



A Fijian Potter at the University of Tasmania

Many successful artist-in-residence programmes have been run by the University of Tasmania's School of Art since the first in 1975. Most of these have involved Australian artists of national renown, though there have been overseas artists also. All have been Western artists, many of them breaking new ground artistically. This year a residency went directly contrary to that rule. Between 21 February and 22 March, the university hosted, at the Centre for the Arts, Mrs Amele Nacewa (pronounced Ah-meh-leh Nah-there-wuh), a Fijian ceramist who is arguably the foremost living exponent of the traditional art of making ceramic pots by the so-called 'paddle-and-anvil' technique. We believe it is the first time in Australia that an indigenous Fijian craftsman has been involved in such a project.

The idea for the residency emerged from the fact that, as one born and raised among the Fijian people and an immigrant to Australia, I have been concerned that for most Australians 'The Islands' are merely a romantic place to take a package holiday, even after which they remain profoundly ignorant of the life, philosophy and culture of Pacific peoples. I have for some years been formally engaged in the documentation of traditional Fijian crafts and felt that a residency such as this could both honour the guest as a fine craftsman and give students and the public some insights into the culture and dignity of one Pacific race.

As a lecturer in the very new and well-equipped centre, I also thought it would be timely to remind the community of the fact that the quality of art is not dependent on technology. The paddle-and-anvil technique demonstrates this perfectly. The ultimate confrontation to high-tech, here results depend on skill, experience and sensitivity, and not on equipment. The process involves holding a rounded river pebble as an internal 'anvil' while slabs of clay are joined and shaped by patting externally with a wooden paddle. The sun-dried end-product is most commonly bonfire-fired, the combustibles varying from region to region. In the hands of a skilled practitioner, simplicity and elegance of form belie the means by which it was produced. In the pre-European era it was a widespread ceramic production method in the Southern Hemisphere, occurring at numerous centres in South America, Africa and the western Pacific. It survives in some form in all of these regions. Locally produced ceramic wares excavated in Fiji have been carbon dated to at least 1500 BC. The sequence is somewhat enigmatic but it appears that present production is in a direct line of descent from styles which emerged about 900 years ago. Functionally desirable, pottery provided at least part of the

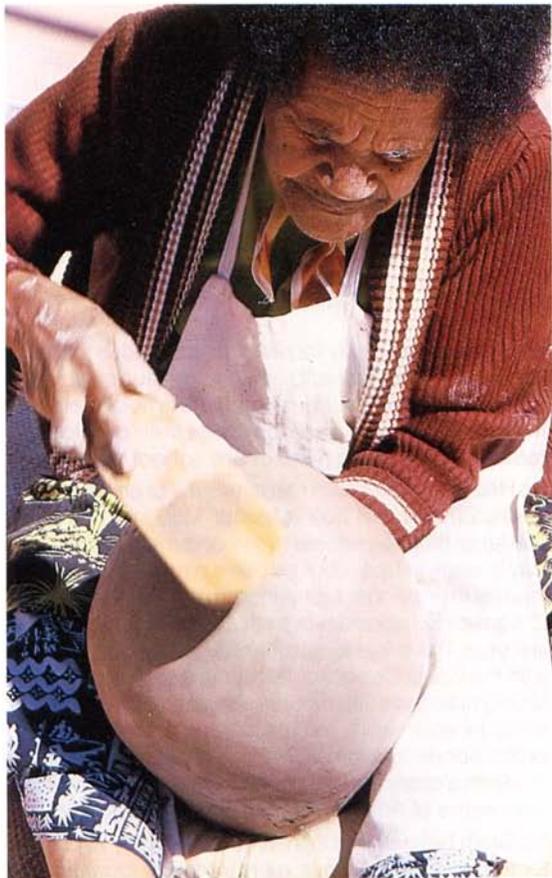
property which was necessary to maintain the complex ritual exchange networks which were required by kinship and were essential to politics and power struggles. The craft was practised in many places throughout the region, though today only five centres remain, with perhaps 20 competent craftsmen in total.

The choice of the right artist for the project was critical. There are many different crafts in Fiji, but it was important to choose one with enough links to familiar Western practice to make it accessible to an Australian audience. It needed also to function within an influential area within the centre and one whose lecturer would be enthusiastic about, and sympathetic to, the project. Also, I have many valued friends among the craftspeople of Fiji, but needed to consider those qualities of temperament that would permit him or her to work confidently in a remarkably alien environment and to engage the interest and respect of audiences. Ceramics was a logical choice – Penny Smith was supportive and her students keen.

Amele Nacewa, a 74-year-old potter, was invited for all of those reasons and also because she is exceptionally talented. She has twice visited New Zealand to demonstrate her art. She accepted with alacrity. For many reasons it was important that she have a friend and companion and again the choice was important but easy to make. Kiti Makasiale, Chairperson of the Fiji Craft Association and administrator of the Government Handicraft Centre, is a friend of Amele and a 'cosmopolitan woman of great ability and charm.

The schedule set for the week-long workshop with which the project commenced was a full one. It began with participants making wooden paddles in the school's wood workshop. Each of the four paddles used in the process has unique qualities of shape and weight related to its function. Amele examined the density and character of many Tasmanian timbers to find the right ones and was delighted to see men and women using machine tools to replicate her cane-knife-fashioned paddles.

In a creek bed near Hobart to select river-worn pebbles, we learned how exacting are selection standards when your tools are few and your work depends on them alone ("Choose a good stone and you make a good pot!"). A veritable cairn developed in front of Amele as she rejected the hopeful offerings brought for approval. Three stones of different profile are used, a different three for each vessel of significantly different size. The stones Amele uses, and one of her paddles, she inherited from her mother-in-law. They have been polished with constant use over perhaps a century.



Amele Nacewa.

A local clay pit provided a terracotta-type clay which proved successful in firing, but during the residency Amele preferred using 'Feeney's Raku' since she didn't have to pick foreign matter out of it. After soaking, the clay was wedged by foot and by hand with a little (less than 5 per cent by volume) fine river sand as grog.

The actual process of forming a pot excited the admiration of all the potters who saw it, for both the ingenuity of the ancient technique and her professionalism. All of the work is done on a mat on the ground, much of it standing, bent double from the hips and walking around the pot as work proceeds. Not even the teenagers among us could match the suppleness of this septuagenarian! Perhaps the most characteristic quality that emerges in watching Amele work, expressed frequently by onlookers, is her tranquillity. Nothing is hurried and no movement is wasted. A number of those involved in the workshop attempted the procedure and a couple even became quite proficient at it.

The aspect of the workshops which aroused perhaps most interest, and which posed the most difficulties, was the bonfiring after complete sun drying. No kiln is used. The fuel used in Fiji consists mainly of dry, fibrous material – coconut husks and leaves, bamboo and reeds. Rapid ignition is aided with dry grass and leaves. Temperatures reached in such firings have been measured as ranging between 700°C and 1000°C,

and Amele regularly achieves over 900°C, with peak temperatures occurring only some five minutes after ignition. Her bonfires are also the smallest of any living Fijian potter. The total length of time for her firings is remarkably consistently: 25 minutes. Despite the incredible heat shock, Amele virtually never has firing losses.

We were interested in seeing whether local fuels would work. To date there have been four firings, three which Amele supervised and one that I attempted in Canberra after she left. To date, none has been wholly successful. Eucalypt has not worked – even dry leaves did not give the rapid combustion she considered essential. The best results have been with radiata pine, boxwood and dry pine needles – the firing in Canberra reached 780°C and I believe more care will yield the magic 900°C. The secret appears to lie in the tepee-shaped construction of the fire in which the broad palm-leaf bases (or radiata planks) outside contain the fire and create in effect a combustible updraught kiln.

The workshop ended with an exhibition in the Centre for the Arts Gallery. At the opening, a young Fijian man who is a hereditary chief, and currently studying at the university, made her a traditional presentation of a whale's tooth on behalf of the university and the people of Australia. This ceremony is the highest honour possible in Fiji, performed only by chiefs and never for tourists. It was a deeply moving occasion for all those present.

In the course of her visit, Amele gave demonstrations to groups in Hobart, Launceston, Burnie, Canberra and Sydney. In all over 300 people – potters and other artists, anthropologists and prehistorians – met her and Kiti, watched the work and, perhaps most importantly, left as friends. For Amele the greatest reward was, as she marvelled again and again, that people here cared so much about her work whereas at home so few, even in her own village, valued it at all. She was overwhelmed by much that she saw – the remark I will never forget was one made to me when she saw modern ceramic technology at work in a local brickworks. "You have achieved so much in this country, all that remains is for you to learn to raise the dead!"

Rod Ewins is the Acting Director of the School of Art, University of Tasmania.

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