

Arts through the lens of a Dei-Naoero (Nauruan)

Alamanda Roland Lauti

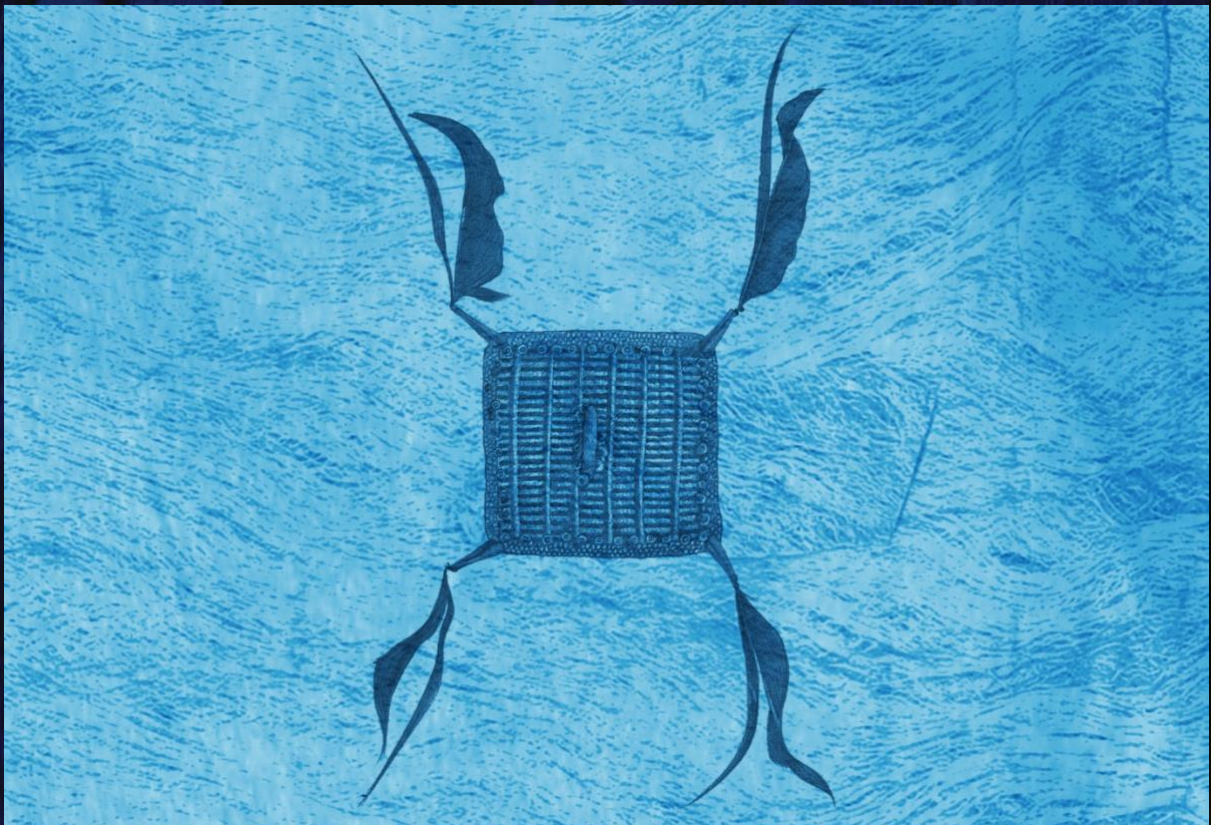


Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina

Author



Image credit: Horasio Cook

Alamanda Roland Lauti

Alamanda Roland Lauti was raised by her grandparents in Aterenogo in the District of Aiwo, Nauru.

She developed a strong interest in Nauruan culture and history in her former position as Nauru Campus Director, at the University of the South Pacific from 2004 to 2021. Given the lack of historical literature on Nauru she sourced a collection of rare historical books for the Community Library and is currently working on the Nauru Collection. In 2018 she worked closely with Sally McInerney on historical images of Nauru which are visible throughout the University of the South Pacific, Nauru Campus.

Alamanda holds a Master's in Business Administration from the University of the South Pacific, Nauru Campus. She is currently employed as a Consultant for the National Heritage and Naoero Museum.

Front image caption & credit



Name: Coat of Arts of the Deiboe Clan

Photo: Illustration based on photo by Axel Killian

Description: This mat is a family emblem or coat of arms of the Deiboe Clan (Deiboe means a variety of large black fishj), one of the twelve clans of Nauru. It is a fine woven mat made from the leaves of the epo or pandanus tree and hibiscus fibre. The mat is adorned with spondylus discs, shells and feathers of the itsi or frigate bird.

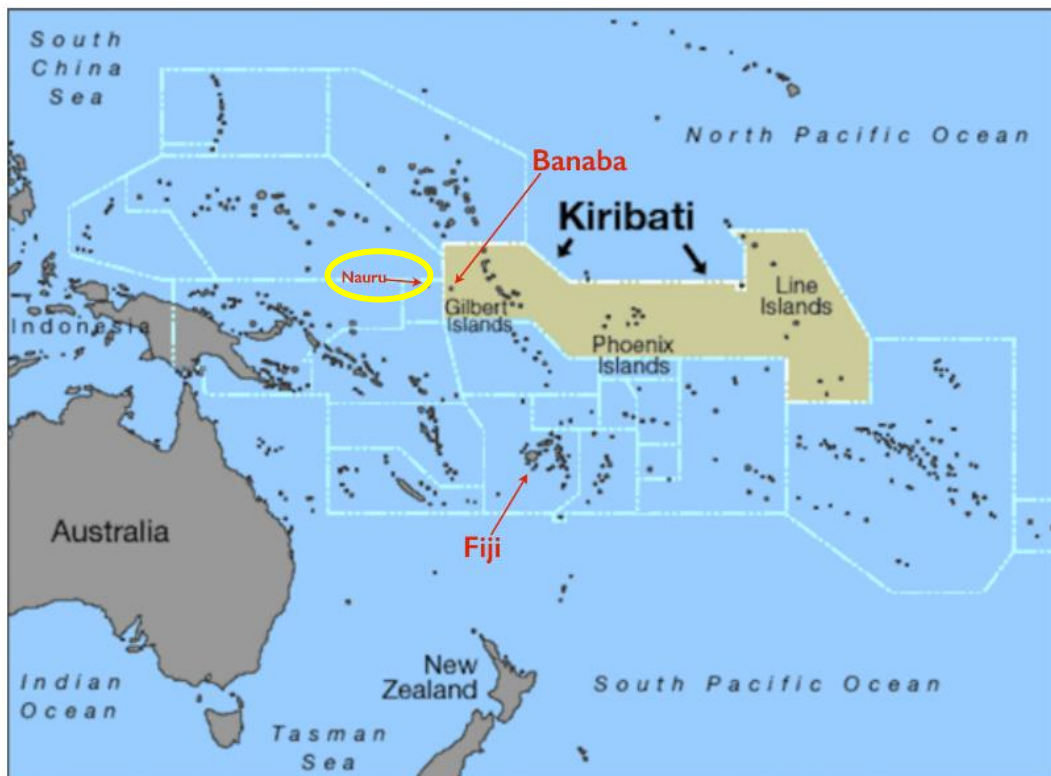
Credit: [Collection of the Freiburg Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 \(1\)](#), Donation of Antonie Brandeis, 1901.



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There is no Nauruan word for art. But art can be viewed as “representing the Nauruan way of life.”



Background – Naoero / Nauru

Nauru is an isolated island in the Central Pacific Ocean with its nearest neighbour Banaba or Ocean Island almost 300km to the East. The island was named Pleasant Island by its “discoverer” Captain John Fearn in 1798. It was told that before sighting the island he was attracted by the fragrance of the tomano (*calophyllum*) trees during the flowering season and appropriately named it “Pleasant Island.” The famous, beautifully-scented flowers



eakwangeiy of the tomano tree predominated the ecosystem of the interior of Nauru before mining. The island was also called various names from Shank's Island, Navoda, Nawodo, Onawero, Nau'uru, Naura and Nauru. It was later called Nauru by the German colonial administration which came up with the spelling of the word to read Nauru and to date is still the name commonly and officially used. However, Nauru is not its original name. The ancestors of Nauruan people were exhausted and weak upon first sighting of the island and called it "Naoero", which is a contraction of a phrase meaning "I am going to the beach to lay my bones." It is unknown where they came from.

The social organization of Nauru is matrilineal which follows the mother's line of ancestors. The matrilineal system is exogamis, forbidding anyone to marry from the same tribe except for the Iruwa tribe. According to Nauruan legend a cultural-hero Araimin gathered together all the people and established a law where marriage between relatives were prohibited within the clan. In accordance with this, Nauruan people divided themselves into clans namely Deiboe, Eamidara, Eamwidumwit, Eamwit, Eano, Emangum, Emea, Eoaru, Irutsi, Iruwa, Iwi, and Ranibok according to their descent. Iwi and Irutsi Clans are now extinct. When foreigners came Nauruan people also commanded them to do as the other clans had done but marriage was permissible within the Iruwa Clan as long as they were not related. Women are the custodians of family traditions and the kinship traditions of the clan, passing on these traditions orally. These traditions are never given to anyone outside of the clan.¹

Nauruan mats and belts are decorated in a characteristic way that are unique to each clan. A family belonging to a clan would claim a unique technique for decorating mats, belts, pregnancy attires, bags and other articles. Every family is entitled to their own particular technique for this is what indicates its members position and descent according to their ranks. Any attempts to imitate a pattern or decorative arrangement is regarded as a serious attack on the family's honour and an insult. This often resulted in disputes between the members of the offending and the offended parties. I recall an elderly women of the Deiboe clan weaving a mat with another clans design. She became very ill and refused to complete the mat. To date no one dares to copy the design of the pattern of others tribe other than their own.

Decorations used on the mat are less important than the mat patterns itself, which can be described as the clan's "coat of arms." The coat of arms were closely guarded in a similar way to what is now known as intellectual property rights/copyright. Families of each clan would preserve and protect their right to own and use this 'intellectual property'. The limited choices of materials on Nauru for decorative ornamentation could be the reason that the

¹ . Wedgewood C, 'Report on Research Work in Nauru Island, Central Pacific', *Oceania*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1936.



unique workmanship allowed each family to use raw materials in a certain way and to create specific designs. This makes the production of various mats difficult.



This photograph² was taken in the early 1900s of King Aweiyeda of Nauru, in the centre wearing a formal suit, and his entourage. In the back row, second and third from the left are two women wearing special clothing showing that they are in the fifth month of their pregnancy. The women wear an apron where they tie a belt (woven from strips of pandanus leaf) around their body with an almost square shaped mat or ekaduuaꞩ placed between her body and the belt. Occasionally a woman will wear two mats, one on her back and the other on her chest. In some families, the woman's hair is cut short and she wears a triangular cap as well as a mat and belt adorned with the family emblem. The two men in the back row on the right are presumably the husbands wearing the same insignia to show that there will soon be an addition to their families. The small mats (where the width and length is less than 30 centimetres) worn by both male and female indicates their aroeni (tribe).

² . Photograph is from a family album sourced by the author.

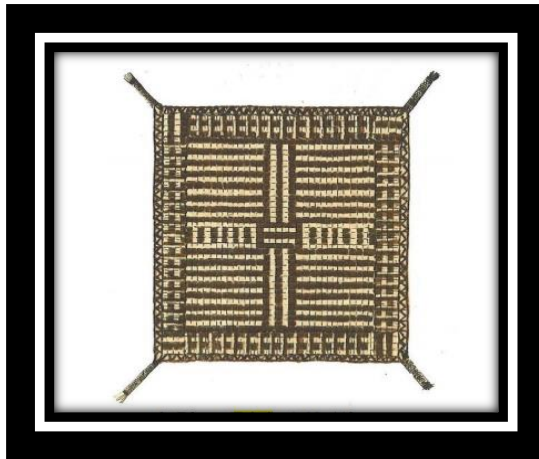


The Coat of Arms of the Deiboe Clan (Deiboe means a variety of large black fish).
Collection of the Freiburg Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (1), Donation of Antonie Brandeis,
1901.

Photo: Axel Killian.

The following mats illustrates the diversity of some of the unique patterns of the Deiboie clan.³

Editan is a pregnancy (mat) of the Deiboie clan



The basic mesh is plain woven. The centrepiece is finished off with black pandanus fibre string. The edges of the border are trimmed with a strip of pandanus leaf, sewn on firmly by means of three corner stitching. Extra hibiscus bark strips that are brown in colour are threaded through in a combination of plain and twill weave.

The mat measures 24 by 26.5 centimetres.

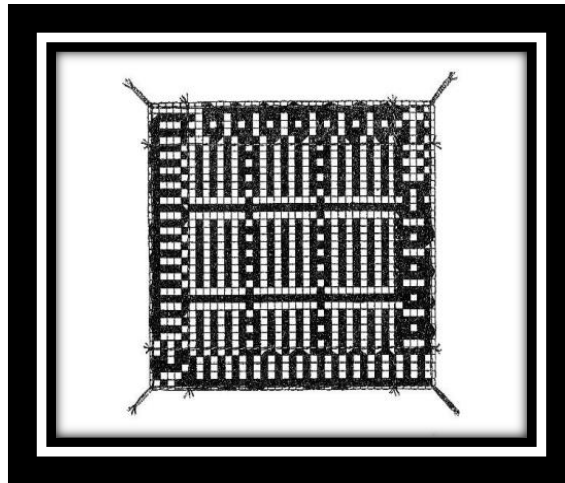


The pregnancy mat is made from pandanus leaves and richly decorated with precious ornaments such as frigate bird feathers, shark teeth, shell and coral. This mat is worn by women of high status (temoniba) with patterns indicating clan affiliation.⁴

³ . Thilenius, G, (editor), *Hamburg Scientific Foundation Results of the South Seas Expedition 1908-1910*, 2018.

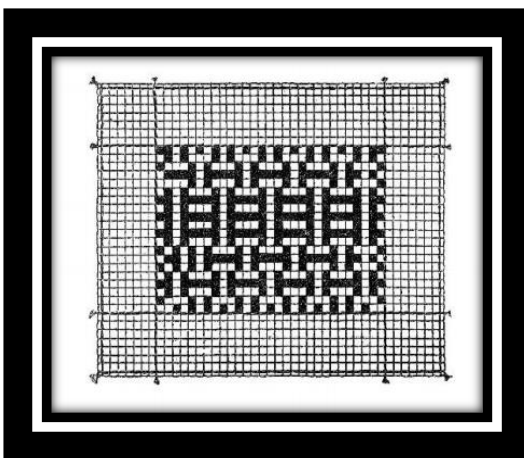
⁴ . Kaeppler, A. L., *The Pacific Arts of Polynesia & Micronesia*, OUP Oxford, 2008.

Tenaugodo (mat)



The basic mesh consists of strips of pandanus leaf in plain “taffeta” weave. Every woven strip consists of two overlapping pandanus leaf strips. Black hibiscus bark fibres are inserted and threaded horizontally and vertically in plain weave to form the centrepiece. This is tied with a black and yellow string, idrua baño⁵, consisting of two twisted strands. One is black hibiscus bark and the other is yellow pandanus leaf. A band of black hibiscus is wound continuously into the border piece. The woven strips are joined on the corners of the mat to form supports for ornaments and wrapped in string at these points. The mat measures 20.5 by 21 centimetres.

Tegaítsi - Frigate bird Mark (mat)

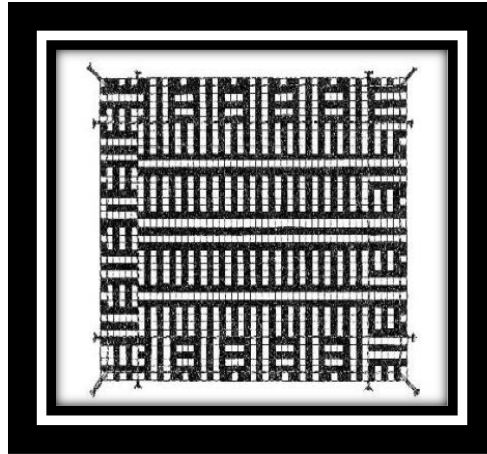


The centerpiece and the edges of the mat are both tied with idrua baño strings. Only the centerpiece have black hibiscus bark strips added.

They are threaded through the centre piece without altering its plain pattern. The mat measures 19.5 by 27 centimetres.

⁵ . Idrua bano are holding strings made from the strips of natural-coloured pandanus leaves and strips of hibiscus raffia dyed black.

Jujúua - Legendary Fish, Created by Buada (mat)

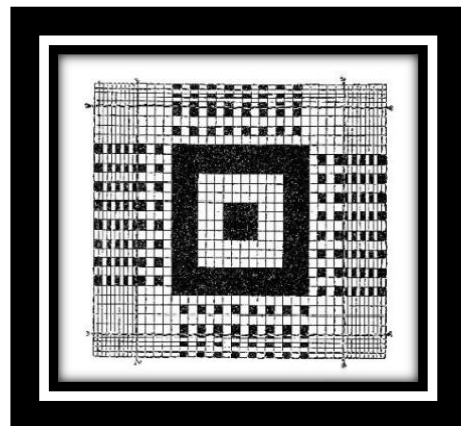


The basic mesh of this mat is the same as the one described in the mat “Tenagaudo”. It is made from strips of pandanus leaf in plain “taffeta” weave. Every woven strip consists of two overlapping leaf strips. Black hibiscus bark fibres are inserted and threaded horizontally and vertically, except that the centerpiece and the mat’s edges are tied off with idrua baño strings, as with the one described in the mat Tegaitsi. The strings around the centerpiece are finished with tufts of frigate bird plumes when they reach the edges of the mat. These are wrapped in cassytha fibres. The hibiscus bark fibre strips inserted are black and follow the plain pattern. The mat measures 20.5 by 24 centimetres.

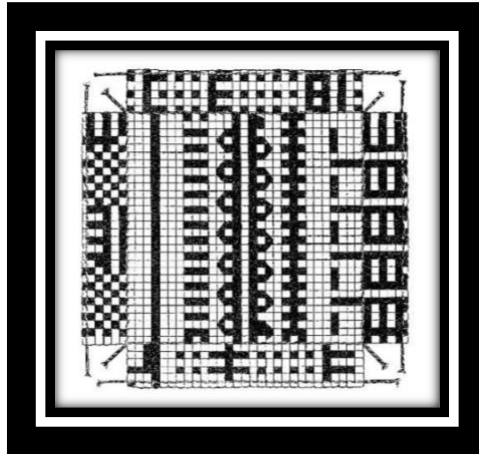
Etāī en kabina - Shell Ornament (mat)

The centrepiece is square-shaped and as a result the border, which is tied on with idrua baño strings, is asymmetrical. The long border is narrower than the short border.

Tufts of frigate bird plumes are attached to the idrua baño strings. The extra strips inserted are black hibiscus fibres. The mat measures 22 by 26 centimetres.



Erob meaning Pandanus (mat)



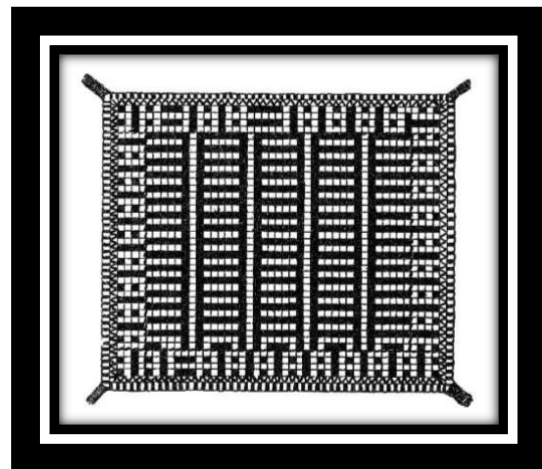
The upper woven pandanus fibre strips are light in colour. The lower ones are brown so that the back of the mat appears completely brown. Its cross-like form is achieved by shortening the end pandanus fibre strips on each side of the mat by the same amount. Like the edges of the mats, the arms of the cross are tied with idrua baño strings which are joined together on the ends to form a plait that is able to support decorations. The interlaced hibiscus bark fibres are coloured black and woven in the plain “taffeta” style. Two black hibiscus bark strips are wound through the middle to create a wave-like pattern.

The mat measures 22 by 23 centimetres.

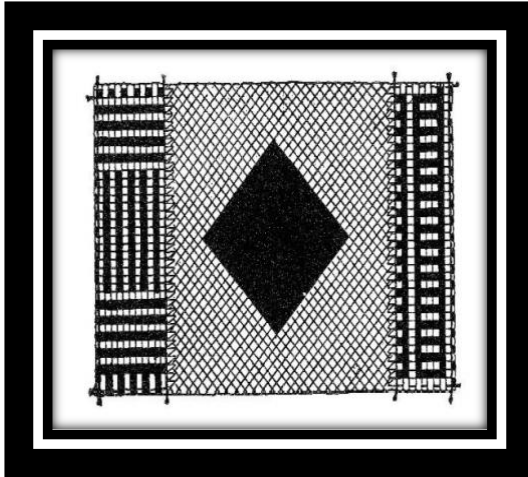
Tenaugodo Large uneaten Fish (mat)

The centrepiece is tied with black hibiscus bark string and the edges of the mat’s border are trimmed with four adjacent pandanus leaf strips which are plaited with black hibiscus bark strips. This is sewn onto the edge of the mat with triangular stitches made of black hibiscus thread. The hibiscus bark strips are black and plain-woven.

The mat is 21 by 23 centimetres in size.



Ipo - Red-tailed Fish (mat)

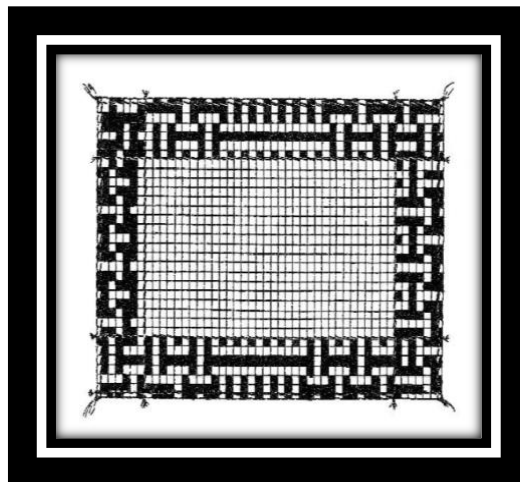


The centrepiece is woven from pandanus fibre strips running diagonally from the top left to the bottom right and from top right to bottom left. The weave is finished off on the long sides. On the two short sides the vertical pandanus fibre strips are tied with idrua baño string and then rotated halfway to the left so they can run horizontally. On the border extra horizontal black hibiscus bark strips are threaded in by the plain-weave method. A square is formed from adjacent black hibiscus bark strips and laced into the centre piece. Black hibiscus bark strips in both plain and twill weave are worked into the border pieces on the upper and lower sides. The mat measures 21 by 28.5 centimetres.

adjacent black hibiscus bark strips and laced into the centre piece. Black hibiscus bark strips in both plain and twill weave are worked into the border pieces on the upper and lower sides. The mat measures 21 by 28.5 centimetres.

Raigide – Honeyeater (mat)

The basic mesh is plain-woven. The Centre piece is tied with hibiscus bark string, as is the edge of the border. Black lace-like patterns have been worked into the front and the underside of the border. Small pandanus leaf shoots are tied to the corners of the mat on the underside. The mat is 17.5 by 23 centimetres in size.



Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, there is no Nauruan word for art. When art is viewed as “representing the Nauruan way of life” it resembles our creativity, our skills, our identity and our knowledge passed on from generation to generation. These systems of knowledge and skills were closely guarded in a similar way to copyright or intellectual properties today. The tribal decorative mats unique to each of the 12 Nauru clans, like these examples from the Deiboie clan, signifies a deeper feeling and appreciation of art and beauty both visual and non-visual through the lens of a Dei-Naoero or Nauruan.