

Summer Harvest

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It's summer harvest time in the World's Smallest Kingdom. Each community schedules its harvest festival for a different weekend so the king can attend them all. Usually the community is the whole island. Sometimes, like on the big island, there are several harvest festivals.

Big is important in the World's Smallest Kingdom. The biggest taro root and the largest cabbage win prizes. At each festival. I saw a taro root seven feet long at one of the festivals.

The king is big, too. One of the biggest people I have ever seen. He weighs over 300 pounds. Maybe more than 400 by now. They drive him around in a specially outfitted golf cart. It has a shade structure built into it of green and blue canvas that can be removed to make it easier for his subjects to see him. His subjects love him. They worry about his health, because he's so big and, of course, has heart problems. But they want him to try all of their biggest fruits and vegetables and their delicious baked goods. Everyone is well-pleased and very proud to have him eat their offering

The king and the winning vegetables are not the only things prized for their abundant sizes in the Kingdom of Tonga. Women who weigh less than 150 pounds may as well look for a foreign husband. Obviously they are terrible cooks, not good at bearing children, and not at all sexy.

The men are big in their own way. Tall and strong, the more muscular ones are the best providers. As men do everywhere, they vie for women's attentions. Thank heavens! Unfortunately, the Mormons got their hooks into the Tongan culture, so now the men always wear shirts. With sleeves.

But their short sleeves show well-muscled cinnamon-colored arms. Their sulus show quite shapely calves. The sulus themselves are attractive. Men and women both wear them. The traditional ones are made of tapa cloth.

Tapa cloth is created by unrolling the bark of the indigenous mulberry tree. It is flattened with pounding. Sections of tapa are connected to each other by pounding the bark fibers into each other from section to section. The mulberries are also pounded to produce dye. The dye is a brown color which is applied to hand cut blocks of wood. The designs include plants, geometric figures and crowns to represent the royal family. When the wood block is properly inked with mulberry dye, it is pounded into the tapa to produce beautiful designs that would be called “primitive” by American and European art critics.

When the tapa is used for a sulu, it is wrapped around the waist and secured by a rope that looks woven of reeds. Tapas are used for other purposes of course. Anything we would use cloth for here. Bedspreads, wall hangings, floor covering. A large tapa is the first acquisition of a young married couple. I saw a VW van driving along the highway one day. It had a large tapa flapping in the breeze over the top. It was tied to the front of the rust colored van with reed rope that ran through the open front windows. It flapped in the breeze, covering the entire top of the van and more. My local friend said, “It’s a wedding party!” and immediately started honking and yelling and gesturing madly. They honked and yelled and gestured back, the whole vehicle of about a dozen people.

The King’s sulu is made of tapa and covers his girth in probably the most regal style possible. At the festival, we all stood in a parade crowd and cheered and laughed and waved as he glided by in his royal cart. Two men walked behind with huge umbrellas so that he did not have to put up his shade structure. He and his people wanted to see each other. Did European-based societies ever have such a rapport with, such access to their heads of state? I, a foreigner, was less than 20 yards from him. I could see his round brown, happy face.

His father promised every Tongan adult, men and women, eight acres of land. He said, “This is your land. Tend it will.” Only occasionally does someone wonder how the math will work itself out should everyone ask for their piece at the same time. I suppose a lot of those remote empty islands would become more popular. At least at low tide.

When the first known European arrived, it was Captain Cook. He named Tonga “The Friendly Islands” because of the people. They still earn the name. And delight in it. My first day in The Kingdom, a native told me the story of Captain Cook arriving at the Friendly Islands as she shared her watermelon with me. We stood on the rocky shore by a rickety wooden pier with random planks missing. She pointed at the clear water and said, “See that turtle?” Indeed, I did, though it lazily swam under two feet of ocean.

“Captain Cook gave our King a giant sea turtle as a gift when he arrived two hundred years ago. That turtle’s child lives at the Royal Palace. Sometimes you can see it on the lawn there. The shell of its mother is in the window of the gift shop at the International Hotel.”

Of course I went to see the turtle and its parent. The mother’s shell was dusty and had white painted writing on it. The painting stated her name and affirmed that she was a gift of Captain Cook in 1700-something. Yes, the shell is very large – another valuable big treasure of the Tongan people.

The royal grounds are large, too. And unprotected, except for a small guard shack on each end of the property by the roads in and out. And the two-foot white picket fence around the manicured lawns. It was installed to keep the turtle from wandering off. And perhaps to keep people from wandering in.

I’ve often thought about this fairy tale kingdom. It seems so remote in time and space. And more than that – in reality. Tonga lives a different reality than America does. Cultures spring from deep-rooted trees in our psyches. We Americans came here for freedom, to make a name for ourselves or to live the dream, to stake our claim in the Land of Opportunity.

Tongans grew up in Paradise, where the Earth provided for every need and everyone was family. Bananas and coconuts grew on the trees and fish and mussels abounded in the seas, and no one had heard of money or work or lack.