

# TE RABAKAU

*By Kaetaeta Watson & Louisa Humphry*



*Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina*



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## Authors



### Kaetaeta Watson and Louisa Humphry

Kaetaeta Watson was born in 1946 at Eita village on the island of Tabiteuea in Kiribati, she moved to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1973 with her husband John, and now lives in Whiritoa. Kaetaeta and John have two children and four grandchildren.

Louisa Humphry was born in 1952 on the island of Kuria in Kiribati, she moved to Aotearoa with her husband Jack in 1973, and now lives in Thames. Louisa and Jack have four children, 12 grandchildren and one great grandchild.

Kaetaeta and Louisa are master artists who have exhibited throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad and are proactive in sharing and passing on their knowledge and expertise through workshops, especially with their own Kiribati community. They are cultural leaders advocating for the maintenance and transmission of their Kiribati cultural heritage which saw them take part as Kiribati knowledge holders for the Pacific Collections Access Project (PCAP) at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. Their works have been exhibited in major exhibitions, including *Home AKL: Artists of Pacific Heritage in Auckland* (2012) at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; as part of *Tungaru: The Kiribati Project*, they participated in *The 9<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT9)*, at Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2018); *Names Held in our Mouths* (2019) at Te Uru Waitākere Gallery; and currently have a work in *Ā Mua: New Lineages of Making* (2020) at The Dowse Art Museum. Working collaboratively with *Tungaru: The Kiribati Project* team, they have been responsible for the revival of the knowledge and skills of making *te otanga* Kiribati armour. Their refined knowledge and expertise in all that they do as makers, creative activators, and cultural movers and shakers was acknowledged by Creative New Zealand when they were awarded the Pacific Heritage Arts Award in 2019.

### Front image caption & credit



**Name:** Te kao

**Description:** Te kao, a mesh carrying net that is used to hold moray eels while travelling home from fishing at sea. It is made of te kora, coconut fibre string, with the circular 'neck' opening created using coconut leaf midribs and bound by te kora. It is from island of Beru, in the Kiribati islands.

**Credit:** Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 1936.295, 23995; 75

**Link:** [https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am\\_humanhistory-object-90561?k=kiribati%20fishing%20net&ordinal=4](https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-90561?k=kiribati%20fishing%20net&ordinal=4)



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## *Te Rabakau*

*‘Art’ is not our word, it is foreign because we do not have a word for ‘art’ in Kiribati. Everything we ‘made/make’ was functional and made for a purpose so therefore the concept of ‘art’ is very different. We have a Kiribati word which is Te Rabakau – which means ‘knowledge’ – knowledge taught to me by my mother, by my grandmother and which I am therefore responsible for passing on to others including our children and our community. It is knowledge that is shared that I then have to practice and to refine the skill of. Yet still, it is so much more than that – it is my Kiribati culture, it is Kiribati pride, it stirs within and throughout me as an iKiribati person – it is a gift.*

*Kaetaeta Watson & Louisa Humphry*

# Te Maroro<sup>1</sup> with Kaetaeta Watson (KW) and Louisa Humphry (LH):

Terminology is highly problematic because now in 2020 as Kiribati weavers and often (through many platforms) we are put into almost a 'lower' category and not seen as 'contemporary' artists yet in our language we hold *te rabakau n raranga* – we have the knowledge of Kiribati weaving, passed down to us which we carry and are highly regarded for our skill and artistry. We would like to persuade like-minded Kiribati weavers to share their skills '*rabakau*' to our young ones in New Zealand so '*te rabakau*' is not lost and is carried on by our new generation.

**KW:** Are we being, sort of boxed, in one box...they assume we all understand their language, but they don't understand *our* language do they?

**LH:** And that is the other thing too, is here in New Zealand we say 'Pacific' art, but we are all so very different. There's no Pacific art, there's Tongan, Samoan, Niuean – so different."

**LH:** So, if we go to [our Kiribati community in] Oamaru and say we are talking about 'art', they'll all say what's art?

But we if go and explain in our language then they'll understand and it will relate to them. They'll then be able to say that *that* person is a weaver and that person is a canoe builder...

**KW:** This term [*te rabakau*] is internally understood [by our own]. But people will not put themselves forward [as that is not our way] and say "Oh, I know how to make a mat" ..

**LH:** We have to point them out. So, if you ask a group, one will say, 'Mary' over there she's a really good weaver. But 'Mary' will not volunteer herself, it will be somebody else who will point her out.

There's actually no art.. everything we do [make] is functional. If my mother sees what I'm doing now is a flower, she will say "what a waste of time, can we eat it? Can we put anything in it?"

There's no *art*. Art is part of our life, what we use, building a house so that we have shelter, weaving a basket so that we can put stuff in it...

**KW:** Together with another weaver, we were running a workshop for women that were interested in learning how to weave with flax. That's our second group that we

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<sup>1</sup> Kiribati term for conversations.

have – about six of them, women. And when we introduced ourselves, my friend explained that she went through a rāranga course and she got a rāranga diploma. When it came to me, I said that I don't have any [diploma], but it is my lifestyle. I grew up with that life and that's how I learnt - with my Grandma sitting there like that and saying bring that leaf...or do it that way... So that's how I learnt as I grew up. As I came here to Aotearoa I built and continue building on that foundation knowledge.

**LH:** Knowing your background.

**KW:** That's what my grandmothers used to do.

**LH:** And I'm still able to do it. Imagine if we have an iKiribati saying that "I'm a third generation New Zealand iKiribati, but I can still do my stuff that I learnt from my grandmother and great grandmother." And if that is the case then I always say, "you're not lost. You're not a lost race in New Zealand."

We're coming up to having third generation. And if they don't know how to make a simple thing like woven balls to play with their kids, then where are you from, you know?

**LH:** With *te rabakau*, it's used a lot in Kiribati. So if somebody breaks a leg, somebody will come up and say "*E rabakau n riring neierei/teuarei*" you know to massage and set the bones. So it's *te rabakau*, it's the knowledge...

Or they might say "I need a mat for my baby, because my granddaughter is coming in a few weeks," "*O e rang rabakau n raranga neierei*" meaning that person has that knowledge to make the mat.

And they are renowned for that. Because people are quite renowned, they're known to be the experts, the knowledge holders of whatever, such as building a canoe...

**KW:** Yes, they will be known to come from this particular village or that village.

**LH:** A master Kiribati weaver is known as *te rabakau raranga*...

Once you have that title *te rabakau raranga* – you are [working] at a high level and standard.

**LH:** If somebody says "*E rang rabakau*" it means they're very knowledgeable...

**KW:** For example there is no use me trying to massage your leg or put your bones together when I don't know.

**LH:** It's funny, you know, if we put Kiribati children who know how to speak Kiribati and we say, "we're going to do an 'art' session this afternoon", most of the Kiribati one's will think we're going to draw.

What's another word that they can use?

When we were called 'knowledge holders' for the PCAP [Pacific Collection Access Project]<sup>2</sup> sessions, we used to think, oh no we don't regard ourselves as the experts, let alone 'knowledge holders', but that is a very apt thing to say – because instead of artists 'knowledge holders' is more appropriate.

We are Pacific people, we like that, but we are really quite unique in our own right, you know.

**KW:** I mean, often, I think the same as Louisa, I go to the market in our small town, and because I weave with flax everyone assumes I'm Māori. So when someone asks "can you show me how to do that", I say "you know I'm not Māori. I'm from the islands..". And they think that just because I'm using flax.

**LH:** We get hostile reactions some times. But the majority are very good, saying good on you for doing that but they're still thinking we are doing Māori weaving.

The hostility comes when some will come and say, who taught you how to weave? I would answer and say, actually I learnt it from the island [Kiribati], all I learnt here is how to use harakeke. And they were like oh, because that's Māori weaving aye?

**KW:** I suppose it's something that takes a while [to know and understand] that we are the same and share a collective history...

**KW /** We all move from one place to another, and as we move we take whatever

**LH:** knowledge we have, and we add it on or adapt, because the materials are not the same.

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<sup>2</sup> PCAP was a Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum initiative that Kaetaeta Watson and Louisa Humprhy were involved in as Kiribati knowledge holders – refer to the following link for more information - <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/research/research-projects/pacific-collection-access-project>