



M A R A J E V E R A F U L M E R

mara@lookinglassdesign.com • www.lookinglassdesign.com • www.seacrossings.org

Graphics in Paradise

by Mara Jevera Fulmer

Associate Professor/Program Coordinator in Graphic Design

C.S. Mott Community College, Flint, MI

(Former Art Director for The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji)

For this graphic artist, working at the island crossroads of Oceania, isolated yet constantly in demand, a whole new visual language had to be learned in order to create meaningful material for her employer, a regional university in the South Pacific.

What happens when an American woman graphic artist from upstate New York moves overseas with her husband and two small children to live and work in a tropical island paradise?

Though it sounds like a setup to a good joke, overseas employment is usually the stuff taken on by US government foreign service employees, international aide workers, missionaries, or investment company executives. Not graphics artists.

Something told me at the time that I should be wary of the "sounds too good to be true" syndrome. A university in the South Pacific? What, do I have to plug my computer into a coconut palm on the beach? Not exactly.

Though my peers living back there in the good ol' USA of A remained on the "cutting edge", riding the tides of styles, and making waves in the every-changing seas of graphic design, it was a tide of a different kind that this American tackled while living and working in this archipelago of 300 or more islands in the South Pacific, known as the Fiji Islands. The truth was that the tide that came and went daily upon the reef out beyond my windows carried with it some hard lessons for which I was continuously learning in the area of graphic design in a third world developing nation.

Graphics in Fiji

Graphic design was not something that someone "did" in Fiji. And the relevance of the art and trade were relatively unknown and unpracticed except in a few hovesl of creative light. Though the biggest industries in Fiji are tourism and sugar, Fiji struggles hard to ply its wares on a global market. In the case of tourism, the markets have been mainly Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Germany, at one point Korea, and North America. The Larger or more sophisticated inudstry

players will go so far as to hire overseas agencies to handle their promotional needs in these countries. Locally, however, there was and still is a long way to go for the art of advertising and visual communications to catch on and yield its effectiveness.

As Art Director and Senior Graphic Artist for the Media Centre at The University of the South Pacific in Fiji's capital of Suva, I was recruited from a university in upstate New York to run the graphics and photography sections. With the grace of the powers above, the mission was to improve the quality of their work which consisted mostly of producing support materials for the university and its distance education programs.



The Author, third from the right with her husband Keith (in wide brimmed hat beside her), rests with Fiji Museum staff and other volunteers who've been working at an archeological dig at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes on Fiji's main island of Viti Levu. The aim of the dig was to gain more information about Fiji's culture and history.

A Yank(ee) down-under

The ol' saying from the Wizard of Oz is more than apt here: You just ain't in Kansas anymore, or New York, Sydney or Auckland. Of course I'd never been to Kansas, or Sydney or Auckland, so I couldn't compare for certain. From a hot and steamy August day in Saratoga, my husband, two small daughters and I packed the last of our worldly belongings and began a 30-hour trek to the other side of the world. Taking a left at the international dateline, we swooped down below the equator to Fiji where it, too, was having a rather hot "winter".

At the university, the initial disappointment over the lack of good equipment and a sophisticated art supply store was overcome by my office second story view. I had left an office two floors underground only to find myself with a fully-windowed corner office on the second floor and a beautiful view of Laucala Bay and the Pacific Ocean, framed by mangos and palm trees. When the depression of leaving friends, family and familiarity would overcome me, the sights and sounds of the waves breaking on the distant reef would provide a soothing comfort to my

bruised pride. Of course, adapting to the "slow" pace of the Pacific has meant developing an incredible amount of patience, as well.

But it didn't change the fact that the nearest art supply store was a few thousand miles away. And, as if distance wasn't frustrating enough, the suppliers from overseas would take ages to answer faxed messages, if they did at all, as if any message sent from Fiji was a message from the afterlife and was better left unanswered.



An early example of patterned masi, Fijian barkcloth, a traditional craft with many symbols and much significance in the Pacific. The frigate bird is depicted in the central motif, along with the overlaid crosses, fish-spines, and floral pattern. Fiji Museum.

Scotch Tape and Paper Clips

After long delays in ordering, shipping and finally receiving the precious art supplies from overseas, I'd finally come to the conclusion that, with only a few exceptions, we could make do without them. I had learned to cope without the fancy trapping of the art industry of the states. And my staff, mostly local native Fijian and Indo-Fijian, who'd never used a pica ruler or a proportional wheel before, thought they should honor these items by keeping them wrapped in their original cellophane and cardboard, and either display them proudly at their crowded workspaces or, better yet, hide them away in a locked file cabinet, out of view of those who might covet these special treasures of the trade. In the meantime, the rubylith sat in a corner gathering dust, an unnecessary luxury in a plain paper world.

By the time the newly purchased 220v handwaxer had given up the ghost (after only three months of hard use), I had long since become accustomed to using scotch tape or glue sticks for paste-up, thinking all the while that my friends at my old job would get quite a chuckle. But the technique was fitting considering the use of plain paper output from the A-4 (8.25" x 11.69") 300

dpi Hewlett Packard laserjet that was our only source for final art from the computer when I arrived in 1991. By late 1993, we were able to purchase a 1200 dpi Unity LaserMaster plain paper typesetter which gave us oversized printouts. Though still a far cry from the high quality Linotronic 300 with 2540 lpi output that I was accustomed to, the new LaserMaster felt like a luxury after having had to adjust my design approach to the simpler equipment available earlier.

The Coconut Wireless and Other Modes of Communication

Not only did the process of adaptation have to do with the supplies and equipment I used, but also the language as well. Though my "client" was generally the university, the audience was the entire Pacific. An ocean? you ask. No, the many small island nations that inhabit it. The university is run by a consortium of 12 member nations with a few other junior members who also send their students. Representing more than a quarter of the world's languages, the Pacific ocean offered challenges beyond just simple literal communication. English is the main language of communications with the university community but to those who participate in its activities, English may be a second or even third language. Throw into the soup some cultural, social, and economic diversity of a far more intense nature than we acknowledge in the USA for a context and the challenge could push some designers and communicators over the edge.

An interesting example of the rich diversity of the visual symbols that are at hand is given in the university's tapa. The design, featured on all official publications of the university, is a composite of symbols from each of the 12 nations that share in the running of this regional institution. Though tapa, barkcloth, is a traditional craft in some of the countries, it is not used in all of them. So the creators of the university's "tapa" had to draw on symbols from other art forms, artefacts, and specialized crafts from each country. The result is a design with representative symbols from each country.

Here is the University Tapa description as adapted from "The Design of the University Tapa", The University of the South Pacific, Information Office, Seona Smiles, Director:



The tapa design featured on official publications of The University of the South Pacific is a symbol of the institution of characteristically Pacific connotation. Barkcloth, known as tapa in Polynesia and masi in Fiji, has long been associated with the marking of special occasions. Traditionally, it is part of the insignia of status and is made and ornamented for socially important ceremonial presentations. In preparations for the University's first graduation ceremony in December 1971, it was decided that the academic robes of the University's Chancellor and Pro Chancellor should carry facings of tapa cloth with designs representing different countries of the University's region. One of the difficulties in choosing such designs was that decorated tapa is not made in all of these places. It was necessary in some cases to take design elements from such objects as mats, spears, adzes, head-dresses and shell ornaments. Another problem was that the patterns used are rarely limited only to one country in the region. In the case of the final design, however, the provenance of the main motif for each country's panel directly relates to that country. The panels meanings are as follows (from left to right):

1,2,3 - The first three panels represent Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. The central motif for each was taken from a tapa from that region. They appear to be stylized flowers but their symbolic significance has been lost. The Fijian comb pattern is at each end of the entire tapa; Frigate birds are between the panels for Fiji and Tonga, and cannibal forks are between Tonga and Samoa.

4 - The fourth panel represents Solomon Islands and has a lengga nut design from the kap-kap shell ornament worn around the neck as its main motif. The striated triangles at the top and bottom were taken from a carved war club.

5 - The fifth panel represents Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas, formerly known as Gilbert Islands) and was taken from a finely woven mat. It is bordered top and bottom by a stylised shark's tooth spear and is separated from the other panels by a design taken from the finely woven sinnit cord on the haft of the same spear.

6 - The sixth panel represents Tuvalu (formerly known as Ellice Islands) and is bordered by a representation of the ancient bamboo flute still played in some communities.

7 - The seventh panel represents Cook Islands. In the centre is a motif from a carved ritual adze from Mangaia with the right border taken from a wooden food bowl.

8 - The Vanuatu panel features a design from a rare ritual head-dress of the Banks Islands bordered by a pattern which is said to represent the marks made by crabs walking across wet sand.

9 - The ninth panel is for Niue with a central motif, a vane pattern, and flying birds separating it from Vanuatu's panel, all taken from a very old Niue tapa.

10 - The tenth panel is for Tokelau and is taken from a woven mat and is separated by the earlier panel by a stylized crab design.

11 - The panel representing Nauru shows string figures, a traditional art in that country. The central panel refers to a legend of twin babies fighting for milk at their mother's breast, while the side figures are flying fish.

12 - The final panel is for the Marshall Islands. The top and bottom and left side borders come from a traditional mat weave, referring to lineage and land inheritance. The central motif is a navigational stick chart, *rebbelib* or *meddo*, used by ancient sailing masters to chart currents and islands.

Even my own verbal language had to be adjusted to suit the new environment. The idioms of the American English language did not always go where the English language traveled, with each new place developing its own slang or catch phrases to serve them. For instance, the "grapevine" no longer existed, but was replaced with an equally efficient mode of nonformal communication called the "coconut wireless." And, with the close proximity to Australia, "G'Day, mate" is an oft-heard greeting, along with "Bula" (Fijian), "Ramram" (Hindustani), and "Malo e leilei" (Tongan) among others.

In another verbal example, one does not "move their belongings" from here to there; instead, they "shift" them as in "shifting houses", meaning moving out of one house and into another. You do not purchase gasoline at a gas station for your car. You buy "petrol" from the "petrol station" for your "transport". You "get transport" from here to there, rather than "get a ride". When something is not quite right or is inappropriate, you would say it was "not on". If something was done right, then it is "spot on" or "set".

Giving printing instructions on mechanicals (camera-ready art) proved to be a particularly trying experience at times. At one point, in an effort to print some stationary for the Fiji Museum, the issue of "reversing" or "knocking out" type and pictures from a solid color became an issue. The printer, after several attempts, finally asked what the expression meant. Exasperated after four

bad press proofs, this artist attempted to explain. "Oh", said the printer, "you mean to 'burn in.'" "No," I said, "that's what you do to plates."

The list goes on and on with some rather interesting challenges to the creative who must communicate across the culturally diverse seas of the Pacific.

There are no Tulips in Fiji

Oblivious to what might seem an insurmountable task, the members of the University Extension staff, who prepare much of the distance education materials used at the various centers around the region, do their best to piece together meaningful publications with some assistance from the Media Centre. Some of the difficulties above come in the form of too close of a reliance on "canned art", or clip art, especially that which now comes on CD-ROM, which often has about as much cultural sensitivity as stale white bread. Simple things we take for granted as our "store" of symbols in western society just don't apply here. Though pressed for time, the USP Media Centre's graphics staff does their best to "Pacifikize" the graphics, changing hairstyles, dress, and adding relevant details. When not in a mad rush, the artists have enjoyed creating fresh drawings relating the subject matter to the audience being targeted.

Sometimes just the knowledge of certain geophysical details become important. Take, for example, the logo developed by this graphic artist for the Fiji government's annual National Disaster Awareness Campaign. With the general concept developed by the consensus of a government committee, the artist created a stylized symbol incorporating the three major disaster considerations: cyclone, tsunami/earthquake, and fire. Floods were represented in both the cyclone and tsunami design. A lightning bolt was added for emphasis with the overall shape taking on the look of a spinning cyclone.

Though the general design was accepted, complete with the government slogan wrapped around the symbol, it wasn't until the final artwork was prepared that everything came to a halt. All because of one important detail. The cyclone was spinning in the wrong direction. Due to the earth's rotation, storms rotate clockwise in the northern hemisphere and counter-clockwise in the southern hemisphere, the result of what is known as the Coriolis effect. It is the same thing that makes the water spin in a clockwise whirlpool motion as it goes down the bathtub drain. Below the equator the water will spin in the opposite direction. The design was adjusted quickly with only a few minor difficulties in maintaining its "integrity".

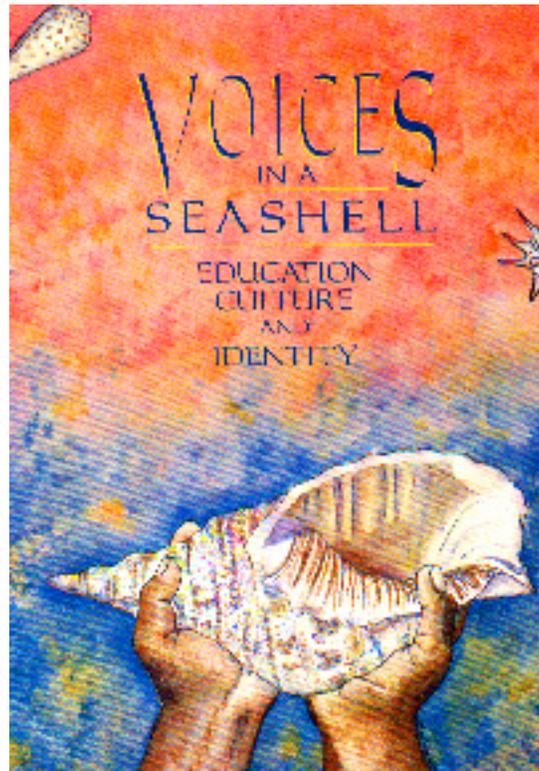


The Disaster Preparedness Logo for the Fiji Government.

The challenge of creating good work was compounded by the lack of consideration by many of our clients for the cultural context of the audience they were aiming for. Quite often, the lecturer was an expatriate like myself who knew their subject very well but in their own cultural context. However common mnemonics that might apply to a westernized society such as the United

States may not be understood by the diverse cultures of the Pacific islands. So the manner in which we developed the illustrative matter had to be re-thought out in the Pacific context.

What of the light bulb? A common symbol for the new or "bright" idea? Does it mean the same thing to a prospective student with little or no exposure to western culture? A student who might very well be doing his studies by the light of a kerosene lantern? Other common symbols I kept at hand, the dollar sign, religious symbols, flags, people, all had to be modified for this diverse "market", whether it was used for a brochure for prospective students or as an illustration for a book or other educational materials.

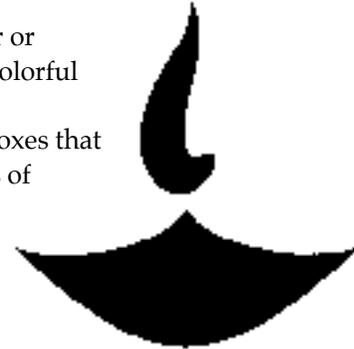


The cover of a book and video tape on learning styles of Pacific Islanders presented to a UNESCO conference in Geneva, Switzerland. The seashell holds great importance as a metaphorical symbol in the Pacific. Art Director/ Designer/Illustrator: Mara J. Fulmer

Suva, Fiji -- A Cultural Crossroads

Within the metropolitan community of Suva, Fiji's capital and home to many international offices and diplomatic missions, it is interesting to observe how communications are developed, what symbols are used and how both western and local cultures combine in day to day communications. Approximately 47 percent of the population is Asian Indian, descendants of indentured laborers brought to Fiji by the British to work the sugarcane plantations at the turn of the century. Another 49 percent are indigenous Fijians, and the balance are other Pacific Islanders, Chinese and "Europeans" (a catch-all name for anyone who is white).

At Diwali, a Hindu festival of lights usually celebrated in October or November, Chinese fireworks of all kinds are sold by the gross. Colorful strings of electric lights are hung all around, sold in their original Christmas packaging, many of them with little electronic music boxes that play various European Christmas carols. But next to the packages of fireworks and Christmas lights are tables of diwas (above is a stylized symbol of a diwa), little clay bowls which are filled with oil and a cotton wick set to burn in a more traditional display of Diwali lights.



Ironically, with Christmas just around the corner, the marketing fever dims, even though Coca-Cola displays colorful posters of a traditional North American white round-bellied Santa Claus holding an "ice-cold" bottle of Coke while balancing on a surf-board. If it weren't for the rather captive market Coca-Cola already had, I would wonder how much the average person in Fiji really relates to that image. Most store vendors display it for three or four months for its decorative rather than marketing qualities.

An advertisement run by Johnson & Johnson in the local Fiji newspapers for baby powder missed its audience when it ran in the early 90s with a pretty white woman dressed in a lacy white peignoir set cradling her creamy-skinned infant in her arms. Although a typical dark-skinned Fijian woman might relate the product to this idealized situation, chances are she would simply think that it is something used by wealthy white women she's familiar with, European Colonials or expatriates, all perceived to be wealthier than she could imagine. There was nothing to tell her the product was meant for her, unless she was being asked to imagine herself as the woman in that advertisement, something she might well have grown to resent. Later in the mid-90s when Fiji's only television station became "permanent", I couldn't help but notice that a television version of the same print ad ran, instead, with a more "Fijian-looking" woman and infant with the dress and surroundings more representative of the growing "middle-class" Fijian family. It was gratifying to see a change towards more direct targeting of the local audience.

An Anthropological Example

Consider a Time Magazine article, February 13, 1995 (US edition) on artwork from the Cro Magnon period, drawings over 20,000 years old on the walls of newly discovered caves in Europe. The article discussed the "framework" of the viewer of the art. The writer defined art in this story as "communication by visual images" demonstrating the advancement of the brain to "associative thinking -- the power to make one thing stand for and symbolize another." The problem faced by anthropologists, they admitted, was that in order for these learned scientists to understand the true meanings and purposes of the drawings, they required the knowledge of the cultural context in which the drawings were created. As beautiful as they are, the 20,000 year old drawings have little meaning outside the current western aesthetic that we apply to them. In



applying this example to the challenge at the university, in this case a wide range of students across the Pacific may lack the framework to apply associative thinking for the visual mnemonics being presented to them and therefore may fail to understand the meanings intended.

At left, Logo for The University of the South Pacific.

A Pacific Logo The logo for The University of the South Pacific is a good example of how the mneomnics of one culture could have drastically different meanings for another. As with many logo designs in the South Pacific, the university logo incorporates the coconut palm, in this case the sprouting coconut. It also incorporates this with a simplified "drua" representing a sort of generic Pacific sailing canoe. To the westerner, especially those from North America, the coconut palm and canoe would conjure images of leisurely activities, swaying palms, ocean breezes, life at ease away from the pressures of the "rat-race". This certainly does not meet with the need of the logo to represent a highly acclaimed educational institution.

But, in defense of the design of this logo, to the vast majority of its audience who are residents of the Pacific Island countries who send their best and brightest to study there, the logo has vastly different meanings than the ones just described. The sprouting coconut, for instance, represents not leisure but personal as well as community growth and development. It stands for bounty, fruitfulness, future harvests, and sustainable development. From the coconut, they not only receive nourishment but building materials, wood from the trunk, sinnit from the husk, basket and roofing materials from palm fronds, oils for cooking, and so much more than I only just began to learn of. Translating this to more metaphorical meanings, the sprouting coconut suggests the sustenance and development of the people of the Pacific. It could refer to the "harvesting" of their most talented who will bring good fortune to their communities through the completion of their studies and subsequent return to share in their newly developed skills and knowledge. How is this so different from the use of the maple leaf as Canada's national symbol?

Juxtaposed with the sprouting coconut is the canoe which is meant to represent the continual exploration, discovery and expansion of intellect and knowledge. It also connects the people of the Pacific both literally and figuratively, demonstrating that the vast ocean spaces between the islands are merely routes by which we travel in order to reach our neighbors. Therefore, in the context of the marketplace, the Pacific Islands, the mnemonics of the logo are more than appropriate for their use, which is to represent the expansion of knowledge and development in the region.

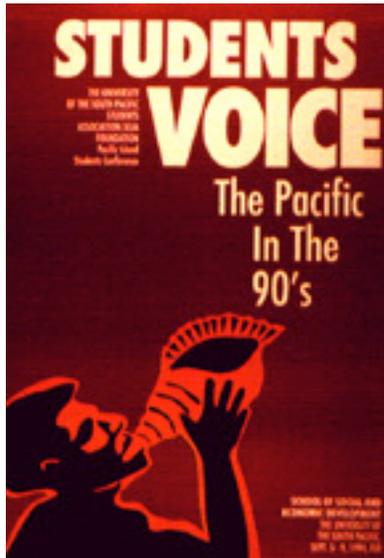
Becoming Acquainted with Cultural Resources

For the graphic artist working overseas or preparing material for an international audience, researching the audience and their cultures has been of ultimate importance. Though it is impossible to learn everything about all the cultures of the Pacific, I have tried to be observant and keep mental and written or illustrative notes of anything that may seem useful to future projects. When necessary, a trip to the local library, interviews or casual conversations with people of the region were necessary in finding the right approach. One way that I developed a

store of imagery was to visit with artisans of traditional handicrafts, learning about the patterns and symbols used in their crafts.

By taking several short-term language classes and trying out my stumbling Fijian with some Fijian friends, I learned some things about the culture that proved useful to the creative process

and for developing new ideas. The natural environment and traditional cultures are so closely intertwined in the Pacific and so, as with the coconut in the university's logo, the symbology is often organic in nature. How closely Pacific cultures seem to resemble Native Americans in their visual arts, we cannot help but wonder about the connections.



At left, Graphic Designer: Josefa Uluinaceva, USP Media Centre

A Student Voice

In a poster promoting a forum held on the Laucala campus of The University of the South Pacific (USP), the theme was the "Students Voice". The success in terms of its attractiveness was such that the posters barely remained up for the period of the conference. Instead, within days of when the conference had

been held, the students had taken the posters and reinstalled them in dormitories around campus. The message of promoting pride among Pacific students remained long after the event had passed. This poster, designed by a staff member of the USP Media Centre's graphics unit, Mr. Josefa Uluinaceva who is native Fijian, is an excellent example of how the artist has used visual

mnemonics that the target audience can relate to. He used a Pacific symbol of the triton's trumpet, known as the davui in Fijian, a special shell used to call a meeting in many Pacific Island cultures, as a mnemonic device for the student voice.



At left, A stylized bundle of kava root as a peace offering. Graphic Designer: Josefa Uluinaceva, USP Media Centre.

An Offering of Welcome

In another example of applying cultural context, Josefa was asked to create a flyer and invitation to a student welcoming ceremony. To be conducted in the manner of the Fijian sevusevu, a ceremony to ask for forgiveness or acceptance, it was being performed by the Fijian students on campus in an effort to welcome back

students from the regional Pacific Island nations who had left after a period of unrest on campus. The visual mnemonic chosen for this was most appropriate to the audience being targeted. Whereas someone from a western culture may have chosen devices such as a dove, or a handshake, the device chosen by Josefa and his client drew upon the cultures of the Pacific. In the Fijian culture, the sevusevu almost always includes a presentation of yaqona or kava root. And so, in his design, Josefa created a powerful image of a bundle of yaqona held out by confident hands in presentation to those being welcomed as a symbolic peace offering to the returning students, a Pacific version of the western olive branch.

An Ivory Connection



In a final example of some of the most challenging work this graphic artist had to face, the development of a design plan for the Fiji Museum was completed in March 1995. In this case, the mnemonics being developed had to have the greatest relevance to the Pacific population. But with seven out of ten visitors to the museum being tourists from overseas, the symbols had to be at least minimally relevant to the tourists.

Though as many as seven different symbols were developed for use by the museum in various galleries and exhibitions halls, it was finally decided that the sperm whale's tooth necklace would become the symbol used to represent the museum in general. Initially met with some resistance and concern for sensitivity to the large Indo-Fijian population who might see this as being "too Pacific" or "too Fijian" in its imagery, the challenge faced here was to justify it in terms of all the cultures who might call Fiji home while still maintaining the "Pacific" look that the tourists would recognize.

It became clear that the connection was in the use of ivory. Prized by all the cultures of the Pacific, whether the ivory was from elephants, walrus or whales, it was ivory that was a common treasure among all of these cultures. Once justified in this manner, the symbol was happily accepted by various ethnic community representatives and endorsed wholly by the Board of Trustees for implementation.

The Punch line

So what ever happened to that American woman graphic artist who used to be from New York? Not a lot. Except that her husband and children also made their adaptations to life in Fiji. Her children did not miss the thrust of commercial television upon their lives, her oldest having to ask a newly arrived American what a "smurf" was. Her contractor husband dealt with a similar array of challenges in building their tropical island home, often importing or manufacturing himself what he needed to get the job done well.

For this graphic artist and her family, life in Fiji meant an incredible lesson in resourcefulness. Without the "instant comfort" and availability of so many "state of the art" resources that we took for granted, we discovered the ability to depend upon that resourcefulness that resides deep within, to make do with less, to make beautiful and meaningful design within the limitations of the resources there and finding that they were not limitations after all, but new challenges that

could be met and surpassed in exciting and creative ways. The native Fijians as well as the Indo-Fijian population have often exhibited that resourcefulness in many ways giving inspiration to what results can be achieved when we add our own brand of knowledge. The end results are every bit as exciting.

We have taken this experience and resourcefulness to a part of USA where the cultural adaptation has been equally as challenging. Now living near Flint, Michigan, in an area surrounded by automative factories rather than tropical islands, I have taken up the challenge of developing a new graphic design program at Mott Community College in their Fine Arts Division. Incorporated into this program is an inherent emphasis on communication in a multi-cultural community.

During my last two years in Fiji, there were still the continuous challenges of printers who made "nice for you" by not following instructions, dealing with overseas suppliers who preferred not to leave their comfortable shores for a little business in tiny Fiji, even by fax, and the various attempts to keep ahead of the molds that grew on my computer disks and video tapes in the nearly 95 percent humidity. Cyclones were only an occasional visitor, providing a rare change to the normal 40 inch annual rainfall.

Swatting mozzies (mosquitos), and reading the latest (six-month-old) issue of PRINT magazine that arrived, the former New Yorker managed to complete a 280 pp visual dictionary of Pacific (mostly Fijian) symbols. Titled "Symbols & Patterns of Grassroots Culture in the Fiji Islands", I hope to someday add it to this website for easier access by others interested in communicating across cultures. This was all in an effort to make it easier for the next graphic artist or communicator who decides to leave the rat-race to work in a tropical island paradise. Something more of a learning experience than it may at first appear from the outside.

Warclub, Fiji Museum

This article was originally presented in August.1995 to Syracuse University. Mara Fulmer lived and worked in Fiji from September 1991 through July 1997.

Article Revised September 1998. Copyright 1998 Mara Jevera Fulmer. All Rights Reserved

