

MEGHANN O'BRIEN (JAAD KUUJUS) / "We are both islanders": Northwest Coast and Fijian Weaving

My practice as a Northwest Coast weaver began from a place so local and grounded, oh, I would have never envisioned myself travelling anywhere with it. As paradoxical as it may be, travel is something that has come out of my weaving practice and has been oddly necessary for the growth of a realistic localized vision. Although Fiji was never somewhere I envisioned going, upon arrival I found it incredible to consider that every area on this earth is a traditional territory to someone, and many of these places share a history of colonialism with varying degrees of similarity and difference with Canada. My first clue that Fijian and Northwest coastal peoples have a shared history was the money: Fijian currency has the Queen's head on the back of the coins as well. We are also both islanders—sea-going, canoe cultures—though have been shaped differently by the historical forces that have impacted our cultures.

In 2013, fellow Haida weaver Raven Ann Potschka and myself flew from the Northwest Coast of BC to the city of Suva on the coral coasts of Viti Levu, Fiji. Christine Germano brought together a group of eight weavers, supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, and we resided on campus at the University of the South Pacific. We spent ten days creating a woven sail of pandanas leaf and cedar bark—combining materials that each culture has traditionally used to weave sails for canoes. Many of the world's diverse cultures share the same weaving techniques. In this case it is plaiting. On the Northwest Coast we also used this technique to weave mats and dividers (walls) for the Big House, a communal house for all people originating from the same ancestor. At the end of the weaving of the sail we spent a few days demonstrating how to weave baskets with cedar bark.

A few years prior to my trip to Fiji, I stepped away from a blossoming career as a professional snowboarder in pursuit of a more local lifestyle guided by the seasons and old ways of the tribes I descend from: the Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw. The lifestyle of a pro-snowboarder is heavily image driven, full of energy drinks, trendy marketing, and an incessant drive for progression. As a sport it glorifies individual success and accomplishment, and is centred around a youthful rock star, globe-trotting image. As someone who grew up with this advertising, I realized how little truth was in it when I reached what was referred to as "Living the Dream." When I began weaving,

it opened my eyes to the value of where I come from, and the strength and power that comes from knowing this. I understood that the community-based values of the coastal cultures needed people to keep them going if they were to survive the constant push of contemporary values.

I feel that the beauty of a place emerges when seen through the eyes of indigenous peoples. The relationships with the local territories, plants, and animals are old and well developed. Many of the relationships are not just theoretical or existing on the pages of anthropological books, but lived in an intimate way. In Fiji, I saw families still living communally—everyone from babies to grandparents on the same land—the way we did here on the coast until residential schools were implemented. In Canada, I dream of living in our old villages, on the land, and most people think I'm out of my mind to want what my ancestors had. People tout the advantages of electricity and how easy we have things now.

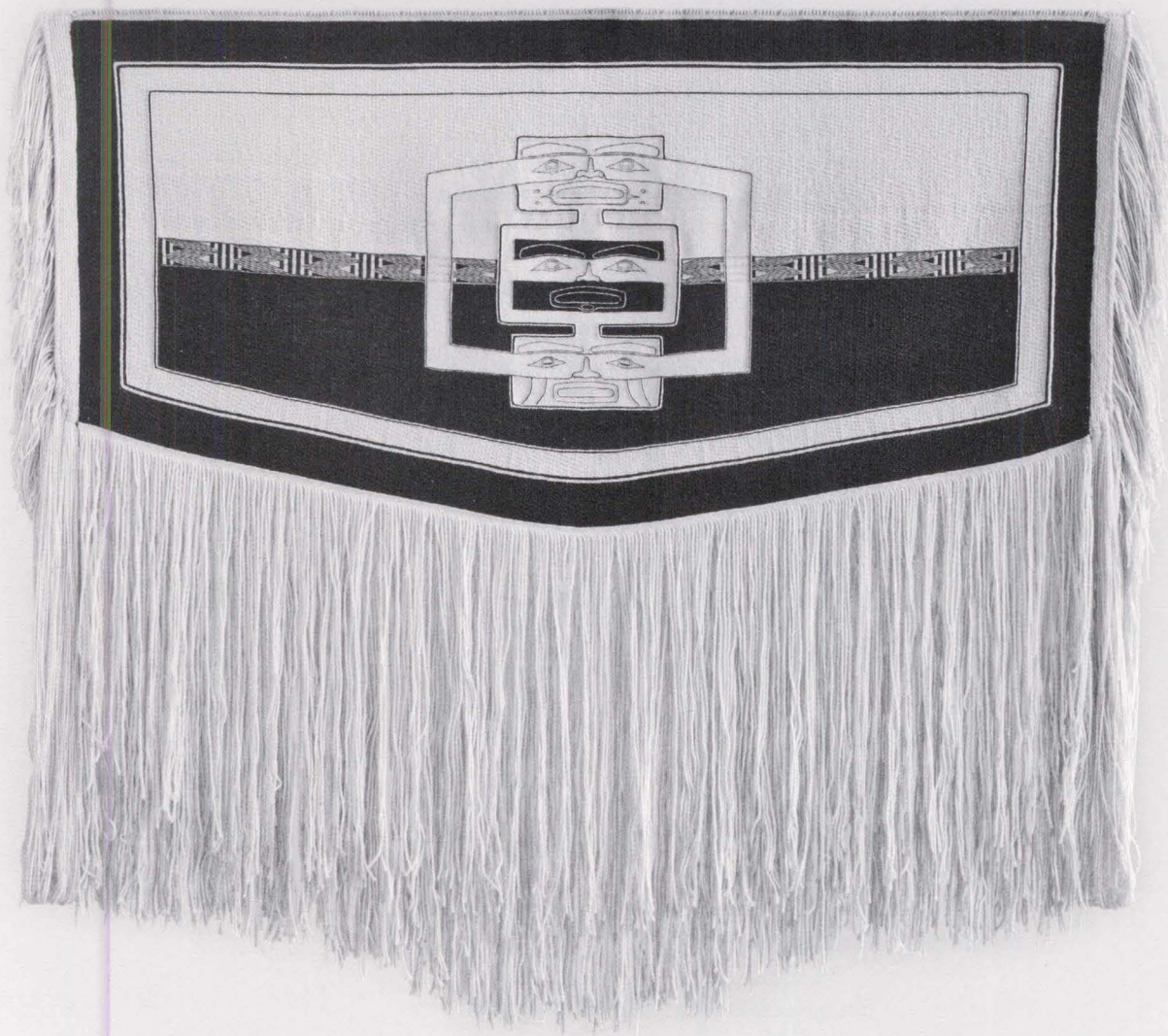
Most of Viti Levu's coral coast is consumed by hotels and private subdivisions. It saddens me to think that people who are native to a land are turned into second class citizens and forced out of traditional territories. Presently in Fiji, nearly every woman weaves mats for their homes, many of which do not have a "floor," but rather are just earth. The efficiency and skill of the elders we worked with amazed me, in part due to the true necessity of their weaving. They were astonished at our age, because the younger generation in Fiji has little interest in learning about weaving. In one short generation their thriving tradition faces near extinction.

For weavers today in BC, weaving is no longer essential in the same way it is in Fiji for the simple reason that we have floors that separate us from the earth, and as a consumer capitalist culture we can purchase virtually anything we need. Weavers do produce pieces for our own people but these are mostly ceremonial. A fairly large project (20 × 18 feet) took two weeks in Fiji. I am sure it would consume months upon months in Canada, and cost a small fortune once it was done. The makers of such an object would most likely fight for it to be taken seriously as "art" in a gallery setting in Canada. I marveled at the Fijian weaver's energy that was connected to an older world than I grew up in.

The difference in our present day situation has a lot to do with what colonizers did or did not do. In Fiji, the colonizers sought ways for the native people to keep their way of life, whereas in Canada much was intentionally destroyed in an effort to assimilate native people to work in the newly established fish canneries. Today, I feel that our worldview is heavily impacted by the presence of government in our lives

under the Indian Act. Much of the policy in Canada is aimed at helping Native people become integrated and succeed in the greater society, rather than getting back to what we once had in “the past”—which is a colonial worldview to begin with. Much of the Northwest Coast native art produced today is redirected into a global market, rather than serving to rebuild the world in the way we once lived. Even though the lives of the Fijians I met are hard in many ways, what Fijian people have is of tremendous value: language, family, and culture.

On the Northwest Coast of BC, many communities are bringing back old methods of harvesting and preparing foods, regalia making, weaving, and carving. Key people are also working to restore language, the importance of ceremony in marking moments of change in our lives, and keeping what is left of our traditions alive. What we do bring back then needs to be passed onto the next generation, which can be a challenge in a world where such powerful forces as media and advertising are shaping our values. When I saw the younger Fijians striving for western ideals seen through advertising, I couldn't help but think of what I experienced as a snowboarder, and I wished to tell them how what we have in North America has such little value. At a traditional welcoming ceremony in Fiji, all ages were speaking their language, being together, singing traditional songs. This is what should exist for every culture and is so hard to get back once it is gone: language, ceremonies, a sense of belonging, connection to the land, and the freedom to transmit cultural values to the next generation.



Meghann O'Brien. *Sky Blanket*.
Photo: Rolf Bettner. Courtesy of
The Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Llnagaay.