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TIVAEVAE: LOCAL AESTHETICS AND COOK ISLANDS QUILTS¹

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Te tavake...Kua moe ki runga i taku tivaevae
The tropical bird from Havaiki
has fallen asleep upon my tivaevae...

What better image for a Cook Islands tivaevae than the vision of this colorful messenger embellishing the fabric's design in a magical moment of trust and oblivion? The sleeping bird brings tidings from *Havaiki*, the source of myth and memory, and is lured to rest in a field of imaginary flowers a long way from its poetic homeland.

The appliqué or patchwork tivaevae most representative of this genre appear to have been vigorously brushed by the mythical bird's feathers and left shimmering in an array of color. Cook Islands women who have created these patterns speak a language of hue and intensity, of flower and butterfly - not necessarily one shaped by words. Colors resonate while patterns shift from figure to ground in an endless round of interplay between the two. Aesthetically, these visual effects characterize the appliqué style of tivaevae termed *tivaevae manu* rendered in florid colors and opulent, rich imagery upon a contrasting ground fabric.

Typically these compositions are arrangements of radially symmetric or quadrilateral patterns emanating from a designated center point that not only locates the design focus but also tempers the pulse of the composition. Skill at cutting the fabric into multiple yet linked figures works in unison with anticipating but also determining the final result. Thus, the act of cutting follows a precise sequence of carefully folding squares and triangles into quarters and even eighths, then snipping along diagonals to create a very decorative, symmetrical and fully-integrated overlay. One misplaced cut and the intricately constructed design falls to bits.

Tivaevae, *tifaifai*, *iripiti* or Hawaiian quilts are some of the descriptive terms referring to Polynesian pieced and appliquéd textiles associated with the islands of eastern Polynesia. The term 'quilt' conjuring up an image of fabric layers bound together by decorative top-stitching is really not an accurate description of Cook Islands textiles. Quilted materials complete with an inner batting would be unsuitable in that tropical climate. Moreover, the characteristic lines of stitching added for textural and dramatic effect in quilts such as those from Hawaii would certainly detract from the aesthetic of pure flat designs emphasizing pronounced silhouettes and rich planes of overlapping color that visually distinguish tivaevae.

The women in Wellington who collaborated with me in this project, have revitalized Cook Islands tivaevae in a New Zealand context. Revitalization essentially means to "give a new life" to something. Tivaevae in *Aotearoa*/New Zealand exemplify an aesthetic that is both "mutable and unchanging." Vibrant colors may trigger memories of flowers in a warmer climate. They may also challenge the propriety of traditional

customs left behind. When Bridget Kauraka, abiding by her personal taste, chooses black as a dramatic but effective contrasting base fabric, she goes against the conventions “back home” where black is associated with mourning. Bridget explains, “...back at home, black is always a mourning color. But here in New Zealand, it’s different. Because I love black, you know? I like wearing black.”²

When I submitted my proposal for this paper I was quite interested in exploring the conference theme of varying viewpoints by delving into the contradictory interpretations of tivaevae creation offered by writers and scholars matched against the particular aesthetic criteria valued by the stitchers themselves. I also hoped to identify holdovers from pre-European contact belief systems concerning kinship, rank and, possibly, the use of textiles to “desanctify” participants (i.e., specifically using fabric to help defuse the accumulation of sacred power) during contemporary rites of passage such as hair-cutting ceremonies and funerals. I wanted to contrast these vestigial and enigmatic cultural precautions with the “decorative” properties and functions of tivaevae as part of a colonial legacy mainly associated with stitching skills and conditioned by hygienic practices learned from nineteenth century missionaries and maintained by twentieth century government health inspectors.

It became increasingly clear to me from the onset of my interactions with Cook Islands women living in Wellington that the notion of “varying viewpoints” really characterized our constantly shifting expectations of each other. Thus, the conference theme became less speculative and more real – more personal. My first interactions with tivaevae makers in New Zealand who soon became my associates in this research were full of testing and surprise. During the opening prayers and speeches at a well-attended tivaevae exhibition in a downtown Wellington gallery, much to my embarrassment, I was singled out from a dense crowd of strangers by the most charismatic “mama” as a special guest and traveler who had come a great distance to be there. That marked the beginning of my association with Tepaeru Tereora, a master teacher of tivaevae who actively revived the art form in the Islands and later in New Zealand.

I met another woman that evening who invited me to attend her stitching group in Porirua near Wellington. After I spent my first afternoon documenting those women cutting, tacking, stitching and embroidering various tivaevae, the coordinator was convinced that I was now ready to write a book about my experience and expressed the hope that I would soon return with publication-in-hand. Tepaeru and her colleagues were less sanguine about my role and my motivations. On one heart-stopping occasion after our interview session, Tepaeru took me to the local daycare center where the women sometimes work on their tivaevae while the children nap. She introduced me as an accomplished embroiderer and told everyone that I was there to share my skills. Strangely, it was one of those days when no one was sewing tivaevae and no needle or cotton (thread) was to be found. Despite my panic, I was cautious because I did not want Tepaeru to lose face in front of these women on my account. Our mutual predicament was resolved when I learned they were planning an important exhibition of tivaevae in the Civic Center and I volunteered to write the catalogue essay. Thus, began our collaboration with my role now clearly defined vis-à-vis their need while Tepaeru’s status was unaffected – possibly enhanced - by her association with me.

Realities, dynamics, perceptions and expectations implicate us equally in this situation. Where is the difference here between subject and object? Who is studying whom? What about these textiles as products of the politics of creativity – is their manufacture and heritage as contentious as the social dynamics swirling around their edges?

The most commonly revived form of tivaevae in New Zealand is the applique style with its two main versions the unadorned, bi-colored *tivaevae manu*, and the heavily embroidered, *tivaevae tataura*. Both types exemplify the ornate, floral and sumptuously colored tropical textile visually associated with Cook Islands handwork traditions. Possibly, much of the symbolic appeal for collectors and tourists is in the way these fabrics appear to fulfill outsider's perceptions of what a lush tropical icon should be in terms of color and imagery. Interestingly, the notion of cleverly stitching pieces of fabric together to create bedcovers and pillow cases was introduced by members of the London Missionary Society in the early nineteenth century. Thus, tivaevae are not indigenous but originated in the gap between native aesthetic choices and European skills nurtured by foreign work ethics. However, for the majority, these fabrics continue to represent the "exotic" to outsiders and the "homeland" to Island immigrants despite tivaevae's exclusion from the recent cultural revival of such genres as dance and music during the Cook Islands nationalist movement in the 1960s. This was probably due to their strong association with European materials and artistic style.

Traces of missionaries' handwork and sensibility are evident in one of the most popular Cook Islands form of tivaevae, *taorei*, that is pieced together from a myriad of uniformly shaped colored squares. Tapaeru Tereora's reintroduction of tivaevae to contemporary village women in the Islands did not stem from her own experience with the medium but was based on careful looking as well as her talent for reconstructing creative processes from accurate analysis. Although Tapaeru's mother was surprised that her daughter had acquired her competency at designing and stitching through "osmosis" as it were, other mamas claimed she was the incarnation of her grandmother. According to Tapaeru she never knew her grandmother, "They said, 'Oh, you know, maybe you're going to follow the footsteps of your grandmother.' And I said, 'I never knew her!' You know, I never met her? But that was her talent. So, yeah... and also I've seen tivaevae being made years ago by other people."³

Tapaeru's challenge to recreate tivaevae by reviving patterns was compounded by the solitary practices of many Island women who preferred to design alone and even cut their images in private. Tapaeru had to break down the secrecy associated with this process so that all stages of tivaevae creation could be shared collectively. She describes the inherent difficulties because often these designs had been "owned" for generations. As a kind of legacy, it empowered many women. "They reckon it's theirs and that pattern "belongs to my great-grandma and it's been passed down and I shouldn't be sharing." Tapaeru elaborates:

But I'm looking from a different angle. I was challenged by one of the mamas who said to me... who called me stupid, you know, for sharing what I got. And I said, "You know Mama, I know you're a talented woman, and, ah... whatever little I got, I'm sharing. And the talent that you got, if you don't share it with me, you'll take it with you. And then when you're not in this world, nobody knows... But if you give me something, if you share with me, when you're no longer in this world..." And they said, "Oh, Tapaeru, who taught you that?" And I said, "Mama Heather. [Laughs]. That's how tough she is!"⁴

In another story Tapaeru relates how she was inspired to re-create a complex patchwork *tivaevae taorei* when she discovered a fragment of her mother's work during

the aftermath of Hurricane Martin. She had gone back to Manihiki, one of the northern islands:

...and I was cleaning up my auntie's place because the water went right through and ruined everything. So I was actually burning things... and I saw this piece and quickly picked it up. I knew what it was. So I washed it and took it to show my sister. And she said [in a loud voice], "What're you going to do with it?" And I said, "You know this is a *tivaevae* pattern." And she said, "That little thing?" And I said, "Yeah. I'll see what I can do." So, you know, I wash it and brought it and I try to do it here [in New Zealand]. There's the outcome of it... [pointing to a photograph].⁵

In the heavily embroidered *tivaevae tataura* some of the floral patterns have been localized – replacing Cook Islands imagery with designs inspired by New Zealand native plants. Another stitcher, Tekura Nootai, describes her innovation, a design based on kowhai flowers and leaves, "My niece is named 'Kowhai.' She just turned twenty-one, you see? And, I thought, 'I'll do this one for her birthday.' That's how I came up with this pattern, the kowhai." When questioned as to whether this "borrowing" transgressed on anyone's cultural property rights, Tekura qualified her action by identifying her design source, "...actually, I took it from the two-cent piece. Remember there was a kowhai [blossom] on the two-cent piece? I actually took it from there. I got my daughter to draw it for me."

Other Islands immigrants feel that by localizing and appropriating imagery they could be infringing on the cultural property rights of Maori as *tangata whenua* (First People of the Land). Pani Hemaloto lives in Wanganui but originally came from Rarotonga. Although attracted to innovation, she is hesitant to appropriate certain images:

I'd like to use Maori designs and New Zealand flowers in my patterns, but to me I don't think I have a right to do that... to me, it's not our culture. We feel it's tapu... I just couldn't bring myself to use it.⁶

Bridget Kauraka may have broken some time honored conventions by using black for the foundation of her floral *tivaevae tataura*. The dominant opinion among *tivaevae* creators in Wellington, however, extols a palette that is truthful to colors in their natural environment. Non-naturalistic or purely decorative colors have a "false ring" to these women. To western connoisseurs familiar with South Seas iconography and its role in radicalizing Euro-American perceptions of color, this attitude may appear regressive and naive, but Tepaeru is adamant:

As the designer I wouldn't even agree for Bridget to have a blue hibiscus because there's no blue hibiscus. You know, I'll say "yes" if it's yellow. Yes, we do have that. So it's actually up to the person who's helping her choose the right color because people will laugh and say, "Huh, never seen a blue hibiscus in my life!" Like for that tiare Maori...that's the national flower. You'll never have a red one – because we don't have a red. Because that's the only color for that [white]. Maybe some people use cream – sometimes they turn creamy. But...ah...not any other colors.⁷

Tivaevae's symbolic function derived from its personal and social meaning in contemporary ritual contexts is expressed in terms of gift-giving, accumulation and wrapping, and its visibility as backdrops in creating ceremonial stage space. These are just a few of the ways tivaevae links to the use of tapa or bark cloth during the pre-European era. Cloth demarcates sacred and secular spaces, is offered as gifts of grace and empowerment, while it also embraces and binds, deflects evil and absorbs an excess of spiritual power. In New Zealand Cook Islands women continue some of these practices. They create special fabric backdrops composed of tivaevae arrangements for celebrating landmark events like a boy's haircutting ceremony, twenty-first birthdays, and weddings. Some women even create quick-and-easy tivaevae look alikes by tie-dyeing sheets with radially symmetric starbursts and festooning stages and platforms with these cloths to evoke curtains of hand-stitched tivaevae.

In addition to its transformative power as a symbolic presence on these occasions, tivaevae are exchanged as gifts thus generating a long chain of giving and receiving that links generation to generation. When one of these links is broken, it can be disruptive emotionally as well as symbolically. Tepaeru was particularly concerned about the loss of a certain tivaevae that happened to be a casualty of a recent divorce settlement between her nephew (for whom it had been made) and his ex-wife, who took it out of circulation away from the immediate family. Traditionally, this tivaevae should be awarded to the oldest daughter but now that rite of passage was in jeopardy. Tepaeru's bitterness is apparent in her anxiety that the tivaevae has become "unanchored" as the family split up thus acknowledging a value that far exceeds its materiality.

Tivaevae's importance in funerals is as strong in New Zealand as it is in the Cook Islands. These are gifts to go to the grave. Tepaeru describes her experience at the burial of her cousin who was like a brother to her:

...a cousin of mine...I look upon him as a brother, died.
That's the best I can do, to take a tivaevae. There were
other tivaevae there. I don't know who owns them because
I saw them on the evening I got there. And then on the day
when he was buried, there was only mine left. And all the
ladies'... and all the other things had all been taken off.
What made it worse, I was so sad, there weren't any mats.
So I had put my tivaevae underneath then to cover it.

[Before the burial] they said, "Aw, it's a waste. It's
beautiful, you know, take it off." They were going to take it
off and they were going to lower him down. And I got up
and I said, "No, let him take it."

Well, to me, you know, he's taking part of me. Yeah [very
soft]. It is something I have worked on and that's how
much, you know, this person meant. You actually treasure
this person. Yeah. So when you bring the tivaevae, it stays,
I think, it stays with that person and goes into the ground
with that person. Because you... you... that's why you
brought it in the first place.⁸

Stitches of myth and memory. Tivaevae engender connections to the homeland regardless of whether these women now living and creating in New Zealand learned this

art form in the Islands. If all tradition is change, then tivaevae join the past with the present just as the magical bird hovers between two worlds:

*Fly my tropical bird
Your sleeping is done so fly
Take with you to Havaiki
The stories of our home...*

Kauraka Kauraka 1990⁹

¹ Much of the historical information presented in this article is extracted from my dissertation (Webster 1997), which examines the effects of European contact on Pueblo textile production for the period A.D. 1540-1850. A book manuscript based on this study is currently in preparation. Information about more recent changes in Pueblo weaving comes largely from my own work with museum collections and personal observations in the Pueblo villages. I recommend Keegan (1999) as a particularly good source of information about the appearance and usage of ceremonial textiles by contemporary Rio Grande Pueblo peoples.

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² Bridget Kauraka, interview by author, Wellington, New Zealand, August 28, 2000.

³ Tapaeru Tereora, interview by author, Wellington, New Zealand, August 18, 2000.

⁴ Tereora, interview, August 18, 2000.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pani Hemaloto as quoted in *Pacific Fibre Symposium – Wanganui 1991. Proceedings*. Published by Sarjeant Art Gallery, Wanganui, New Zealand (1991), not paginated.

⁷ Tereora interview August 28, 2000.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ I am grateful to Tapaeru Tereora, Tekura Nootai and Bridget Kauraka for their collaboration in this project and for Tapaeru Tereora's gracious consent to quote from her brother, Kauraka Kauraka's poem. Lines from this poem are also cited in Lynnsay Rongokea, *Tivaevae: Portraits of Cook Islands Quilting*, (Auckland: Daphne Brasell Associates Press, 1992), frontispiece.

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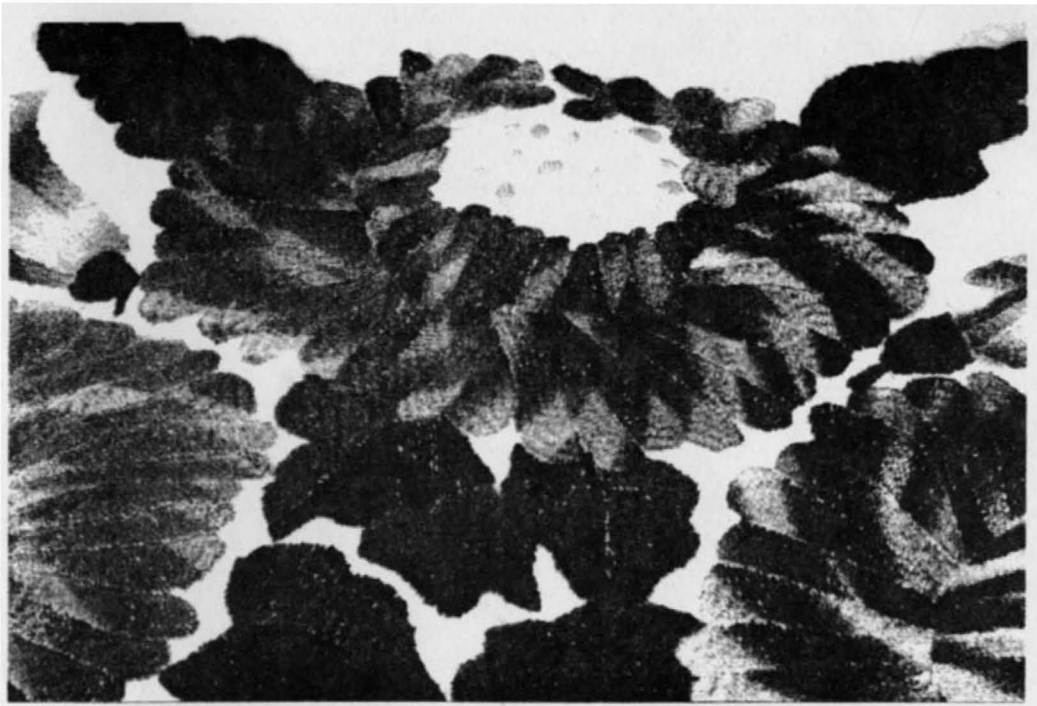
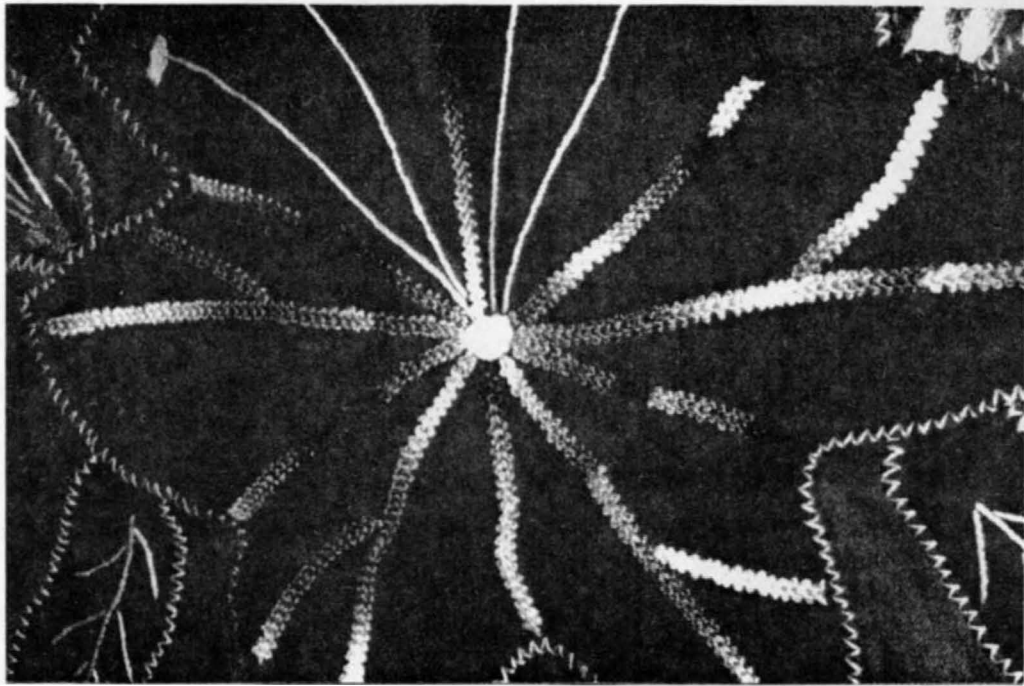
Exhibit of *tivaevae* at Oceania Design, Wellington gallery, July 6, 2000.
Author's photograph.



Cook Islands stitchers at Porirua arranging *tivaevae manu*, July 19, 2000. Author's photo.



Example of old *tivaevae taorei* with new version designed and stitched by Tapaeru Tereora lying underneath. Photo by author, July 7, 2000.



Details from two embroidered *tivaevae tataura*. Author's photo.