

Susanne Küchler and Andrea Eimke

Tivaivai

The Social Fabric of the Cook Islands

With photographs by Andrea Eimke



Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1 A short history of patchwork in the South Pacific	1
2 Threads of life The material connections	19
3 Keeping time, stitching memories Patchwork quilts and the mapping of time and space	41
4 Hidden in the light	69
5 From social fabric to textile art	93
Bibliography	114
Index	117



Chapter 1

A short history of patchwork in the South Pacific

Patchwork, the world over, evokes associations of warmth and nurture. Whether hand-stitched or machine-sewn, the patched-together pieces of cloth appear to make tangible the forgotten, the strange and the foreign in one swift move: making all pasts equally present. Of all the artefacts capable of reviving memories, patchwork illuminates, in the simplest and most convincing manner, the potential for material and the marks left by the virtuous application of technology to shape the mind. Made from discarded pieces of fabric, or from cloth bought specifically for cutting and assemblage, the weight, smell and look of the patched cloth brings a place and its people to life more concretely than any merely visual representation could. Patchwork is decidedly not about representation, but is rather about ways of being and thinking, 'mind work' we might say, and is about creating a strange analogy with what is 'social' about identity.

There are many ways to describe the associations provoked by patchwork, and those who have begun to be attentive to what it does in society find it hard to stop themselves marvelling about its capacity to pave a network hidden from the bright light of the everyday. There are the quilts made by Afro-American slaves to encode, in the stitched patterns, the pathways to freedom known evocatively as the 'underground railroad'. Quilts from the frontier of colonial America provide evidence of an underground economy run by female heads of households on the back of cloth-wealth. These precious fabrics were transformed into a material heritage to which proprietary rights could be extended and transmitted in ways that supported the independence of the household. Many who love the making of patchwork enthuse about the activity's generation of connections with loved ones, both those whose former clothes may be reworked into patterns that are evocative of loss and of a remembrance of times gone past, and those who will become the future recipients of the finished artefacts.

Patchwork connoisseurs speak about the capacity of patchwork to create and sustain relations that make up the meaningful and coherent thread that enables a life to be recounted as having a 'biography'. The absence of patchwork

may make a difference to the way biographical relations are managed; though the work put into patching pieces of cloth into myriads of patterns may be meaningful precisely when such relations cannot be taken for granted. Clusters of relations founded upon such work with cloth may emerge precisely, like other networks relating to the making and receiving of artworks that inspire the sharing of a common memory, when people do not 'feel at home in the world', but instead live in diaspora (intellectually, emotionally, politically, economically) (Belting 1995). The conditions under which identity may come to be considered a scarce resource to be husbanded are manifold, and we may suppose that they have only increased with the practice of labour migration and the growth of entire transnational societies that trace relations to increasingly remote and imaginary homelands. It is with the fragility of such relations in mind that we turn to the equally fragile patchworks made by one of the most scattered transnational peoples, whose 'homelands' are tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. On these islands, living in a diasporic condition was required by the landscape long before the labour trade, travel and work permits increased the expansion of the community.

This study is set in the Cook Islands, an archipelago of fifteen tiny islands. The total land area of the country is only 240 square kilometres, while its exclusive economic area covers a maritime region of nearly 2 million square kilometres, stretching between Tonga and Samoa on the one hand, and French Polynesia on the other. Since 1901 the group has been included within the boundaries of New Zealand, and its people, who are culturally close relatives of the Maoris of New Zealand, are citizens of that country.

The country is broadly divided into a southern and a northern group, on account of the very different ecology and geology that dominate life on these islands. The islands of the southern group – Rarotonga (the main island), Aitutaki, Atiu, Mangaia, Manuae, Mauke, Mitiaro, Palmerston and Takutea – are, with three minor exceptions, of volcanic origin and continue to uplift, and have fertile soils and lush vegetation. The exceptions are the small atolls of Palmerston and Manuae, and Takutea which is a sandy key. The southern group comprises about 90 per cent of the Cook Islands' total land area, with Rarotonga being the largest island with the highest elevation. The northern group consists of seven islands of coral formation, all being low-lying atolls with sparse

Photo courtesy of Cook Islands Museum and Library Society, Rarotonga.

Experts in exile

Tara Maui

'Mama would be so pleased to know that you remember her!' May Maui's excited voice beams at me through the phone. She sounds almost the same as the last time I saw her, on the occasion of a brief interview with her mother in 1991. When I started taking the first notes for what would later become this book, Mama Tara was already terminally ill; she passed away a few weeks later on the 29 March 1991.

Two-thirds of a century earlier, on the 20 July 1924, Tara Maui had been born on Atiu. As a very young girl she may have still been able to learn from Mama Teakaruia Moni, the woman who is considered to have introduced the first sewing groups to Atiu. When she married her husband on the island of Mangaia in 1947, at the age of 23, she was already a well-known *taunga* and had cut many *tivaivai* for women on Atiu and Mangaia. Her most beautiful patterns include highly intricate designs such as 'Hanging Lantern' ('*Mori Tautau*'), 'Butterflies' ('*Pepe*'), 'Crowns' ('*Korona*'), 'Crowns and Pineapple', 'Fans' ('*Tairiri*'), 'Kiss Me Quick' and many others.

When I asked May whether she could bring along a *tivaivai* of her mother's, she had to admit regretfully that she had given hers away as a gift at a family function. After some persuasion, she was able to borrow one belonging to her brother. We went to the Domain park in Auckland, and sat on the lawn for a long chat and a photo session. These pictures show how special Mama Tara's patterns were, different from those of any other *ta'unga* on Atiu. The craftsmanship in this *tivaivai*, which she sewed herself, is immaculate. Evenly sized and spaced stitches throughout, with tidy finishing on the back, were her trade mark.

May remembers that Mama Tara was also skilled in making *tapa* and weaving pandanus mats and hats. I recall her sewing hats: joining long braids of pandanus on her old treadle sewing machine. Mama Tara was an outstanding seamstress, who could look at a dress, or the photograph of one, and then get the scissors, cut the fabric, and sew one just like it. Consequently, she had to sew all the village uniforms for the *tere tere* Pentecost celebrations.

'We'd come home from school and the house would be full of bags with fabric for the uniforms already cut up,' May remembers. 'She'd spend two days and nights sewing and we'd have to help. Or she'd have cut a *tivaivai* and spread it out on the floor for tacking. She'd get mad with us, telling us to be careful not to step on the fabric, and we'd complain, "but Mom this is our house where we live! We need to be able to step somewhere to get in!"'

But Mama Tara would not accept their complaints, and instead would make them sit down and help her with the tacking or other sewing jobs. Like many young women (myself included), May was not keen to learn how to sew. Back then, helping her mother seemed a tedious chore.



Above: Fine stitches and neat work were Mama Tara's trademark.

Right: *Tivaivai* that Tara Maui made for her adopted son Kiriau.

Some time ago May, now a mother of two, joined a group of Manihiki women in her Auckland neighbourhood who gather for sewing *tivaivai*. 'Those elderly women, some of whom had to be taught how to sew, were quite surprised at the skill with which I handled my sewing jobs, until the *ta'unga* told them that I had grown up as a *ta'unga*'s daughter,' May proudly tells me.

Mama Tara was always very modest about her talent. When women put money in the folded fabrics they sent to her for cutting into a pattern, she used to return it, refusing to accept payment. Nor did she want to keep the food women brought her as payment. They would have to sneak into the house, quietly leave it on the table and quickly disappear, so that she could not argue with them.

'A short time ago, for a wedding, I decided to sew waistcoats for my three boys all on my own, and it was as if my mom was right behind me, telling me how to do it,' she smiles. 'When I picked up Mom's *tivaivai* from my brother's house and drove down here, I kept looking at it sitting next to me in the car. It felt as if Mom was there, feeling pleased that her work was receiving the recognition it deserved.'

Very few of Tara Maui's works have remained on Atiu. The women for whom they had been cut gave most of them away as treasured heirlooms to family members that now reside overseas.

Though this shows that her patterns were very popular, and were therefore selected as special gifts, it saddens me to think that her work has almost disappeared without trace from our island. But she left her memories in our hearts, and I feel privileged to write these lines in honour of her life's work.

Taukura Porio (Mama Tapu)

Atiu Place No. 1 in Mangere, Auckland. We leave the car parked in front of the huge house and enter. Passing a tidy office, well equipped with computer, printer and everything people of today need to organize work, I admire the glass case on the opposite wall, which is filled with trophies of all sizes: first, second and third prizes, for all sorts of competitions the members of our Atiu community in Auckland have succeeded in. The hall in front of us is so huge that it dwarfs the eight women that have gathered around a large

Taukura Porio, a *ta'unga* in Auckland with a pattern sample from the 1940s.

table. And then I see Mama Tapu: she hasn't changed a bit! I immediately recognize her by the halo of white curls that surround her friendly face. In front of her is a piece of fabric the size of a cushion-cover, on which she has just finished drawing a cluster of frangipani blossoms. The woman sitting opposite has now to trace these onto a sheet of transparent plastic, in order to copy the reversed design to the first cushion-cover's pair. We hug and kiss, and Mama Tapu introduces me to the seven women next to her. I do not

know any of them, and nor do they know me; most have been living in Auckland much longer than I have lived on their home island of Atiu. But I know many of their family members: brothers and sisters and cousins, and some have heard of me and my husband.

On my right side sits a petite octogenarian, skilfully stitching a red snowflake pattern onto its yellow background. Despite her advanced age, she does not wear glasses, but her stitches are neat and tiny! From her repeated questions, I gather that she finds it hard to believe that I, the *papa'a* (white foreigner), have lived on her home island for twenty-three years.

'Let's go to the other room,' invites Mama Tapu, and one of the mamas follows us with two cups of coffee and a plate of biscuits on a tray.

Mama Tapu is the daughter of one of Atiu's first Members of Parliament, Papa Vainerere Tangatapoto. When we visited Atiu for the first time in 1982, he flew back home on the same plane, in those days a five-seater Sky Master. His obvious love for, and engaged description of, his island won our hearts for Atiu even before we had set foot on its shores.

Papa Vainerere came from a family of tailors. He and his brothers all knew how to sew men's suits, Boy's Brigade uniforms and shirts. Their mother sewed the female garments, long frilly dresses made of floral cotton prints. Young Tapu grew up in the family home surrounded by fabrics and the rhythmic sound of treadle machines. Her mother, Aketua Vainerere, had died aged 26, when Tapu was only three years old. Soon she was given easy sewing tasks to help her grandmother.

When she was seven-years old, her mother's first cousin took her to Rarotonga, where she lived in the Takamoa Mission compound until her return to Atiu in 1946. She had learned how to use a sewing machine and started to sew her first mosaic piecework *tivaivai* at the age of twelve. She was also a skilful weaver of pandanus mats, baskets and hats. In fact, when my mother visited us on Atiu in the mid 1980s, Mama Tapu gave her a beautifully plaited *kikau*



Never too old for sewing *tivaivai*.

(coconut-leaf fibre) hat, whose colourful hatband, composed of minute shells, has survived to this day.

In 1949 a small group of eager students at Atiu school were chosen to become teachers. Tapu was one of them, her subject being, of course, home economics and sewing. In the 1950s Mama Tapu got married and had her first son, Tauu Porio, the only child who still lives on Atiu today. The Women's Institute was established and Mama Tapu joined a sewing group. She discovered her talent for designing *tivaivai* patterns. Her first *tivaivai manu*, a lily pattern, accompanied her fourth son to his grave. The *tivaivai taorei* that she brought with her to the interview is her own first *taorei* pattern, a rose. She shows me a triangular fragment from one her grandmother's *tivaivai*, made in the 1940s, that she has kept as a family heirloom. Despite her 16 children, she has continued teaching and sewing.

By 1987, when her daughter started studying at Auckland Polytechnic, most of the older children had left home, and the family moved to New Zealand. Though no longer teaching, she kept busy creating outstanding *tivaivai* patterns. Her design skills were in high demand for all sorts of family and official celebrations, and her patterns became famous in the Auckland Cook Islands community. In September 1999, she formed the sewing group whose *ta'unga* she remains today. When she shows me a folder in which she has gathered meticulous records and photographs of her own artistic career and of the group's events, I am amazed and full of admiration. The group had their first exhibition outside Auckland in Wellington

in 2003 and has been invited to Christchurch for workshop events. They have also been the subject of an anthropological thesis and have been written about in textile magazines and a recently published book about the Atiu community in Auckland. She proudly smiles when I tell her that in 2005 the C.I. Tivaivai Association exhibited two of her *tivaivai* (which her group had cut and sewn for Revd and Mrs Tangaroa Uea, then based on Atiu) at the XI Patchwork Meeting in Ste Marie Aux Mines, France.



Chapter 2

Threads of life

The material connections

Migration has been a fact of life for Cook Islanders from at least the time of the earliest historical records. Massive migration, assisted by extensive networks of marriage relationships, has created a transnational society extending far beyond the shores of the homelands. This study is about these homelands, which for Cook Islanders remains the spiritual home, however imaginary it may be to some, and the 'sources of knowledge' (*tumu korero*). A considerable proportion of Cook Islands income comes in the form of remittances from relatives living as migrant workers in New Zealand (to which Cook Islanders have free access as New Zealand citizens) or further afield in the Pacific metropolises, in America or in Europe. Belying the romantic anthropological stereotype of an isolated local world, living standards are no different to that of New Zealand, with imported food, videos, television and the mod-cons of everyday life being found in every house.

Despite the transnational character of the corporate kin group, family ties with those who reside in the homelands are strong and flourishing, with family members travelling back and forth a great deal for annual or family ceremonies, such as Christmas, New Year, weddings or hair-cuttings and most importantly for unveiling ceremonies, which conclude the commemoration of the dead. Even those who reside in the homelands, for however long, consider themselves to be part of this great wave of migration. As women are the most active migrants, they have great stories to tell of travels and residencies some place else, or are hatching plans for the future. Visits with the scouts to the Philippines, with the sewing bee on tour in Hawaii, or exchange visits of church groups to neighbouring local islands or to far away Australia are among the frequently mentioned occasions for travelling abroad, alongside the perennial trips to daughters or sons working in New Zealand or beyond. A poem written by Michael Tavioni for his granddaughter, Chrystalla Vaimana Ari'I Tefana-Neophitou, bears witness to the cosmopolitan life led by Cook Islanders now for nearly 200 years:

Native of 2020

She is...
Fair skin
Green brown eyes
Slightly blond or red hair
Narrower nose
Longer neck
Pleasant looking
Thinner lips
An inevitable fruit cake

Local of 2020
Her gene bank includes
Rarotonga
Atiu
Mangaia
Tahiti
Aotearoa
German
English
Irish
Chinese
Spanish
Greek-Cypriot
Scottish

(Mason 2003: 247)

Atiu: A Case Study

An obelisk shaped monument stands on the Boys Brigade Ground in the heart of Atiu. It is five metres high, two metres wide and sits on a slab constructed of local limestone. Erected in the memory of Paulo Ngamaru Ariki, the Atiuan chief who assisted in the construction of the Cook Islands Christian Church nearby in the 1950s, the islanders call the monument *Te Pito* or 'the navel' and claim that it is situated at the exact centric point of the island.

When travelling around the island, this measure of certainty in the topology of the island comes across in the almost perfect positioning of roads and houses, which radiate out from the centre in a star-like fashion. This arrangement of living 'on the top' is a product of twentieth-century planning, in former times the settlements were scattered in and around the foothill area near the coast.

Atiu is the third largest island of the southern group and forms a triangle known as *Ngaputoru* with the islands of Mauke and Mitiaro. Formed of a raised reef and a volcanic core, Atiu is a high island rising along a series of flat-topped ridges to 65 metres in the centre. The island has an area

Photo courtesy of Cook Islands Museum and Library Society, Rarotonga.

conduct their lives within the busy intersections that are created by ever expanding fields of relations. Whereas men tend to stay, either at home or abroad, like their *tivaivai*, women move back and forth, and further afield, quietly and patiently, and make the society that came to form the basis of the Cook Islands nation.

'A Quiet Life' by Vaine Wichman



Evaine au ma te au manako muteki e tetai au manako umumumu, ma te tatuatau I toku taima I rotopu I took ngutuare tangata e pera taku tanu kai.

Evaine au ma toku au manako moemoea e te roriroi tikai, te tua nei au I toku karape na roto I te auau o tako umu.

Evaine au I roto au tuatau mamae kua akamaara katoa au I toku manuia. Uuna atu I toku mamae kit e tamariki e ora nei.

Evaine ra au ma te akakoromakianga roa e te ngaueue kore. Te tu tango nei au I roto I te akatupuanga o te basileia e tona au arataki k otaku teia il akatupu.

I am a woman of quiet thoughts and widespread thinking, dividing my time between family and field.

I am a woman of lonely dreams and tired horizons, sharing my knowledge in the *umu* fires I tend.

I am a woman of painful experiences, treasured memories, rearing my hurt in children left behind.

I am a woman of patience and perseverance, standing my ground in the growth of a nation and the leaders I made.

Tivaivai taorei designed and sewn by Akaiti Ama†, now in the collection of the Rarotonga Resort Hotel.

Women, their biography and their *tivaivai*

Akaiti Ama was the eldest of five children in an important noble family on Rarotonga. On her mother's side she descended from Potiki Taua, a high priest appointed by Tangiia Nui Ariki to perform priestly functions, especially concerning the investiture of *ariki* (high chiefs), at the *koutu ariki* (chiefly court) named Arai-te-tonga-vare-roa-paa (see Savage 1980: 266). According to the genealogical records studied by Stephen Savage between 1894 and his death in 1941, and posthumously published in 1962 in his now classic *Dictionary of the Maori Language of Rarotonga*, this high priest also held the title of Teariki Taraare Mataiapo, one of the seven *mataiapo* titles of the district divisions which today make up the district of Avarua. On her father's side, she descended from an important chiefly line from Tahiti, Tamarua Nui.

Akaiti Ama gave birth to nine children, but also taught throughout her married life: first as a schoolteacher and then as a high-school principal. In her later years she performed the important function of Justice of the Peace.

Alongside her busy public life, she managed to design and sew *tivaivai* for her children. When she was pregnant with her last-born son, Akaiti kept her husband company in the family's pineapple plantation, an experience that inspired her to design and sew an unusual *tivaivai taorei*, which has survived her death. When she suddenly died in November 2003, her grave site was erected beside the ancient *marae* of Arai-Te-Tonga, which lies beneath her son's house. Her younger sister Terangi Little has taken over as head of the family and can recount 47 generations.



Tracing *ta'unga*

When I first became familiar with the art of *tivaivai*, I was quite surprised to discover that most women did not design their own work. I learned that each of Atiu's five villages had one or two *taunga* who would cut the *tivaivai* for the other women. You took the fabric to the *taunga* of your choice, mostly the one that lived in your village, and decided upon a motif that you would like them to cut for you. Once cut, you and your friends, if necessary, did all the work, or you could pay a skilled seamstress or embroiderer to finish the *tivaivai* for you. If the *tivaivai* were displayed, for instance in an annual show, only the owner's name mattered, and the praise, if any, was given to her. Naturally, in such a small community as our island, everyone knew who had designed, cut and sewn your *tivaivai*! Over the years I learned to distinguish the individual styles of the various *taunga* on Atiu.

I think it unlikely that the art of making *tivaivai* came to Atiu before the end of the nineteenth century, and if *tivaivai* themselves did, they would have been as a gift to the *ariki* (high chief). *Tivaivai* making was probably not common amongst ordinary women until the beginning of the twentieth century. My first informants in the early 1980s were elderly Atiuan women, most of them no longer alive. They all attributed the introduction of *tivaivai* making in organized groups to Teakarua Moni, though some admitted that there must have been some other women who already knew how to make *tivaivai*. There is nobody left to ask for confirmation, nor could I find any written records.

Teakarua Moni

Teakarua was born in Tahiti in approximately 1900 and died in New Zealand around 1982, the exact dates being unknown to her nieces on Atiu.

Teakarua came to Atiu with her parents. Her father was said to have been a Chinese merchant. She most probably learned the art of making *tivaivai* from her Tahitian mother. As a young woman she went back to Tahiti, bought all sorts of merchandise, and shipped it to Atiu, where she and her brother John set up the first privately owned retail business on the island. After her return from this trip, she started gathering young women around her and teaching them all sorts of craft skills. Thus, the first women's sewing group was formed. The *tivaivai* sewn in these groups were *taorei* (mosaic piecework) and *manu* (snowflake-style cut-out applique). Teakarua Moni's niece still keeps as a family treasure a notebook in which her aunt recorded the patterns for several *tivaivai*, the oldest entry dating as far back as 1936. She also owns the *tivaivai* to go with that pattern, keeping it well protected in a large metal storage chest.



Teakarua Moni (left) shown here with her mother, sister and brother, John.

Emily Teariki Rakei (Mama Puni)

It is the end of this year's Christmas holidays. Atiuan visitors from overseas are leaving the island again to return to their New Zealand and Australian homes. I will have to rush if I want to catch up with Mama Puni, who now lives in Wellington with her children while her daughter Teau looks after the family home on Atiu. Many of the family heirlooms are still stored here in large metal boxes secured with big padlocks.

Her smile is still as friendly as I remember it from last year's visit, her voice still sounds like the tomboy she must have been in her younger days. 'What do you want?' she teases me. I have visited her so often, borrowing *tivaivai* for overseas exhibitions, or asking for information, like now.

Mama Puni was born on Atiu on 24 April 1936. She is proud that she will soon turn seventy (this interview was conducted in 2006) and feels as fit as a young woman, she assures me. She looks it, too! As niece of the founder of the first sewing group on Atiu, she learnt her skills of designing and cutting *tivaivai* from her mother and her famous aunt Teakarua Moni. Under her mother and aunt's supervision, she cut her first *tivaivai* when she was twenty-two, and has cut over a hundred *tivaivai* since for the women on Atiu, mainly for members of her Teenui village sewing group and her own private requirements.

I ask her about the trophies I can see proudly displayed on a side table. She picks one up and tells me that she won it for her participation in a craft exhibition on Rarotonga in 1992. In 1995 she was elected president of the Teenui women's group. 1995 saw a memorable *tivaivai* exhibition on Atiu's Boys Brigade Ground. Two pastors' wives were leaving the island at the end of their



Right: Emily Teariki Rakei alias Mama Puni (in 1994) proudly posing in front of Teakarua Moni's *tivaivai* displaying her family photographs.

Below: Precious *tivaivai* are stored in securely lockable metal boxes.





Chapter 3

Keeping time, stitching memories

Patchwork quilts and the mapping of time and space

The association of the patchwork quilt with memory, with protection and with the sustaining of connections hidden from plain view has inspired generations of scholars and practitioners. The quilt frequently inspires nostalgia. A tangible thing that has been crafted, altered and used by people, it has a capacity to tell of times gone past possibly only matched by narrative.

As Judy Elsley has argued in her book on *Quilts as Text(iles)*, the patchwork quilt can be compared to a text which takes shape in blocks that form an ever larger pattern 'whose central motif is change' (1996: 1). While the analogy with writing is not one I want to pursue in this chapter, it is a useful to us here in as much as it allows us to discern a unique feature of the activity of quilting: patterning a surface, like pen on paper, the pieces which compose the quilt serve to draw ideas together in a manner that speaks of a synergy of making and knowing that continues beyond the construction of the 'final' product. In the same way as we readily accept that the writing down of a narrative makes its content portable as well as comparable and combinable with other narratives written before and after, patchwork made of stitched fabric pieces lifts the resulting pattern onto a spatial and temporal plane where it functions no longer as a singularity, but as something that combines and multiplies, a provocateur and agent of transmission.

Patchwork as a technique has its roots in the European decorative sewing used to embellish clothing, bedding and other textile items, either singly, or in

combination with quilting, which, in fact, is a different process all together (see Horton 2005: 17; Schoeser 2003:112–33). The two processes may be combined, as they have been in American colonial history, yet each can also be used on their own to create planar surfaces in which patterns appear through stitching. In quilting, two or more textiles are layered through stitches that penetrate all layers and that form designs through the alignment of rows of stitches. Patchwork, on the other hand, involves combining small pieces of fabric to create a surface pattern; this additive process may either take the form of piecework, in which fabric pieces are sewn directly onto each other, or of appliqué, in which fabric pieces are arranged and sewn onto a fabric background that is part of the pattern.

Where unquilted appliqué occurs on its own, superimposed onto a second layer of fabric, as is the case



Left: Caption for the photo opposite goes here.

Right: Connections hidden from plain view.



Dyed pareus and tacked tivaivais offered for sale at a road-side stall on Rarotonga

With this new-found appeal of thread-based images, the once quite distinct logic of mapping evident in latticed things became blurred with that of cordage in the fashioning of patched and embroidered quilt-like sewings. What emerged in the conflation of cordage and lattice-based techniques of mapping in the sewing patchwork, are unique time-maps that elicit a temporal logic in which ideas of continuity through acts of renewal merged with empowerment through acts of containment. Patchwork thus gave rise to a political economy that is centred on biographical relations. Spatial and temporal cognition are key factors in the consolidation of effective biographical relations, which are known and remembered through sewing, the material connectivity of which asserts that relations are made and born.

We have seen in this chapter how patchwork fuels an economy run on 'past'-time in which generalized commodity value is converted into an asset that sustains the economy of the household. Women who sew together regularly share assets such as bank accounts into which they pay proceeds of

occasional sales of *tivaivai* and from which they draw money to purchase the cloth required to a new sewing. Sewing bees such as these, however, also sustain the household as whole, as they regularly inspect each others' homes, and purchase from the collective account what is needed to keep them running. What may appear to the innocent eye as an ostentatious craft made by the busy hands of quiet women thus challenges our expectations with an astonishing testimony of the pooling of assets in things and people that is vibrant and sustainable in the homelands and elsewhere.

Notes

- 1 Lehman and Herdrich point out the importance of the distinction between the two modes of representing space in their linguistic and ethnographic research in Thailand and Samoa (2002: 179–97).
- 2 This section is based on Küchler 2004, though substantially revised. Permission has been given by the publisher to incorporate this material here.
- 3 See A version of the ideas expressed over the following pages have previously been published in *RES* (Küchler 2005).

Tutaka: humble homes become colourful castles

In *Ancient Tahiti* (1928: 158–60) Teuira Henry reports that the priest used to change the god's tapa and feather decoration every three months. Only priests were entitled to plant the special *aute* (paper mulberry – *Broussonetia papyrifera*), to prepare the cloths to cover the *to'o* (family god) and to deal with the *tapu* of the gods, as only they had the requisite secret incantations with which to protect themselves. The *marae's* treasures were kept in an *ia manaha* (sacred storehouse) and had to be aired every three to four months to prevent them from falling prey to the mould and destructive bugs that abound in warm, humid climates.

In 1926 the *Au Vaine* (lit. 'the women') established the *tutaka* ('inspection'). The heathen gods had long since been abolished and all Cook Islanders had been converted to Christianity. But the custom of cleaning and airing all cloths and textiles regularly, which in Henry's book was connected to priests and sacred dwellings, seems to have remained and has become important for people's own homes. This three-monthly inspection tour ensures that every household benefits from regular efforts to keep it clean and its inhabitants healthy.

If you visit Atiu during the days preceding the *tutaka*, the uniform buzz of lawnmowers and grass-cutters will greet you as you enter a village. You will see immaculately manicured gardens with long washing-lines decorated with colourful clothes next to every household, and you may even find all mats, cushions and mattresses spread out on the lawns around the houses to air.

I would like to share with you some early memories of our life on Atiu. When I first learned what *tutaka* was, I shuddered! Atiu, in those days, had only dirt roads. And some dirt it was... The oily rust-coloured earth entered the louvred windows in clouds whenever a vehicle drove past. Admittedly there were



The *tutaka* committee on its way to work



Colourful clotheslines adorn every household before *tutaka* time

fewer vehicles then, but enough to have kept you busy all day just wiping dust, had you intended to keep your place clean and spotless at all times.

The *tutaka* committee included the doctor, public nurse and health inspector, and altogether was a group of approximately ten people. These would not only want to examine your dust-free, sparkling home, but would also look under every bed, inside every cupboard and at every shelf, your suitcases (local substitute for wardrobes) and camphor boxes filled with neatly folded, recently washed and aired laundry. They would check cooking-house, wash-house and outhouse, and judge the results of your gardening skills and your taste in decorating! I did my best, scrubbed, washed (with the next-door neighbours' girl's help) and polished, got Jürgen, Mr Green Thumbs, to plant two frangipani trees and a bougainvillea.

When the big day came, I waited and – saw the committee go past without even a look at the result of my hard work! Frustrated, I ran after them and dragged them to my house: what else had I worked so hard for, if not for them to come and check and approve what they saw! After the inspectors' shyness had passed and their ohs and ahs had stopped, I was told that *papa* (European) houses did not have to be inspected, because *papa* were always clean and orderly (little did they know, but I wasn't going to tell them!)

Upon my further inquiries regarding the custom of *tutaka*, I learnt that the next one, at the end of the year, would be a special inspection for which women prepare all year long. The main emphasis in that *tutaka* is on the houses' decoration: covers for sofas, chairs and cushions, tablecloths, bedspreads and pillow cases; even floor coverings and doormats. After finishing the inspection, there would be a grand ball in the Atiu Nui Hall and a trophy would be presented to the winning village. In good Polynesian custom, the winner is not an individual, but the village community as a whole. The village whose women have all fulfilled the demands of the women's committee's programme, decided upon at the beginning of the year, will win. Often there are several winners and the cup is shared, like so many other things in our island community.

The *tutaka* is currently practiced with three-monthly regularity on most islands of the Cooks group.



Chapter 4

Hidden in the light



Characteristic of Cook Islands *tivaivai* is the ostentatious depiction of flowers, arranged on large, coloured sheets of cloth. Each *tivaivai* depicts one or more flowers repeated many times over its surface in a symmetrical pattern. The flowers are shown most vividly, and with striking verisimilitude, on appliqué *tivaivai*; while piecework and snowflake designs occasionally obfuscate the botanical identities by means of geometric abstraction.

As one surveys the plant kingdom modelled in *tivaivai*, one is reminded of a botanical manual of archetypal images. Yet one also quickly notices with astonishment that many of the flowers that are depicted with such attention to detail are strangely familiar, bringing to mind gardens from moderate climates, such as those found in England or North America. There are the beloved roses, marguerites (the English daisy,

not to be confused with the Cook Islands word *matirita*, which refers to the English chrysanthemum), gardenias and pansies; but one will search in vain for such Cook Islands icons as the frangipani flower, the noni plant (*Morinda citrifolia*) or even the hibiscus, found all over the islands, but rarely finding its way onto *tivaivai*. It is the foreign, the strange and the forgotten which appear to be collected up and stitched into the fabric, where they are held in place in the form of memorable images. A trend one can discern from pre-Christian times in the binding of the feathers of foreign birds, which served as tokens of the omniscient and yet distant power of the gods, into the sennit-wrapped wooden god-staffs by means of floral-shaped knotted cords, or into male ritual paraphernalia such as feather headdresses or sculptures.

Caption for the photo opposite goes here.

Pansies

In 1991, after an article about our company was published (Eimke 1989), the Atiu Fibre Arts Studio was contacted by the Folk Art Museum in Fort Mason (San Francisco, USA), which was interested in exhibiting Cook Islands *tivaivai*. Early in 1992, we packed a good cross section into two metal boxes and shipped them to San Francisco. Mata Teamoke, then my co-director, and I flew over to attend the exhibition opening.

The museum was quite tiny, but the curator had done an exquisite job in displaying each work to its best advantage. A television crew came for interviews, and we were quite proud to see our island's treasures so well respected.

During this week in April we were lucky with the weather. It was possible to walk to the museum from our accommodation, and in these daily journeys we passed many houses with window-boxes of colourful flowers. Whenever we passed those that displayed pansies, which had so many different sizes and colours, Mata would stop me and have a close look. She could not get enough of them. Pansies cannot grow on Atiu, as it is too hot, but I had the feeling that that was not the reason that Mata was marvelling at their beauty and variety. 'No!' she laughed. 'We are planning on a programme [two pillow cases, a table cover, a sofa cover and two cushion covers!] for our *tivaivai* show which will all

be "pansies" *tivaivai tataura* having three colours in the flower and green leaves.'

That year's show was one whose wealth of colours and number of participants (400) remain unrivalled. Needless to say, Mata's pansies had the most realistic colour combinations and shapes...



Embroidery (detail) showing stylized pansies



Tivaivai taorei with hexagons and diamonds

of shadow across the surface of the *tivaivai* furthermore creates the impression that the light source is not part of the field of vision, but originates from another dimension. It is these characteristics that are shared by Cook Islands, Hawaiian and Tahitian *tivaivai*.

There is thus something quite hyper-real about the flowers presented on the *tivaivai*, which appear to be there for a purpose other than that of mere representation. Like Marcel Duchamp's artworks, which experimented with ways of capturing the shadows cast by the fourth dimension (time) onto our

knowledge acquired in the tending of plants; the flowers in appliqué *tivaivai* elevate such hidden views to the surface by embroidering the shadings of sun-kissed blossoms and pollen with multicoloured thread.

The choice of colour for foreground and background, petals, leaves and pollen add to the impression that concepts are forged in the construction of the floral image which somehow capture what remains unsaid, and yet which informs actions vital to self and society. For the choice of colours and the manner of their superimposition is such as to create the impression of a light source situated behind the

tivaivai, allowing the pattern from the forms of the cut-out fabric to stand in the shadows of another complementary pattern seeming to emerge from a bright light. It is this inversion of positive and negative spaces which, in a good design, should be well balanced and trick the untrained eye into read the motif so that it appears to exchange foreground and background. The pattern itself is placed on a two-dimensional surface, yet appears strikingly three-dimensional, with the flowers' 'depth' giving the impression of full boom. The even and regular distribution

three-dimensional world, Eastern Polynesian *tivaivai* appear to entice the viewer into contemplating the possibility of another world, one which intersects the visible plane via the creative channels of the mind. We will see in this chapter how, through the creative use of floral imagery alluding to the interplay of light and life, shadow and death, coloration and olfaction, concepts are brought to the fore that are as vital to the conduct of self and society today as they were two hundred years ago in pre-Christian times. These concepts concern the state of the souls of the dead, and their impact



Embroidered stamens (detail of *tivaivai tataura* owned by Ngakura Kautai)



Light shining through *tivaivai tataura* by Nga Mokoroa

on the minds and conduct of the living; concepts which were then and are now intimately bound up with the creative transformation of cloth-like surfaces into shrouds for the dead and clothes for the living, and which met then and meet today with comparable cosmological ideas within Christianity.

Flowers have been said to speak a common language; so it is perhaps unsurprising that gazing at *tivaivai* one is easily reminded of other floral images from far away, such as those engraved on the surface of seventeenth-century Huguenot furniture. Flowers in the Huguenot diaspora served as a secret code, a hidden cue to memory, that in the diaspora had become vital for expressing visions of self and society in a way that would secure their transmission (Kamil 2005). Flowers, of course, are abundantly used in artworks across all ages and nations. The beauty of flowers is that they lack meaning and purpose, and thus appear to be depicted for incantation, rather than interpretation. Their only project is to flourish: growing, living and dying, soaking up the light whose presence they testify; attracting insects with their shape and bright colours, and 'feeding' them their pollen, offering them their pistils in order to aid their procreation. They are there, simply; almost as a kind of superfluous phenomenon in the midst of a complex world. No doubt it is the fragility of the flower, its testament to the presence of life and light, as well

as to its tending and transformation, which is presented to us within the folds of the *tivaivai*.

Larger than life, the botanical order created by *tivaivai* making in the Cook Islands incites us to rediscover the monumental and the complex in the miniature, the minimal and the simple, as leaves, petals and pollen project a world in close-up perspective. In the Cook Islands, *tivaivai* the size of the patchworks suggest a scale that forces one to step away in order to see the whole, yet this is in tension with the scale of the patched, and occasionally embroidered, floral motif, which draws the eye closer to the surface to identify the composition. The movement that is anticipated by these two scales could be argued to resonate rather well with the tracking back and forth from home that dictates both men's and women's life in the Cook Islands. The micro-scale of the flower – represented either from 'within', that is from the perspective of the internal structure of a plant invisible from the outside, or from a perspective that draws the eye even further into a microscopic vision of the crystalline structure of its leaves and blossoms – effectively presents an iconic journey into the heart of Cook Islands life, coupled with an ironic realisation that, hidden in the light, such journeys inevitably involve the presence of the foreign, the strange and the forgotten.