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The Tradition of Weaving

Abstract

Weaving: to form a stuff or material by interlacing filaments of a particular substance in a continuous web.
There is no tradition of the loom on the islands; all weaving is done by hand.

JANE DOWNING

The Tradition of Weaving

Weaving: to form a stuff or material by interlacing filaments of a particular substance in a continuous web. There is no tradition of the loom on the islands; all weaving is done by hand.

The women of the Handicraft Co-op sat on mats on the swept cement floor of their shop as they waited for the flight from Honolulu to arrive. They were not idle: each was weaving a mat or a basket or an oboñ as they talked; Dolly was onto the brim of a coconut fibre hat and was deciding on a purple trim.

‘And what sort of dye do you use? Is this from some berry or nut?’ asked the RiPalle woman as she fingered the fine purple filaments. Arlene Smith has spent a week in Majuro and as she waited to fly out, the seeds of an idea for an article were taking root. As a freelance writer she was always alert for opportunities — making echo soundings on her surroundings. The cliché of atomic testing, the image of the mushroom cloud over Bikini atoll, had been done too often, but she’d seen some photos from the DeBrum collection in the museum that had stuck. Women wearing exquisite clothing mats from their waists, a close-up of one, so fine and beautiful and according to the caption, made more than a hundred years before. A few quotes and local colour from these women and a piece on the ongoing art of weaving was sure to hook a magazine back home. Tradition was easy to sell.

She took her pen and pad out of her carry-all as she waited for the Marshallese woman to reply. The paper curled in the humidity. Dolly was rummaging in a cavernous Gibson’s plastic bag and talking double-quick time to the woman leaning up against the wall on her left — or so it seemed to Arlene who knew only the greeting Yokwe and found foreign tongues bordered on the miraculous.

The answer to her question came just as she was giving up on it. Dolly exclaimed a satisfied, *ah-ha*, and placed a fat-coin shaped container in the palm of Arlene’s left hand. She recognised the shape and weight from her tie-dye days. *Dylon* the label read. *15: Windsor Purple*. There was a landslide of little containers at the mouth of the bag. *2: Golden Glow* seemed very popular.

Pandanus leaves are the major source of raw material. Leaves are cut from the tree, the ends and thorns trimmed off before drying. Each leaf is then softened by rolling it into a circular shape and pressing it down with the hands. If it is still stiff, it can be pounded with a dekenin made of giant clam shell. When soft the leaves are cut into iden or strips of the desired width.

The width of the runway covered from the ocean to the lagoon with just a strip the span of a road to spare. It was used to catch water when, or if, it rained, and the reservoir shimmered at the southern end up behind the airport building. The women had the Co-op shop built at the end of this building in a way as to catch the breeze off the lagoon, but still they hunkered down close to the relative cool of the cement. Marta wafted the breadfruit leaf she'd picked up on the way in and stirred a bit of breeze for herself. A full marriage mat tented her legs and she was embroidering a big red Yokwe Yuk at the dead centre. The wool went fuzzy like fairy-floss in the dampness of her hands and she had to tame it back into tight strands as she worked.

The conversation never ceased as she did this. Evie was telling them the latest about Isaac who they'd all seem get on the plane less than a year before, little knowing. Comings and goings. The stories always ended up there as they waited for the weekly Hono flight. Isaac going, Isaac coming back: with an unexpected Australian wife on his arm and not the full university education he'd been sent down to Sydney for. His *wife* and three children in Delap were told that night. *They'd* had no official marriage, with a mat to make their vows upon, still his mother sided with this wife in the face of the law that said the new white one was his true and legal spouse. She threw Isaac out. They, Isaac and bride, were living in one room on his uncle's weto way out towards Laura now. No running water. The life must be pressing the weak westerner down. Every week the women of the Co-op expected to see the Australian wife haul in her suitcase and board an outgoing flight. Maybe this week, Evie hinted.

Liktanur, her face folding in on itself like an old apple, woolly, fairy-floss white hair halo-ed above, *tsk, tsked*. There was one thing to be said for the Japanese, she told the younger women, they never let their women marry a Marshallese. She didn't need to say anything about the Japanese men: evidence was in a number of faces weaving on their laps though the war was but a memory.

Lost in these memories she missed the RiPalle tourist's question concerning myths about weaving. Dolly was telling her about the woven kites from the old days, whereas Liktanur could have told the story about her namesake, the woman who wove the first sail — in wide, long strips, sewn together to make the three-cornered shape that carried an outrigger at tremendous speeds across the vastness of the ocean.

The white woman's pen was racing across her page as she wondered how she could possibly weave kites into the narrative of her article.

Other materials are used in addition to maan or pandanus leaves. They are kimej, the skin of the coconut leaf bud and malwe, the midsection of the coconut leaf, as well as non-endangered shells.

Arlene was trying to describe the clothing mat she'd seen in the photograph at the Alele Museum. There was nothing she could see like it in the shop for all

its crammed and congested appearance: hung with fans and oboñs and the ubiquitous navigational stick charts, every flat surface piled with ziggurats of coasters and place mats and baskets, the corners devoted to rolls of mats, mats for births, for marriages, for deaths, as well as for everyday sitting and sleeping. She had Dolly unroll one jaki mat, used, she was told, for sleeping on. It was so coarse compared to her memory of the photograph, though it was in fact smooth to the touch. Lizard scales and snakes too look rough, but were disconcertingly satiny if one dared to reach out.

Heat was crawling like little crabs up her freckly arms. She'd be very pleased to be on the Continental 727 with a coke in one hand. Picking up a sun-bleached white fan, with a coconut leaf fringe, she made as if to examine the handicraft work before giving it a test swipe or two or three through the muggy air. Dolly was re-furling the jaki, giving up on a sale. This one was a talker not a buyer, a taker not a giver. She now had her camera out. She'd be asking to take their photo next, out under a pandanus tree, asking them to swing their thick black hair down out of their knots, place a hibiscus behind an ear, position the glaring ocean just right behind the tableaux to complete the local ambiance.

Still, it wouldn't be for too much longer. They'd saved almost enough, Herbie and herself, for another load of cement bricks for her weto in Likiep. Soon they'd be able to start building, and then they could retire and move out from this overcrowded island and back to the beautiful memories of her childhood in the outer islands.

But then the woman was asking Dolly to look into the back of the camera. A series of photos passed over the view-finder. It was one of the new digitals like Herbie had brought back from Guam last trip. There'd be the extra expense of a generator now, to run the computer, and of course the lights, out on Likiep. They'd all got a hoot out of Evie's grandson the first time he was taken across to Arno. When night came he'd whined petulantly, why can't we just turn the lights on. He could see nothing in the glow of the gas lamps, so blinded was he by Majuro's bright lights.

'Here it is, this one, this photograph,' murmured Arlene beside her. There was an old European idea that people who went below the equator would melt from the heat. Believers exhorted adventurers from setting out. This was not technically below the equator, being just degrees above it on the map, but Arlene, standing close to the Marshallese woman, could feel herself actually melting. Surely there was only so much sweat in one person.

Dolly shielded the camera window to focus in on the photo of the photo of the nineteenth century clothing mat.

'That!' exclaimed Arlene. 'Don't you make *anything* like that now?'

It was as fine as fabric sure enough, Dolly conceded, and beautiful. But she knew the nylon of her mumu dried quickly in the sun, and covered all the dark-honey skin the missionaries had despaired at when they'd landed. These museum mats covered only half a woman after all.

Baskets are the most lucrative cash product next to copra. Handicraft Conferences are held across Micronesia on an annual basis to strengthen the industry.

The women had, as a collective, stopped weaving. Two younger women had arrived with a couple of Gibson's bags each filled to overflowing with delicate flowers — bougainvillea, hibiscus, and others Arlene could not name and would have to look up in her Flora and Fauna reference when she got home. There was a growing buzz of talk as the women cut lengths of twine and commenced threading the blossoms. Several of them clasped the end of the thread in their toes to keep it taut.

Arlene realised too late she'd missed her chance of a photograph of the weaving process. The story wasn't really working anyway. It seemed, so her informant was unashamed in telling her, that the rather unique looking circular oboñ wall hangings were adopted from other parts of Micronesia only twenty years before — the name of the woman who'd brought the technique back was mentioned — and the designs on the lids of many of the baskets were introduced by Japanese traders. As for the wool and the Dylon commercial dyes... From where Arlene was sitting, and she was sitting again, woven fan still in her hand and being put to use, there wasn't much of the local tradition left. The women showed no interest in the exquisite mat in the photograph and plucked instead at their uniform plump mumus they'd bought from Gibsons or Reimers. One of the recently arrived women stood out for wearing a skirt: cotton, brightly appliquéd; different.

'What is that skirt?' Arlene asked the old woman now beside her. Likтанur followed her pointing finger and nodded out her knowledge.

'Yes, traditional skirt. From Pohnpei. Traditional Pohnpeian skirt.'

The men were no better. The concourse outside was increasingly busy, and the men wore t-shirts, different only in the advertising logos where once there were tattoos. One was carrying his packet of cigarettes rolled in the sleeve — reminiscent of the ancient way of carrying items in the elongated ears. But not worth getting the camera out at all.

She stared across to where the green of the sea met the blue of the sky, to the clouds anchored there on the horizon like far off islands. Only, she couldn't see, they *were* islands, on the other side of the lagoon.

Traditional mats are intricately woven with geometric motifs like tattoos in seven ornamental zones around the centre square. Each zone has a name symbolising the spiritual fabric of Marshallese society. The outside band is Bokwōj — to embrace. It is the parental embrace tightly safeguarding the valuable bond of love, peace and harmony among the members of the clan.

The noise of the plane wove its way into the conversation, and was eventually registered.

‘Baluun, baluun,’ one of the children playing around the Co-op shouted. The words took flight, passing from child to child, like a kite skimming above their heads. The activity inside increased, a flurry of petals flew like wedding confetti as the threads were shortened and tied and a tower of delicate wut, wreaths of flowers to be worn on the head, grew and grew.

Arlene Smith practiced for the last time *kommol tata*, thank you, as she put the fan back on the pile, her pen and paper back in her carry-all, and her thoughts back into leaving not weaving.

The flight was disgorging its passengers as the new ones queued to board. Businessmen and missionaries and aid workers were caught up in customs while the returning children of the island rushed through. Marshallese had been leaving since first contact with the white men. And returning. Oral history had the first, Lojeik, return on an American whaler in the early 1800s. His sister had welcomed him with joy. These kids were coming home from college on the mainland — in Oregon and Costa Mesa — for their summer holidays, with bare bellies between hipsters and mini-ts, with iPods and ideas, and with laughter. Their mothers abandoned the Co-op and crowned them with wuts amidst the bustle of the airport.

Liktanur nodded wisely at the door of the shop over this youngest generation, her wrinkles folding further around her bright eyes.

And Arlene wrote nothing down.