

FIJIAN POTTERY



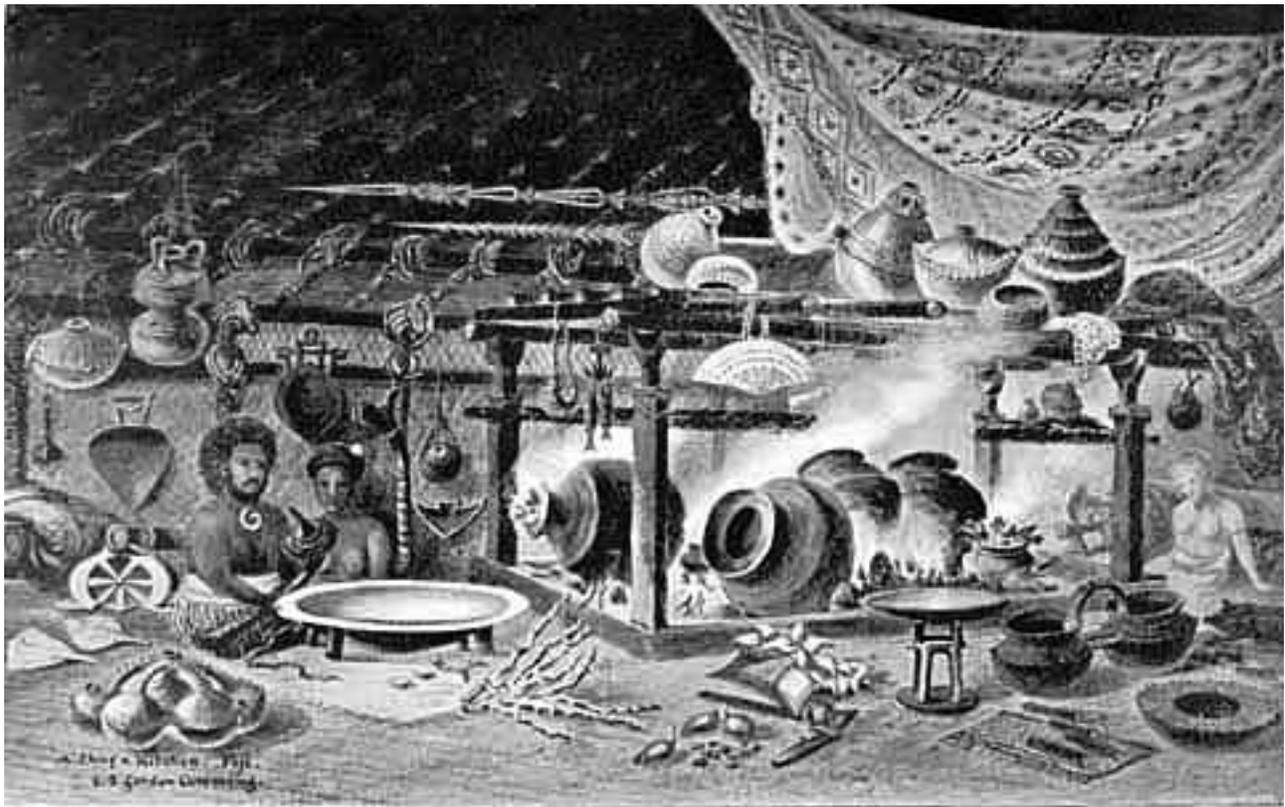
This exhibition of Fijian ceramics celebrates the first workshops run in Australia by an indigenous Fijian craftsperson. Between February 21st and March 16th 1987, the University of Tasmania's Centre for the Arts has been privileged to play host to a lady who is arguably the foremost living exponent of the traditional art of making ceramic pots by the so-called "paddle and anvil" technique - Mrs. Amele Nacewa (pronounced Ah-meh-leh Nah-there-wuh). The purpose of inviting this guest was to honour her as a fine craftsperson, and to give students and the public some insights into the culture, skill and dignity of one Pacific race. Although Pacific islanders look to Australia as their largest, and in some ways most important neighbour, and although our country is indeed involved with the commerce and politics of the region at a number of levels, most Australians remain almost totally western-oriented, and are profoundly ignorant of the life and culture of Pacific peoples. "The Islands" are to most merely a romantic place to take a package holiday. It is hoped that this workshop has been one step in remedying this situation. From the consciousness resulting from it, it is hoped participants may extrapolate to the rest of the Pacific, and also see parallels to the Aboriginal people of Australia.



The paddle-and anvil technique is extraordinarily technologically simple - the ultimate confrontation to high-tech. In essence clay is worked by holding a rounded river-pebble as an internal form while patting externally with a wooden paddle. The 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 wide-spread 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.

The pottery of Fiji was noted by the earliest writers on the islands. It is evident from their information that the craft was practised in many places throughout the Group. Functionally desirable, it 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. Regional specialisation extended even to the types of wares produced in one centre, not every pottery district producing every type of ware. This persists today, but with only five areas producing anything at all.

Locally-produced ceramic wares excavated in Fiji have been carbon-dated to at least 1500 B. C. 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. Simply put, the types of wares which have been produced during written history fall into three categories: Cooking pots of two main types, basins of two main types, and water containers of enormous diversity. This exhibition contains examples of the three major categories, pots and basins from the Singatoka district, and water containers from Rewa.



A CHIEFS KITCHEN.

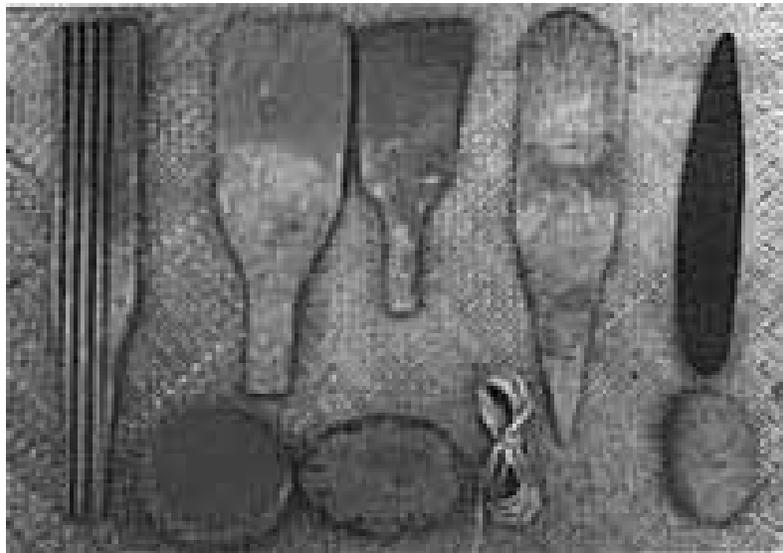
Amele Nacewa

Amele Nacewa (pronounced Ah-meh-leh Nah-there-wuh) was born and raised in the small village of Ndratambu near Nandi, on June 6th 1913. At the age of 20 she married Isikeli Nacewa and moved to his village of Yavulo, on the west bank of the Ruailevu River (today usually called the Singatoka River) next to Singatoka township. This is one of the villages whose traditional craft product is earthenware pottery, made by the women, who pass the knowledge down from mother to daughter. As a "non-local" from an area which lacked any living tradition in ceramics, Amele was excluded. This was not according to Fijian custom, but due rather to the confusion of many traditions in the post-European era, and the resultant secrecy of traditionalists attempting to prevent further erosion. Her mother-in-law, whose responsibility her tuition would normally have been, did not wish to divulge the knowledge for which the Singatoka district was famous. However pottery was an outdoor activity, carried on communally out of doors. In the absence of formal tuition, Amele learned by watching, and imitating.



For over fifty years now, Amele has been producing pots. When she was young, most of the women of Yavulo knew the art, but today only a couple of other women in the village have any knowledge of it. She has had "apprentices" but none has possessed her natural talent, and none has persevered. In a society where there is great pressure to Westernise and little call for traditional craft products, incentive is lacking. Curiously, despite this fact, one will still hear remarks about how she should really not be making pots, because she is a kai yawa - an outsider. Certainly some of this is envy, for Amele has built a reputation which extends beyond Fiji. But one should not underestimate the depth of feeling that traditional arts and crafts are more than just regional activities, that they are a birthright - indeed, that they are "in the blood". The fact is, however, that whatever her origins, Amele was born with the gifts to become an exceptional craftsman. Exceptional particularly today, as perhaps the only living potter whose products can stand comparison with the old pots in Museums.

Amele produces three types of traditional wares - fingerbowls (out of which shellfish and other soft food could be eaten), water-containers, and large cooking pots. The former two types may be slightly decorated around their rims by impression with shells, and are waterproofed by being "varnished" while hot from the firing by rubbing with resin from the kauri pine. Cooking pots, Amele's particular specialty, are not varnished nor decorated in any way. They are, however, simple and elegant.



The tools used by Amele for all vessel types, are three smooth river pebbles and four simple wooden paddles. The size, weight and shape of both stones and paddles is critical, and they are used in various combinations at different stages of manufacture. No wheel is used, and no coiling techniques.

At the start of a large cooking pot, the technique may appear to resemble slab-building, since at an early stage two lumps of clay (which will become the walls) are beaten into rectangular "plates". However a third lump is treated quite differently, being hollowed into a bowl by punching with a hammer-stone, and then fined down by paddling. To this the side slabs are welded, and from this point the procedure of refining the form is purely a paddle-and-anvil one, bearing no relation to slab-building, and with only a distant kinship with coil-building. During making, the growing pot is held in a doughnut-shaped cradle of pandanus leaves. The worker initially works seated, with this in her lap, then to complete the pot stands and works around the vessel, bent double from the waist.



The most remarkable aspect of the Yavulo technique is the inversion of the developing pot halfway through the procedure, to enable a completely even wall thickness to be paddled.

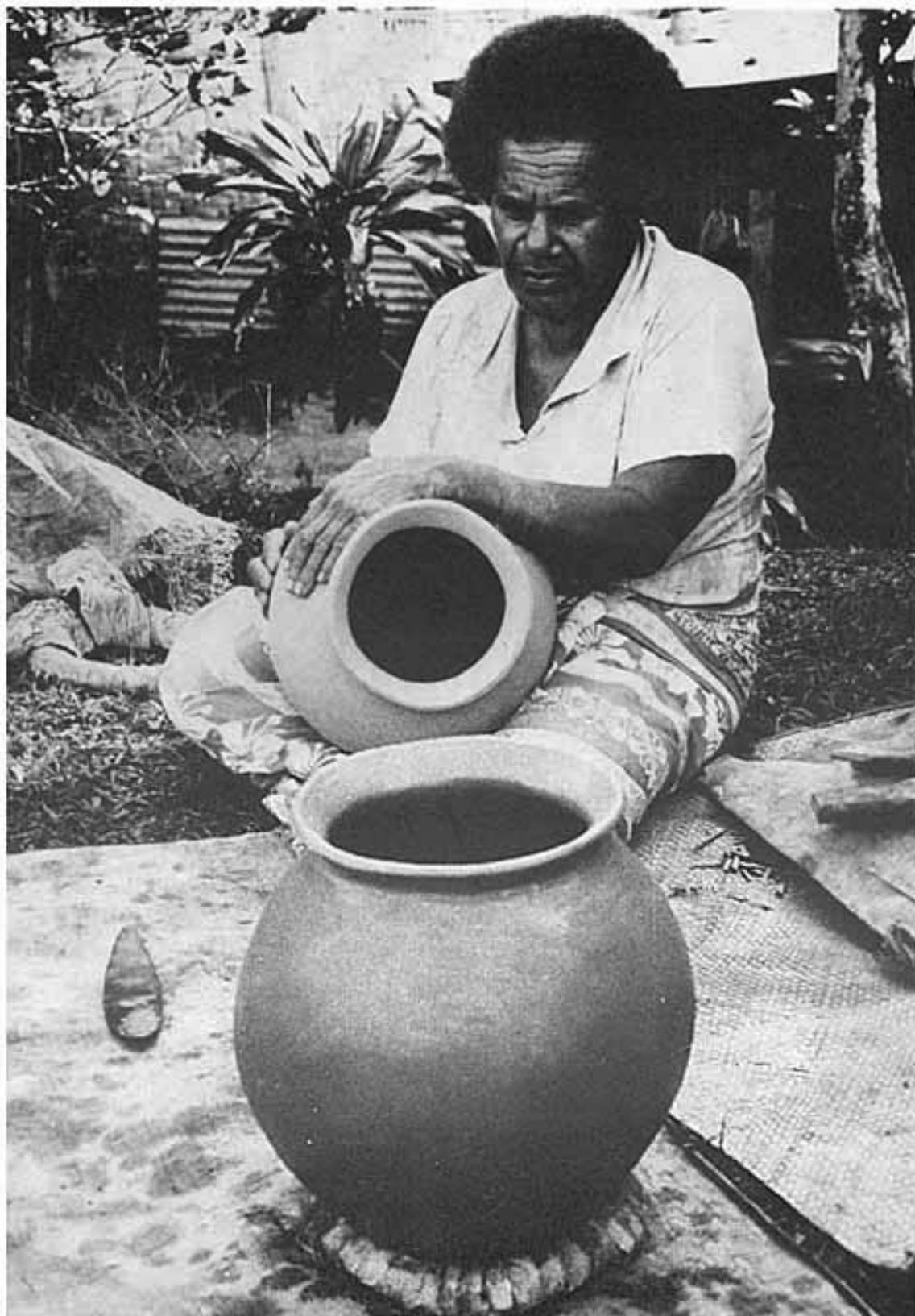
What started as the base of the pot becomes the mouth, while the original "mouth" is patched with a disc of clay paddled into place. This is carried out in two stages which are particularly successful in achieving the intention. Even to form the lip of the pot, no coil is used, the requisite clay being drawn up from the wall of the pot with the fingers, and the shape refined by further paddling. The whole process of making a large pot takes from two to three hours. Other vessel-forms are made without the inversion step referred to above, but the procedures are otherwise comparable.



After complete sun-drying, the pot is fired with a bonfire. 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. Her bonfires are also the smallest of any living Fijian potter. As a result of the Tasmania residency, firings so far attempted with eucalyptus fuel have yielded temperatures of only around 700°C. In use, the pot rests on its side on three ceramic or stone potstands. It remains permanently in this position, merely being rotated a little after each use. Foodstuffs are added, the fire is made under the pot, and when it begins to steam water is added and the mouth closed with a leaf "stopper". Cooking is by steaming, not boiling - the effect is that of a pressure cooker.



From Wilkes, "Narrative of the US Exploring Expedition". Philadelphia, Lea & Blanchard 1845.



Kivei Rod Vinaka Vaka Levu Levuqu
Ameli Nacewa na Tinamu