual carrying a strength and power of ancient times.

Examples of ceremonial inclusion of tapa includes funerals, weddings, and chiefly ceremonies. When someone dies, tapa cloth would be presented with honours along with other symbols of wealth and generosity such as handwoven mats, large bundles of kava root, and livestock. Similar exchanges are used for weddings where the bride and groom are each wrapped in long lengths of tapa cloth, often quite heavy and leaving the wearer challenged to walk. But garlanded with salusalu (flower wreaths), the honored couple play homage to the old ways. A similar garment would be worn during the traditional ceremonies for the creation of a new chief. The tapa cloth would be of high importance having been made, and patterns painted, with great care.

The methods of preparing the masi cloth are basically the same for both the Fijian and Tongan cultures. But the patterns painted on them, the tapa designs, vary greatly. Where the Tongans pride themselves on creating huge masi in lengths measured in the hundreds of feet, their rubbed and painted patterns are generally larger, less visually complex and generally softer in appearance than the highly prized Fijian tapa cloths with their finer and more intricate painted patterns. The larger Tongan style is still very much a part of the tradition in one part of Fiji, called the Lau group, which has a large Tongan influence in many of their traditional practices. There exists a few rare examples of the combining of styles which display the softer reddish brown rubbed and painted patterns of Tonga that are bordered and interlaced with the smaller dancing stenciled black and brown patterns of Fiji.

There is a contrapuntal rhythm generated from these special pieces like that of the strong harmonic voices singing long smooth tones against the sharp syncopated beats of the Fijian lali (hollow log drum pounded with wooden mallets). It is no wonder that pieces such as these

remain in the domain of the chiefly Lau group, an area of Fiji which allows only restricted access by the western world.

Though each style of tapa cloth has its merits, its own beauty and importance to their individual cultures of Fiji and Tonga, it is the influence of modern economics and the tourism industry, especially in Fiji, that has begun to change the integral aesthetics of this traditional art form.

Patterns of Pride

The softest fiber cloth created from masi was usually for wearing, such as a sulu or for loin cloth. A tapa sulu ni gone is a wrapped skirt/dress made for a small child or infant. Generally, a little stiffer fiber is used for larger pieces or for ceremony but not so stiff as to make it unfoldable. One can sense the great pride taken in the intricacies and presentation of the designs, the skills displayed and the pliability of the fabric. Because it is used as a form of exchange of wealth, it is a matter of village pride to be able to provide the tapa which displays the superior skills of the women who created it in terms of texture, colour, intricacy and execution of the designs. When incorporated into rituals performed across family lines, in public view, or before chiefs of high rank, this becomes an even more special honour.

Browns and blacks dominate the tapa patterns against the ecru white of the fibrous masi cloth. Made from the natural materials available to them, the rusty browns are generally made from a mix of the mangrove plant infused with candlenut bark. Other reds are from the iron oxides in the red clays so abundant in parts of Fiji. And the blacks are usually from the charred candlenuts or the burnt tree resin of the dakua tree.1

The frigate bird, fish spines and cross create an interwoven affect that evokes an almost musical rhythm. Collection of the Fiji Museum.

The patterns invoke their creator's involvement in a sometimes harsh life, yet allows the suggestion of the general easiness of the Fijian character. Simple flowers break through more serious patterns that suggest the waves of the sea, the comb used to style the frizzy Fijian hair, the patterns of cannibal forks used for the now tabu ceremonial eating of the bokola (human flesh). Frigate birds playfully dance through more intricate geometric shapes suggesting even larger frigate birds. A Christian cross appears as if giving only minimal notice of its other meaning.

The patterns give life, like the old mysteries of elven paintings in Celtic lore. From them one feels the richness of a life full of purpose. The rhythm of an inner felt music, to move to in a functional dance that carries one through the magic of each dawning day. Everything experienced in play and in work serves the spirit, from climbing the trees for coconuts, turning the husk fiber into sinnet, scraping the coconut meat to create lolo (coconut cream), to the joy of eating the fruit of the day's labours made from the village communal efforts of those that fish, that farm, that clean, that prepare.

The patterns create motion, the forward movement of life in occurrence, the backwards motion of the reverie of lives gone past, an homage to ancestors. Alternating triangles of white and brown create a pinwheel motion of tumbling, rolling, a playful pattern of light and dark, like that of a child's toy. And so well this reflects the personality of the people who in the midst of the hard labours of day to day living can bring forth an almost childlike enjoyment and splash and play in the waters they harvest.

With stencils cut from palm leaves, or carved from bamboo to be rolled on and retouched, the patterns are imprecise, wavy, irregular in width of line and strength of character. Yet the overall patterns remain strong and recognizable. As in the variations and distractions on a life's journey, when viewed in completion the patterns become clear. This is the Fijian tapa. Life given, and life described.

This is the Fijian tapa cloth as it is in traditional ceremonies, in ritualistic and spiritual uses. It is a rare sight for the Western visitor, or kai valagi, to see tapa cloth of such a quality as to evoke these feelings of mystery and life. To view the tapas at the Fiji Museum in Suva is to travel back to a time where the warriors fought, the chiefs ruled and the white man was only an enigma to be largely ignored.

Cannibals and Converts

All was not paradise in these times. The Fijian islands were avoided by many due to warnings by the Tongans to the first white travelers in the area of fierce warriors who ate the human flesh of their enemies in order to capture their mana or soul. Captain Bligh, one of the first to navigate these waters in the early 1700s under unfortunate circumstances when he was cast adrift from the H.M.S. Bounty by a group of mutineers, was left to find cover from the terrors of the Cannibal Isles as they'd chase them in their huge outrigger canoes called druas for which the Fijians had become famous.

The islands had often been missed completely by European travellers who saw only low heavy mists surround their boats through the treacherous coral reefs. Many stories tell of early contact often met with an horrendous end with incredible tortures and death when the fierce Fijian warriors would set upon the unwary travellers who had failed to heed the warnings.

Cannibalism, bloodshed and death were very much a part of stories of everyday life in the early days of European contact.

But even then, the spiritual powers of masi was recognized. The priest, or bete as he was known, was always consulted before the warriors went into battle in order for them to determine the possible outcomes. He would sit in the centre of the dark bure kalou, a very tall narrow structure with a roof that seemed to reach up to the heavens. And then "trembling, siezed in a fit and with eyes rolling, he would invoke the powers of the gods whose 'message' reached him via the trail of white masi" strip that was strung from the high peak of the roof down to the ground near where the bete sat.2

The masi was recognized as possessing power or the ability to carry the strength of the gods. Worn as a turban by priests, or the koroi warrior dressed in new masi to celebrate his initiation with his first kill, the masi, either pure in feathery white or painted in intricate patterns, held an undisputed power that was utilized in the spiritual life of Fijians. It is that same power one feels today in the pieces the craftswomen make for non-commercial, or strictly ceremonial use.

Such was the power of mystery of the Fijian Islands that the Christian missionaries found necessary to overcome, to tame, and to save in the name of their Lord, Jesus Christ. Now with nearly all Fijians converted to Christianity, in one form or another, the ancestral spirit comes forth only under the misty veil of Christianity. And, even in the patterns of tapa that have survived from early days of missionary contact, one cannot help but look at them and wonder about the influence of early American patchwork quilts, an embroidered doily, or the lace trim from the dresses of missionary wives.

Much like the Celtic lore of the Lady of the Lake was absorbed into the description of the Virgin Mary, the spirit gods of pre-missionary Fiji still fulfill their needs in the undercurrent of everyday Fijian life and ritual. But even now, one cannot help but feel the power of the ancestral spirits as the mists once again veil the islands from sight many days of the year.

A Woman's Art

The Fijian tapa is one area of traditional life that is a creation made wholly by the hands of the women. In the painted patterns are woven the stories they tell one another as the women sit together by day or by lamplight, sharing their duties in the communal life of the village. Their patterns evoke i yalo, a spirit, an aura of a presence stronger than the sum of the whole of the women whoÕve created the piece at hand.

Though the men are the traditional rulers, with the exception of women born to a chiefly status, the women of the village are the gears that make the communal clock tick forward. With the complex support created from the village, there is a system where one will always find food or sustenance. In the Fijian village there are no orphans for the children belong to the village and the mataqali (family clan). The villagers share the duties of cooking, washing, fishing, gardening, weaving of mats, the care of the children and for the old.

There are no wars for the warriors to fight and the men must find purpose in competing in a new world of business, formal government, and economics. In recent times, the Fijian government has found a place for a modern warrior in the area of international politics and Fiji has become a large

contributor to peacekeeping forces around the world. In addition, Rugby payers who reach the level of international play are accorded a status akin to war heroes.

Economic and Government Control

Since gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1970, Fiji has undergone tremendous changes in the focus of its economy. Sugar cane, a mainstay of the Fijian agricultural export products continues to play a large role in the economy, as does the export of gold from mines in the interior of the main island, Viti Levu an more recently on the second largest island of Vanua Levu.

But tourism has had the biggest impact on the the social, economic and developmental growth of this small island nation of just 750,000 people and around 300 islands. With nearly half the population consisting of descendents of Asian Indians imported to Fiji approximately 100 years ago as indentured labourers to work the sugar cane plantations, the Fijians have fiercely defended their right to control their destiny, including maintaining control of the government by constitutional means.

Since the military coups of 1987 ousted a perceived Indo-Fijian sympathetic government, a new constitution was been put in place guaranteeing the Fijians control of their government, with members of Parliament divided in terms of race and not simply political party affiliations. The coups had detrimental effects on the economy as foreign support was withdrawn by major supporters such as New Zealand, Australia and Britain.

The US also pulled back and advised American businessmen to stay clear of Fiji as it was considered an unstable foreign investment. In an effort to make Fiji more attractive and to compensate for the lack of confidence in future investments in Fiji, the Fijian government took measures that effectively devalued their currency to 70 percent of its original value. Although the immediate effects on the local economy appeared disastrous, food prices skyrocketed, foreign loans on electricity were now astronomical, cost of imported goods went up, the interim government worked hard to grapple with these and other challenges as they tried to set forth on a steady road towards economic growth and political stability.

In the last two years, efforts were underway to adopt a revised constitution that adjust the balance of government and the way in which people of various races are represented. After a new constitution was accepted, Fiji was formally accepted back into the British Commonwealth in September 1997. But new difficulties lay ahead with the impact of the Asian economic crisis on Pacific economies. Fiji recently devalued its dollar in January 1998 by 20 percent for the first time since just after the coups of 1987. ItÕs impact has yet to be determined but initial affects are seen in its inability to attract foreign workers and the costs of fuel and other imported products increasing. Though there has been a decline in tourism due to the difficulties with Asian economies, those tourists travelling with US dollars can now see an exchange rate of as much as $2FJ to $1US.

Tourism Industry: Economic Blessing or Cultural Affliction

Since 1987 and until the recent economic difficulties in Asia, the Tourism industry has had steady growth with an increasing number of visitors to Fiji from North America, Australia, New

Zealand, Korea, Japan, and Germany, linked by direct flights from three major airlines, Qantas, Air New Zealand, and Air Pacific, FijiÕs own flagship airline. Each year hundreds upon thousands of tourists find their way to the Paradise sold to them in the brochures. Of sparkling white sandy beaches, verdant rainforests, underwater rainbows, the mystery of the Fijian smile. And to those who stay at the resorts, this is much of what they experience.

But what lies beyond the crystal clear waters, the pristine reefs, and the friendly smiles of the Fijian people? Demanding more than just a postcard vacation, visitors to Fiji expect to experience more of the mysterious Fijian culture, and to bring some of their experiences home with them, souvenirs of cultural value, a little bit of Fiji.

And overall, the Fijian people have done well to meet the demands of this growing Tourism industry. The traditional Polynesian way of hosting visitors is much the same here among the Melanesian Fijians. But with the conflict created when tradition and economics meet head on, one observes what happens to the general quality and craftsmanship of traditional arts and crafts when produced solely for the purpose of sale to tourists.

In the case of the tapa cloth, the results are poor at best. The cloth is thick as if no attempt has been made to soften it. The pieces are glued together rather than being blended together with the pounding of the ike mallets until the fibers mesh together. The patterns are poorly planned and crudely painted. This is not the art form of the tapa cloth created for use within the Fijian culture and society. This is a crude imitation to be handed off to tourists for a quick dollar.

But strangely enough the tourist, though unimpressed, skeptically accepts it. One who has come from North America and spent thousands of dollars to experience the mysteries of Fijian culture while still maintaining a few comforts of home is not likely to accept that the pieces offered are anything less than traditional art. While looking at the finer pieces on display in a hotel lobby, or the Fiji Museum, or publications, one can only shrug off the disappointment and dismay at the apparent lack of pride in the workmanship of these castoffs.

I cannot help but agree, in one sense, with an earlier observer of the effect of Western culture on traditional Pacific art forms when Alberto Cesare Ambesi stated that they "have been plunged into a crisis of sterility and commercialisation" that could possibly be attributed to the introduction of modern tools.3 But he then declared this to be "yet another demonstration that the growth of material benefits may bring about an impoverishment of spiritual life..."4

On this point I wish to disagree. Instead, this may be seen as only a tentative experimentation. That a protective shield has been cast over the finer work, either consciously or unconsciously, which, in order to preserve its spiritual presence, must actually be denied to the outsider's possession. This may not be a conscious act, for many women look upon their creation as simply a craft of minor consequence but necessary to everyday life like sewing or cooking, and of only occasional importance in itself. The creation does indeed take on a presence beyond its simple existence and the unconscious protection remains apparent.

As a former resident of Fiji, an artist, and former Art Director for The University of the South Pacific, I found I was often in a position to seek out the traditional arts and crafts that escaped the short-term visitor. But that is because I had time. Time to look at the tapacloth, to feel it, to sense its presence.

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I began as an outsider, bringing with me all the baggage of Western thought, prejudice, and perceptions. This beginning cannot be changed but it can be overcome. And, to my Fijian and Tongan colleagues, I have offered my humblest apologies if my descriptions of use, history, and indigenous perceptions may seem overly simplified or inaccurate. It is for the uninitiated eyes of the Westerner to whom these descriptions are offered in the hopes that they, too, may come to appreciate the essence of this traditional art form.

And, although my understanding and attributions regarding the aesthetic form of pattern and creation of tapa cloth may seem far removed from the conscious thought of the indigenous cultures where they exist, subconsciously, or even unconsciously, the meanings are there deep in form for any to see should they attempt to release themselves from its purely material presence.

As I go through my daily travels here and there across Fiji, the South Pacific, and the USA, the patterns and interwoven textures of the tapa become clearer to me. I see them in the light flickering through the fan of the palm leaves, in the ripples on the water, and the layers of misty mountains of the islandÕs interior as I sit watching the sun going down on another day. The tapa cloth, the real tapa is one that holds the patterns of life, showing the heart the path that leads back to the dawn of time where the patterns of the ancients began.

1 Clunie, Fergus, Yalo i Viti, Shades of Viti: A Fiji Museum Catalogue, Fiji Museum, Suva, 1986, p 126-127

2 Gravelle, Kim, Fiji's Times: A History of Fiji, The Fiji Times Ltd, Suva, 1992, p 20-24

3 Ambesi, Alberto Cesare, Oceanic Art, Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd, 1970, p 154

4 Ibid.

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