

Weaving with Niueans – by Pippa Carlyle-Mitchell



The island of Niue in the western Pacific ocean, known affectionately as “The Rock” by the islanders, is a raised coral atoll near Fiji. It is 11 hours and 20 minutes behind GMT and lies just beside the International Date Line, so leaving Auckland on a Saturday, means one arrives in Niue on a Friday. The island is about the size of the Isle of Wight and a single-track tar road runs parallel to the 64 kilometre coastline. We spent five weeks there in May and June of 2009. From the air, we could see how small it was and the jaggedness of its coastline. As we came in to land, we flew over the island’s only rubbish dump. Coconut palms and pandanus trees line the edges of the tropical forest. From the air, the palms gave a green star pattern to the forest, their fronds like friendly arms waving.



In the airport we met a customs official called Tapu Judith. One seldom learns the personal name of a customs official. On realising I was a weaver, she told me that almost all the islanders were weavers, that every village had a weaving group and they met together at least once a week. She would put me in touch with Peta at Peniaminas' weaving group, which was only two miles from Namukulu Motel where we were to stay. Tapu Judith was almost an albino. Tapu is a Polynesian word for 'sacred'. Tapu Judith smiled at me.

Alofi is the island's main village. The supply ship docks in the harbour there. All the shops are in Alofi, including a post office selling rare stamps, two supermarkets, a gallery and a craft shop selling hand-woven items. There are a few cafes. One is called the Crazy Uga Café. An Uga is a coconut crab, a land crab that grows enormous. The Niueans trap them in coconut traps and they regard them as a culinary delicacy. Can something with such a hard shell, huge pincers and beady eyes be a delicacy? A few days later, at a little cove called Hio, I watched dozens of baby crabs emerging from a coconut lying on the ground. For such tiny creatures, they scuttled away very fast.

Wild Hibiscus with cream coloured flowers like giant buttercups and heart shaped leaves as large as plates, grow everywhere in the forest. The leaves are used to lay food on for eating and to cover food with in the earth ovens used by the people to bake their taro (yam) and coconut crabs and pork. Most families keep a pig. Some families keep many and they run half wild in the edges of the forest, darting like moving shadows over the coral between the trees. The bark of the wild hibiscus is stripped off and laid in the sea to mellow. It comes out white and was used to weave fine clothes once. Now they mostly buy factory clothes but they use pandanus leaves and coconut palm fronds to weave baskets and bags, hats, mats and decorative wall hangings.

The hibiscus we are familiar with grows wild in Niue with its scarlet, apricot or white flowers. The ladies wear the flowers in their hair.



I cycled to the Peniamina group's meeting-house with its' faded pale blue walls, every Tuesday. We all sat on mats on the floor to work. Peta's grandchildren were there too. They talked and played and the smallest boy of two years old named Bentley, handled a large knife and split pandanus leaves, just as his grandmother did. She did not try to stop him; that was how he learned to be careful. I thought he was very clever not to hurt himself and even cleverer to copy Peta so well at the age of two. His uncle Fernando was only seven and played war games with sticks for spears and the expert mimicry of an actor. He spoke very good English for an island boy of seven.

Peta split a coconut frond in half and shaved the midribs with her knife. She laid them over each other so the leaves criss-crossed and were easy to weave. She started the weaving off and then handed it to me. For a while, she sat beside me making sure that I had grasped the technique. The air

turned humid while I wove and perspiration ran down my forehead and into my eyes. “ Gee you sweat a lot!” Said Fernando. Every day on the island was hot and humid but when I concentrated on weaving, the heat became intense. Once I had the gist of it, Peta moved away to scrape pandanus leaves and roll them up. They were almost the colour of brown paper tape and the rolls were rolled the same way.



After three hours we stopped for lunch. We had breadfruit and baked raw bananas and coconut porridge and taro. For greens there were Bok Choi leaves grown by Peta in raised beds between coral stones. She was watering them when I first met her. We worked for two more hours after

lunch. Peta took the almost closed basket from me and squeezed it between her legs until it was boat shaped, then she plaited a strip down the middle of the inside, turned the basket over and plaited a strip down along the middle of the outside, closing the base. That was the basket made in a day, ready for carrying taro, or fish, or breadfruit, or anything really. I tied it to the front of my bike and rode back to the motel, happy and with the cooler afternoon air in my hair.



I cycled to the market in Alofi one morning at nine. On rows of benches beside tables sat Niuean women and some old men, talking quietly, selling their wares. There were taro, paw-paws, bananas, and cooked food Niuean style. Many people drank coconut porridge straight out of half nuts; no need for bowls. I noticed a table where bags interwoven

with complicated designs in black and cerise, were displayed for selling. The black was a natural plant dye, the cerise was a chemical colour brought in from mainland New Zealand.



I picked one up and a woman in a bright red cotton blouse wearing a red hibiscus flower in her black hair came to speak to me. She was the weaver of the wares displayed on the table and her name was Enele. We were soon talking and she persuaded me to buy a flower-patterned bag. “I can teach you to weave one.” She offered with a slight accent. We arranged Wednesdays to be our day. “ My husband can fetch you in his lorry.” Fohe, looked after the islands road. “ Liku village is too far for your bicycle.” She insisted.

The following Wednesday, Fohe picked me up in his lorry. He was friendly and looked strong. He examined the road for potholes as we drove along. At their house, Enele was sitting on the porch steps in the sun, making pandanus twirls for bleaching. I sat down beside her and she taught me to twirl the strips around my fingers, familiarising me with the feel of the fibre. The porch was strewn with twirls like large wood-shavings by the time we stopped for tea. On the way in, she showed me her pet flying fox in a cage. She rescued it when Fohe orphaned it by trapping its mother: flying foxes are another Niuean delicacy. After tea, we went into Enele's weaving room where the bed was covered in half made baskets and piles of off-cuts. She taught me to weave the inside skin of a double-skinned basket with inch wide strips. She talked all the while about her island; how once in a drought as a child, she was lowered down a hole in the ground with a flaming torch to fill coconuts with fresh water from an underground source. The torchlight reflected off the water to show her where to go. Later, having made enough progress for one day, I was driven back to the motel by Enele's daughter, Angie.

I spent time between weaving, visiting pools where colourful tropical fish swam in water as clear as glass. I swam with them for hours, gazing at them as though they were flowers. The sea heaved into the pools with fresh water and more fish. On the bottom of the pools, black sea slugs and 'nudibranches' rolled slowly with the motion of the waves. Bright yellow and black sea snakes darted towards me, then backed off again and left

me alone. Not far from the reef, the forest clung to the coral, the tree roots woven together in a mesh that kept them from falling in all but hurricane-force winds like Cyclone Heta, which took the coastlines' trees away in 2004. It took only five years for them to grow back and destroyed houses were rebuilt further inland with the help of funding from the New Zealand government.

On Tuesdays Peta taught me to strip pandanus into fine strips and weave them into a hat. One Tuesday I showed her and her sister Salome how to weave a frame basket from supple-Jack cane growing in the forest; a small payback for their teachings. On Wednesdays Enele taught me to weave coloured patterns into the outer skin of my bag. She was clever with patterns. "I like Maths" she told me. On her walls were intricately patterned hangings and she was proud of her inherited craft, proud of her skills and determined to teach her daughter the patterns she had created;



from the traditions passed down through her family.

I made good friends on Niue and five weeks after our arrival on the coral atoll, with my woven hat on my head and my pandanus bag woven with a beginner's pattern in my hand, I climbed up the plane's ladder with my husband, fully intending to return.

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