

Art / Weaving: The Origins of Futunese Kato (Baskets) through Folklores, Beliefs and Traditions of Futuna Island, Vanuatu.

By Eric Natuoivi



Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina

Author



Image credit: Provided by Eric Natuoivi

Eric Natuoivi comes from Futuna Island of the Southern part of the Vanuatu Archipelago. He completed a Masters Degree from the New South Wales University of Australia and worked to promote both Traditional and Contemporary arts through writing and teaching at the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Apart from his teaching career, Eric is also an artist and is one of a few well-known ni-Vanuatu artists. A potter by trade, he feels strongly that the knowledge of art, both traditional and contemporary, is essential for his country's identity.

Eric's primary inspiration is Vanuatu's traditional culture and this is reflected in the use of traditional motifs and patterns he incorporated in his artworks. As an artist, Eric has works in the collections of galleries and museums in New Caledonia, Australia, Hawai'i, UK, France, Germany, US and Canada.

He is currently working as an art consultant at a private company, the Millennium Consultancy Services, in Port Vila, Vanuatu since 2020.

Front image caption & credit



Name: Kato (Basket)

Maker: Linda Natuoivi.

Place: Futuna, Vanuatu

Description: Kato (Basket) is a women's art created from processed pandanus leaves. The functions of kato are numerous and used both for daily and ceremonial purposes. Kato is constructed from stripped pandanus leaves plaited together firstly to form the base of the kato before it is woven upwards. Patterns are incorporated at the top of the kato to give a taste of beauty before the ending part, the tarabuni, which finally completes the basket. The artistic skills of creating traditional patterns on the kato is professionally done by the weaver using patterns such as the nufe (caterpillar), rou niseni (fern), rago (fly) and many more.

The nokave (handles) are woven on opposite sides of the kato for handling or carrying purposes. Traditionally, a kato is never dyed but, in modern days like with this kato, imported dyes are used to dye the pandanus leaves before they are woven. Kato is usually worn either hung over the side of the body, attached to the shoulder by the nokave, or is carried over the back. Traditionally kato are useful objects convenient for carrying goods and belongings. This particular kato is woven by Linda Natuoivi, the wife of the author, Eric Natuoivi, who also comes from Futuna. Linda is one of Futunese skilled kato weavers and is currently affiliated with the Natuoivi Art Association as a weaving trainer/instructor. She conducts weaving classes with youths in her community and is residing in Port Vila purposely to transfer the knowledge and skills of weaving kato to the younger generations.

Credit: Description provided by Eric and Linda Natuoivi. Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina, based on the following Kato from Futuna, Vanuatu, made by Linda Natuoivi - [Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira](#), 2016.15.5.



Art/Weaving: The Origins of Futunese Kato (Baskets) through Folklores, Beliefs and Traditions of Futuna Island, Vanuatu.

By Eric Natuoivi

Varona, meaning nothing but a lump of rock raised above the ocean, is the birth name of the island that is now known as Futuna. Varona was renamed Futuna, meaning rocky island, by Captain James Cook in 1774 maintaining a link to the original meaning 'the rock' of its birth name. Today the name Futuna is used as the official name of the island and is part of the Vanuatu archipelago.

Creation of Varona

The name Varona derives from the legend of Buga and Sina, a couple who settled on the neighbouring island of Tanna. Sina was pregnant and craving for gagaika (shellfish) so the couple, one day, went out on a fishing trip in a canoe searching for gagaika. Basiesi, a cruel devil spotted their canoe and immediately went to where they were fishing. While Buga was busy searching for gagaika, Basiesi performed a tragic spell and took possession of Sina where he pushed her off the canoe and transformed himself to imitate Sina's nature. Despite all of these happenings, Buga had no knowledge of Basiesi's cruel acts. Poor Sina struggled to swim to safety but due to her pregnancy, tides and currents, she could not make it to shore. She drifted further and further away from land and soon lost sight of the island. Thoughts surrounded her conscience wishing that something could rise from the bottom of the ocean to support her to rest. In no time she could feel something creeping up from under her feet, a rock pushing and lifting her up, up and up until soon she was on dry land. This is how Varona the rock was formed.

Legend of Majijiki

Another myth that links to the creation of Varona is the legend of Majijiki, god of the South Seas. Majijiki was thought to be a god full of wisdom that gave him power to perform miraculous happenings. He is referred to as the creator and great artist of the land responsible for creating nature, hills, terraces, valleys and changed the landscapes of the island, kavajia. He performed artistic scenes that were admirable and surprising. One of which was his vision to connect the five islands of the South Seas: Erromango, Tanna, Aniwa, Aneityum and Futuna (Varona) to form one single island. So, one day he attempted to fulfil his dream but was unsuccessful. Majijiki also possessed a magic toki stone axe, permitting

him to perform his magic acts, either favourably or unfavourably depending on his magic outcomes.

Futuna Myths and Legends

Futuna myths and legends are associated with the natural environment, the land, the sea/ocean and the atmosphere/sky. The ancestors believe that there are two worlds, the physical and the spirit worlds. They also believe that the spirits have dominant power over nature therefore the physical world sets rules to follow certain possessions to please the spirits either in everyday life or when carrying certain ritual ceremonies. When people are associated with the environment, either land or sea, they act accordingly to the general rules to please the spirits. Sometimes when things are not done correctly, the spirits retaliate against the people causing injury, sickness or even death. However, the people can protect themselves in such circumstances by seeking traditional medication from rakauotua 'clever' men and women. The knowledge of all traditional beliefs are handed down orally through history by elders.

Futuna has a rich and diverse culture including its arts. Culturally, regarding traditional beliefs, arts are separated as men's arts and women's arts and this is structured according to their beliefs. The art of weaving is a women's art so women have the rights and duties to pass on the knowledge and skills to the next female generation.

Three Origin Myths of Futunese Weaving of Kato

My context is the origin of Futunese weaving associated with three mythologies that explain the knowledge and skills of weaving in creating certain parts of the kato (basket).

Firstly, the story of Sapai and Mouga the original weavers of tabakau and botu mats woven from green coconut leaves and dry pandanus leaves. This is believed to be the foundation of weaving. As part of the weaving ritual, Sapai and Mouga would go for a swim in the sea. They performed the fakabaku, splashing water surface with the hands, a procedural performance calling out for Fatukanu, believed to be a sea creature, to come and provide them with more knowledge in weaving. The type of weaving skill they performed is called Ni hlaga.

The second myth that refers to weaving is the legend of Tu, the most beautiful weaver. Tu lived on her own, bounded by a fence protecting and isolating her from the rest of the world, whilst spending all her days weaving. She created different weaving rabakauga designs or patterns. Most of her rabakauga are used in modern weaving.

The third myth is about Sorenau and Faturere, the two sisters who settled on the highest peak of the island, sitting on two platforms and spending all their days weaving in isolation from each other. Sorenau wove hlisi a bird's nest, while Faturere wove matafiri, entwined



weaving. However, they never achieved any weaving skills because they had a quarrel and were separated from each other.

The structural concept or idea of the Futuna kato was developed from the knowledge and skills perceived from the ideologies of these three myths. They are put together to form a complete kato according to three stages: firstly, the body of the basket ni hlaga; secondly, the rabakauga designs or patterns; and thirdly, the completion of the basket matafiri. All these knowledge and skills were combined together to form what is called kato, the basket. However, the first kato were made without the nokave (handles). The cultural context of the kato is: all weaving knowledge, skills and techniques from the stories are put together to form the original kato.

My personal view

My personal view is, the cultural evolution of the Futuna kato (basket) indicates that weaving is a living art as it has changed from time to time over history.

Today, the Futuna kato has become the dominant Futunese piece of artwork both domestically and internationally. Samples of Futuna kato are held by Art Galleries and Museums in the Pacific Region and other parts of the world. Presently, kato are classified by the Futuna people as the major commodity of the island and is traded within Vanuatu, especially for the tourism industry. The vast techniques and qualities of weaving kato are seen as a competitive art form and practice within Vanuatu, especially the handicraft market vendors.

Regarding intellectual and ownership copyrights, the Vanuatu Government has provided copyrights laws to protect individual intellectual copyrights as well as copyrights to protect ownership of Vanuatu arts.