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*Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*

*Weavers of Men and Women: Niuean Weaving and its Social Implications* provides the most comprehensive contemporary ethnography of Niue’s history, its people and material culture to date since those written by Percy Smith (1903) and Edwin Loeb (1926). Translated from German to English by the author, Thode-Arora has made accessible valuable research that encompasses museum collections, fieldwork and scholarship. From the discipline of anthropology, the author has undertaken an in-depth study of Niuean culture on the island and the diaspora in Auckland, New Zealand. The title “weavers of men and women” is part of a quote from Young Viviani, former Premier of Niue, in reference to his late wife who was a weaver. The author uses this quote as a departure point to focus on the significance of weaving within the broader context of Niuean society.

Between 2002 and 2005, Thode-Arora conducted 18 months of fieldwork in Niue and Auckland, with the support of the German Research Foundation, the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, and a Fellowship at the Women’s Studies Programme and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Auckland. From the outset, the author gives a detailed outline of her methodology and the chapters to follow. Thode-Arora has drawn on a range of sources including archives, unpublished and published material, interviews and her own participant observations. This data centres on weaving and has helped to provide a broad and rich foundation for the analysis.

The book is divided into four main sections, with the larger part dedicated to sections two and three. The first section provides a short history of Niue since its human settlement and a closer look at pre-Christian Niuean society. Far from an isolated island the author emphasises (as have other authors) the movement of people particularly from Tonga and Samoa who eventually settled in Niue. Thode-Arora surveys Niue’s encounter with explorers, traders, and European and indigenous missionaries in the late 18th and 19th centuries. She then moves onto describe Niue’s social structure, and eventual political relationship with Great Britain (1880s-1900) and annexation by New Zealand in 1901. The politics of the New Zealand colonial administration are interrogated with a focus on Resident Commissioner Hector Larsen who was killed in 1953. From the 1960s, Niuean migration to New Zealand for employment is surveyed. However, the author emphasises that Niuean work migration actually began in the 19th century with events like the infamous Peruvian slave trade and the work of Niueans as plantation labourers in places like Samoa. This section ends with a focus on the important Niuean contribution to the First World War.

Section two delves into the central part of the study, comparing the combined contexts of Niue and Auckland, New Zealand. Here the author focuses on a range of topics relating to Niuean society, including church congregations, women’s groups, and land rights. A key highlight of this section is the examination of life cycle events
such as the *huki teliga* ‘ear-piercing ceremony’ in which woven items play a part. Life cycles such as this are embedded in the concept of *fakaalofa* ‘reciprocity’, and Niueans comment on the complexities of giving and receiving. According to interviewee Maiheote Hekau, aged 62: “Our way of life is reciprocal…. A local person would accept it [a gift of food or other things] quite gracefully and say ‘thank you’, but then at some stage in the next six months or the next year, however long it takes, they would in turn give back” (p. 148). As Thode-Arora illustrates social relationships are nurtured and regulated through life cycles. However the cycles are not time-bound, and this gives Niueans flexibility to return the *fakaalofa* that was shown.

Section three focuses on the technical and social aspects of the art of weaving. As the author demonstrates, accounts of women in the 19th century were largely non-existent in the literature, thus here an in-depth look at the art is a good reminder of the processes undertaken and the commitment by weavers. Thode-Arora describes the plants which historically included hibiscus bast fibre and pandanus, and has now extended to New Zealand flax and plastic bread bags. The range of woven items are examined as well as their function in the social context, where for one weaver recalling the economic impact in the 1930s and 1940s, “tablemats helped Niue to survive” (p. 258).

Section four summarises in four pages, the complexities of the preceding chapters. One of the key points is that the work of women is situated in the changes in Niuean society, to the point where women are now able to take on more leadership roles in a community which was predominantly egalitarian in nature. Since the early missionary period in the 19th century, which supported weaving, the appreciation of Niuean weaving has continued and expanded to contexts like the annual Pasifika Festival held in Auckland in 2003.

Throughout the text, quotes are interspersed from the author’s interviews and from the unpublished Master’s thesis by anthropology student Eve Kay (1989). These quotes help illustrate the subtle changes and continuity in ideas relating to identity since the 1980s. The emphasis on the egalitarian society parallels a society that according to the author is inward looking. Thode-Arora’s evaluation of societal conflict and the difficulties of migration and cross-generational differences are engaging and shed light on the intricacy of relationships between people, villages and church congregations. The author has provided excellent documentation for her research with an extensive bibliography and detailed footnotes. A table in the appendices section provides good coverage of materials used in producing woven items such as *potu* ‘mats’ and *kato* ‘basket’ with Niuean language terms. This will greatly assist future researchers interested in exploring Niue’s cultural history. The images and colour plates add depth to the text. The author’s research in several museum collections has enabled a rich evaluation of Niuean material culture, and provides good additional information for Te Papa’s Niue collection of about 300 *taoga* ‘treasures’.

As an extension of the research in New Zealand, I would have liked to see the incorporation of weaving groups outside of Auckland, such as those based in Wellington who have had a long weaving history in the local region. Perhaps re-formatting the layout to have the indigenous terms first (and without italics) and the English translation in brackets would have helped with readability, and put
indigenous categories and terms more forward in the reader’s mind. Despite this short list of limitations, I would recommend this book for researchers interested in Niuean cultural history and seeking to understand contemporary Niuean society. The accessible language and empathetic tone opens the work to a range of readers from the more general to a specialist scholar. As an observer, Thode-Arora provides a quiet reading of the cultural context, leaving Niueans to play a central role. The key processes and topics that resonate throughout the text are migration, culture, change, legacy, continuity, transnational communities and relationships, all of which are interconnected with weaving. The last few lines of the book adequately summarises the research and the innovation of Niuean weavers: “the very essence of Niuean weaving seems to be in keen observation, experimenting and improving, until the end product has become a distinctive part of Niuean culture” (p. 266).


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Robert and Gigi York present an extensive array of archaeological evidence, ethnohistoric accounts, and observations of archaeological and museum collections to provide a wide-ranging picture of the extent and diversity of sling use in Oceania and the Americas. The volume begins with a short introduction to slings and slingstones. It is noted that as slings are usually constructed from materials that do not preserve well, there are very few slings in the archaeological record. Most of the evidence for sling use therefore, relies on the identification of sling ammunition (slingstones) and as such these artefacts provide the focus for much of the book. The authors also provide some general notes on the worldwide history of the sling and, perhaps most useful to many readers unfamiliar with these artefacts, information on identifying slingstones by form and weight. The authors then move into regional reviews of the evidence for sling use and slingstones in Oceania and the Americas, which forms the bulk of the text. The Oceanic section is divided into chapters on Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia (the Polynesian section also contains a small section on Madagascar), while the Americas section is divided into a chapter on South and Mesoamerica including the Caribbean, and a chapter on North America. Each of these chapters is comprised of highly detailed sections on specific island groups in the case of Oceania, and on larger geographic units for the Americas. These sections provide information on archaeologically and historically known sling and slingstone forms, historic accounts of sling use, osteological evidence of sling inflicted injuries and treatments for these injuries (notably trepanation), details of actual preserved slings and suggestions of artefact types that may be slingstones, but are not currently interpreted as such. Finally each larger regional section ends with a concluding chapter presenting themes, issues and specific questions regarding slingstone research in the areas.