

## Travel Report

# THE LANGUAGE OF PATTERNS IN THE COOK ISLANDS

Steev Peyroux

I'm in a workshop with no walls, carving an ancient Polynesian pattern into a wooden figure. Chickens occasionally strut by. A dog belonging to nobody lounges nearby. It is languidly warm, so my shirt is off as I work and the radio is playing back-to-back ukulele music.

It feels like what I imagined being an artist on the tiny South Pacific island of Rarotonga would be like, and I feel deeply satisfied. This is a world away from my own studio environment in the mid-winter depths of Dunedin.

I have been taken under the wing of Mike Tavioni, Rarotonga's most senior artist and ta'unga (traditional master carver). Poet, painter; tattoo artist, stone, wood and bone carver; author and social commentator, Tavioni's role within the Pacific art community is acknowledged from Aotearoa through to Hawaii.



Figure 1. Mike Tavioni in workshop.



Figure 2. Steev Peyroux in Tavioni's workshop.



Figure 3. Steev Peyroux and David Teata.

Tavioni's inclination to work across many art disciplines seems typical of Polynesian artists; as a student at the Dunedin School of Art (DSA) in the mid-1980s I shared a studio with the now renowned Polynesian artist, Michel Tuffery. Like Tavioni, Tuffery works across a myriad of mediums. Perhaps a holistic, interdisciplinary approach is characteristic of cultures such as Polynesia where art is intertwined with life, rather than specialised or compartmentalised.

Over the years since then I have taught printmaking techniques to many Pasifika students. Nearly all of them were drawn to relief printmaking, made by carving into a woodblock. So my intention in going to Rarotonga was to study traditional Polynesian printmaking, in order to discover where this affinity with woodcut printing came from. To my surprise, what I discovered is that there is very little traditional printmaking in Polynesia. The art of tapa uses some stamp and stencil printing, and the more recent tivaevae traditions involve stencil printing, but that is all.

Instead, the imagery drawn on by the students I taught originated in traditional carving and tatatau (tattoo). It would seem that these art students were attracted to disciplines which involved carving as a means for self-expression in the context of their cultural identity. As I observed their progress through art school, I became more and more curious to know the deeper significance of the distinctive motifs and patterns they used. These patterns strongly identified their work as Polynesian, but beyond their surface appearance they meant nothing to me, making me aware that I had little direct experience in the Pacific neighbourhood I am part of.

A 2014 Otago Polytechnic Staff Award provided me with the opportunity to study in the Pacific. Rarotonga was an obvious choice – an ex-student, Dave Teata, was building a studio there; my old art school friend, Michel Tuffery, provided me with an introduction to his uncle, Mike Tavioni; and my father-in-law is Rarotongan, meaning I would be accepted as puna (family) on the island, helping to immerse me in the local culture.

When I met Mike Tavioni he was in the process of writing a book on the language of symbols and



Figure 4. Tangaroa. "Wooden carving of a 'fisherman's god,' 18th-19th century," British Museum. Reproduced with permission © Trustees of the British Museum. This figure is cited in Te Rangi Hiroa, *Arts and Crafts of the Cook Islands*, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Bulletin 179 (Honolulu: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1944), 312, fig. 191.

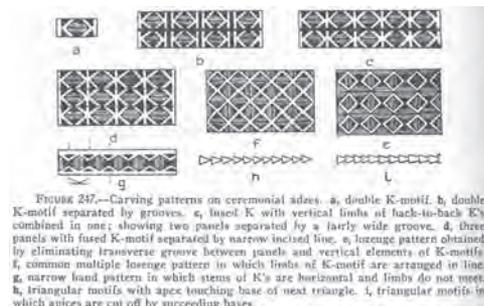


Figure 5. The repeating 'K-motif', reproduced from Te Rangi Hiroa, *Arts and Crafts of the Cook Islands*, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Bulletin 179 (Honolulu: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1944), 388, fig. 247.

patterns in the Cook Islands. Along with his wife, Awhitia, also a highly respected carver, Tavioni is making work based on traditional knowledge, preserving the craft and the meanings behind it, and the local art community is encouraging him to record what he knows as a valuable resource for future generations. Shortly before meeting Tavioni I visited the director of Rarotonga's University of the South Pacific, Rod Dixon. When I told Dixon why I was here, he suggested I assist Tavioni to organise the material for his book. I could not suppress my wide grin, as there seemed no better way to conduct my planned study. And that is how I found myself in Tavioni's workshop with the chickens and the dog.

Tavioni is keeping traditional art practices alive by teaching children their cultural roots, and feels this is vital for the islands' wellbeing and sense of identity. Polynesians passed cultural and historical knowledge down from generation to generation by oral tradition. Sadly, much of this traditional knowledge was lost during the European missionary era when Cook Islanders enthusiastically embraced Christianity and were convinced to abolish many traditional art forms, particularly carving and tatatau. The few carvings that the missionaries did not burn were taken back to England.

The flow of knowledge is kept alive when traditions are copied by descendants, but modified and handed on. For Tavioni, the question for Pasifika's contemporary artists is not, has he or she used traditional motifs? Rather it is, what have they done with them? What have they added of their own to make it theirs? Culture is a population's response to a particular time and a particular place and evolves through continuous adaptation and appropriation. Like many islands in the South Pacific, Rarotonga has a migratory population which is in a symbiotic relationship with the daily foreign influences of rampant tourism. Hopefully Rarotonga's culture can be enriched by the tensions and challenges of this environment.

Tavioni had me assist him in organising his material on traditional motifs and on the structure of his book, from the first god, Io, who has no parents and was never depicted, to the speed and sophistication of Polynesian vaka (waka). He tells the story from Captain Cook's journal of Cook meeting several Polynesian vaka in open ocean. While Cook sailed on at full speed these vaka, from standstill, sailed easy circles around his ship. Tavioni told me that the speed and navigational skill of Polynesian sailors has been slow to be acknowledged by Western historians. Many were cynical about claims the ancient navigator Kupe from Tahiti was the first to discover Aotearoa, and then sailed back to Tahiti to report his discovery. This incredible level of mobility suggests there was a lot of movement and exchange of ideas between the Pacific Islands, particularly Tonga, Tahiti, Cook Islands and Aotearoa, which all share many language, genealogical and cultural similarities. The name of Tavioni's book refers to this natural impulse for travel; it is called "Nuketere," meaning "People on the Move."

In his book Tavioni explains that in Polynesian art, symbols were created which came to have specific meaning and social and religious significance. Like language, they connected people and times and helped to transmit values and beliefs. Patterns and motifs have a hierarchy of their own. Designs were chosen for their importance in the belief

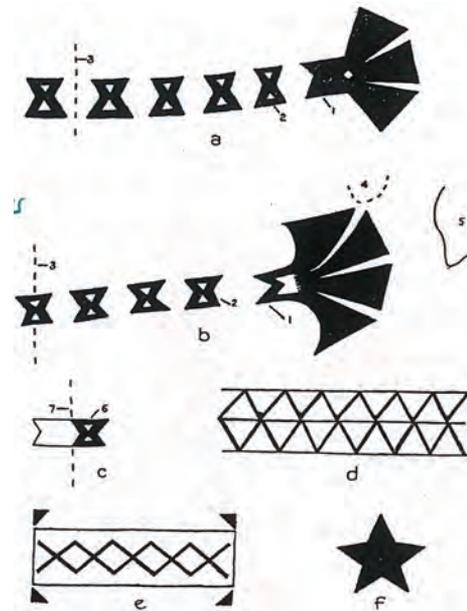


Figure 6. Tattooing motifs from Rarotonga, reproduced from Te Rangi Hiroa, *Arts and Crafts of the Cook Islands*, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Bulletin 179 (Honolulu: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1944), 132, fig. 72.



Figure 7. Michel Tuffery, *Pili Saipo*, (1988).

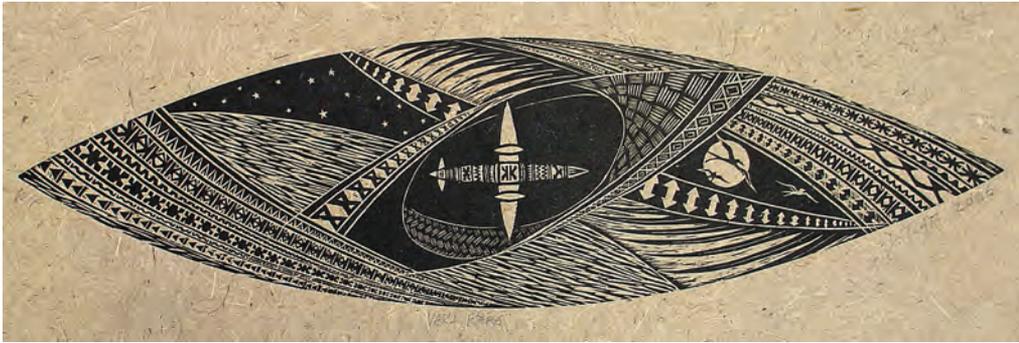


Figure 8. David Teata, *Vaka Fere*, (2006), woodblock on handmade paper.

system, for their significance to the wearer and for their aesthetic qualities. The designs reserved for the decoration of items used in important rituals assumed great mana.

These patterns were the work of skilled tā'unga on skin, wood or tapa. Tā'unga created their own repertoire of patterns largely drawn from natural forms: plants, animals, fish and the physical environment. Motifs were strongly influenced by personal experience and religious belief.

Cook Islands patterns are rhythmic, mostly geometric and repetitive in style. The ni'o mango or shark's tooth motif is one of the most common motifs; a simple triangle, it is repeated to form dynamic patterns. Some islands in the Cooks developed patterns using more elliptical shapes, such as the tikitiki-tangata motif in Aitutaki and the elliptical eye motif from Rarotonga.

Certain motifs were well known throughout much of Polynesia, such as the 'image of man' motif, known in the Cook Islands as tikitiki-tangata. Across the Pacific it was represented by various tiki forms, the embodiment of gods or supernatural beings.

Contemporary Pasifika artists like Dunedin School of Art graduates Michel Tuffery, David Teata, Bridget Inder, Tere Moeroa and currently Anasaunoa Teofilo, are investigating these traditional symbols and exploring how they might manifest in their own work. Teata graduated from DSA in 2006 and is in the process of building a house and art studio on Rarotonga's eastern coastline which he plans to equip with one of the few printmaking presses on the island. He is part Mangaian (one of the Cook Islands), part Rarotongan, and is researching how the motifs that held so much significance for his ancestors revealed a person's history, tribal and social affiliations, religion, achievements and lineage. The repeating 'K' pattern



Figure 9. Bridget Inder; *Running in the Rain*, (2004), woodblock over monochrome, 760 x 565 mm.

from Mangaia occurs often in his work and originally represented the human figure. Teata often dreams in patterns, which interests his elders greatly. When he wakes he records these images and uses them in his work, tying the designs back into his genealogy. Teata says that when one's ancestry gets traced back a certain distance it takes on a mythological quality. At this point, one finds that the same mythological figures start occurring on different islands. He likes the way this leads his work into ideas on spirituality.

In Aotearoa, Pasifika artists contribute to a thriving culture. Their work often examines ideas of identity, hybridity and place within the intercultural challenges posed by being an artist in Aotearoa. Creative energy is created by rubbing shoulders against the other cultures with which they co-exist. One of the distinctive things about Aotearoa is that everybody either comes here from somewhere else, or has ancestors who did. Everybody who arrived, whether a millennium ago or last year, brought stuff with them and then adapted to or rejected what the next arrivals introduced.

The national obsession with family lineage on this small island was a delight for me. I changed my family name to Peyroux when I got married so as to be different and found it useful for my profile as an artist. But in Rarotonga it held a whole new significance; I made a point of telling my name to the locals I met and they invariably talked at great length about the Peyroux genealogy, from the woman selling us tropical smoothies who said to my daughter, "Oh, you look like Alex," to Awhitia Tavioni spending an afternoon telling me stories about the many Peyroux ancestors. She told me of the French naval engineer, Jean Dominique Peyroux, who in the late nineteenth century was on a stopover in Rarotonga. The island had no engineer so locals plied him with so much alcohol that he missed his ship the next morning. Now Rarotonga is full of his descendants. This was Awhitia's way of placing me in the context of her community. In Māori culture this is known as He taura tangata, the cord that binds people.

It intrigued me to imagine what an un-colonised Aotearoa might look like today. Cook Island Māori have a similar genealogy and language to Māori in Aotearoa, but remain self-governed, speak their own language and remain the majority of the population. The third great migration of Māori to Aotearoa is said to have departed from Rarotonga: "the arrival of a 'great fleet' of seven canoes and some of the most illustrious Māori chiefs and most noble genealogies in Aotearoa. When the chiefs landed, they spread out across the two islands, carving out territories for themselves. Eventually, their descendants organised themselves into loose associations of tribes named after the ... waka that their founding ancestor had arrived in."<sup>1</sup> Te Arawa and Tainui are the names of two of the waka still familiar to us today.

Māori in Aotearoa evolved in their own unique way. However, while I was in Rarotonga it fascinated me how many connections have survived the centuries; in the early twentieth century, my wife's great uncle John could communicate with Taranaki Māori because their dialect was so similar to that of his native island of Mangaia. However, when he married a Ngā Puhi woman from Northland, he could not understand her family's Te Reo as it was more similar to the Rarotongian dialect, which he didn't know as well.

While in Tavioni's workshop, I spent time carving my own work using the patterns I had been learning about. The carving came naturally to me because of my experience in relief printmaking. The designs I used related to Rarotonga and to the ancestry of the family I married into. My work will eventually help to make up the posts of a school Tavioni is building to revive the traditional art practices of the Cook Islands.

Before I left Rarotonga Tavioni and I established an arrangement for a student residency at his school, in collaboration with the University of the South Pacific, and culminating in an exhibition at the main art gallery on the island, BCA Gallery, directed by Ben Bergman. A Pasifika student, or any DSA student, will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a Pacific Island culture to explore what effect it might have on their art. My own study not only gave me a better understanding of Cook Islands traditions; my study had also opened my eyes to the deeper meaning behind the Māori symbols and motifs of my homeland. In learning more about my neighbours I seem to have learnt more about my own place.



Figure 10. Tere Moeroa, *Faces*, (2009) mixed media print, 675 x 510 mm.



Figure 11. Anasaunoa Teofilo - work in progress, 2014.

**Steev Peyroux** is the technical teacher in the printmaking studio at the Dunedin School of Art. His drawings, which have print processes layered within them, play with a balance between representation and abstraction. Steev's work questions how real our perception of life is when so much of the world is invisible to us. It refers to the duality of the conscious and the subconscious, or of the real world sitting above the dream world.

Of Samoan, Cook Island and Tahitian descent, **Michel Tuffery** MNZM was born and lives in Wellington. He has been a leading player in raising the profile of contemporary Pacific Island art, both locally and beyond the wider Pacific. Adept in all arts media, he works collaboratively with technicians and other art practitioners to realise his numerous performance and installation projects. His work is focused on the conservation of the environment and shaped by his Pacific Island ancestry. Tuffery graduated with a Diploma in Fine Arts (Honours) from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in 1989. The early print works shown in the "Pasifika Cool" exhibition at the DSA in 2012 were conceived during a 1987 research trip to Samoa timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the treaty of friendship between Samoa and New Zealand in 1962. This research opportunity provided Tuffery with invaluable cultural knowledge of tapa cloth (siapo), tattooing (tatau) and fa'a Samoa.

Born in the Maniototo, Central Otago, **Bridget Inder** is of Samoan and New Zealand descent and lives in Sydney. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in 2003 and completed a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction from the DSA in 2010. Her printmaking explores her dual heritage and the conflicting relationships that emerge from the creation of a cultural in-between space. Inder suggests that people

of dual heritage inherently challenge the boundaries of cultures and this examination of cultural authenticity plays out in her work. As well as maintaining her strong arts practice, Inder is also a keen sportswoman and plays rugby professionally in Sydney.

**Tere Moeroa** is of Cook Island descent and was born and lives in Dunedin. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in 2007, majoring in printmaking. Since graduating, Moeroa has expanded his graphic sensibility and skill with line to incorporate contemporary tattoo, and now practices as a tattooist as well as being a printmaker, musician and graffiti artist. Influenced by traditional Polynesian art, tatau, music and graffiti, Moeroa articulates a distinctive Pasifika attitude in his work. Moeroa participated in the 2010 Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust's secondary school workshops as an assistant tutor and mentor in the print studio. More recently, in collaboration with Heramahina Eketone and Nexus Dimensions design crew, he designed the new 2012 Otago Polyfest banners, donated by Otago Polytechnic to the Pacific communities of Dunedin.

Born in Mangaia, Cook Islands, and of Cook Island Māori descent, **David Teata** lives between Waimiha, King Country, and Rarotonga. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in 2006 and a Postgraduate Diploma in Art and Design from AUT in 2008. As a student Teata became interested in woodblock printmaking, giving him an opportunity to explore his Manganian artistic heritage, develop his carving skills and give artistic traditions a contemporary expression. These early works, carved from MDF blocks, began Teata's interest in the fusion of traditional and contemporary designs, involving the symbolic use of shapes, patterns and motifs. His work embraces and celebrates the diverse cultures of New Zealand, drawing inspiration from the dynamic process of merging and intersecting that is shaping our multicultural society, and exploring the notion that identity is shaped by our inheritance interacting with our current experience and context. In 2010 Teata was awarded third place in the visual art section at WAM (World Art Market), Vancouver Museum of Anthropology, Canada.

**Anasaunoa Teofilo** graduated with a BVA in painting from the Dunedin School of Art in 2013. She is currently enrolled in postgraduate studies.

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Lee, *The Great Migration: New Zealand*, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/nz/maorijlg2.html> (accessed 14 October 2014).