



MA MATHILDA'S TERITE

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Ma Mathilda had always lived in San Raphael. But now she was ill, and as all her family had moved away, she had gone to live with her daughter in Arima.

Ma Mathilda's mother was a Carib. Her grandparents were Carib and she was proud of this. The Caribs, she always said, were very clever people who made full use of all that nature provided.

For instance, just look what they could do with Terite, that wonderful reed which grew in the forests near Ma Mathilda's home.

Ma Mathilda had been taught to use Terite by her grandmother and mother who made a living for themselves by making baskets, big ones and small ones, from Terite. Terite was also used to make fans to fan the cooking fires at home and to make the "Culeve," a long pliable hose in which cassava was squeezed and strained.

But now Ma Mathilda was ill and the doctor said she would have to take it easy, and so here she was in her daughter's house sitting in a rocking chair in the front gallery with nothing to do. She who had always had plenty to do.

Ma Mathilda sighed. "I wish I could do something," she said to her daughter. "This sitting makes me feel so useless."

"Well, Ma," said her daughter, "why don't you do some weaving? You could sit all the time and it wouldn't tire you too much. And since we have a church bazaar coming up it might be nice to have some Terite mats or Wife Leaders on the craft stall. Maybe Wife Leaders would be best, since they are small. Come to think of it, the ladies on the Craft Stall could show everyone how the Caribs used these Leaders to keep their families together when they were walking through the bush."

Ma Mathilda's face lit up.

"What a good idea!" she said, "Let us send the boys to San Raphael for Terite."

The boys had spent many happy holidays in San Raphael and had often gone into the forest with their grandfather, so they knew where to look for the Terite. It always grew in dark and damp places, surrounded by many trees. Sometimes it grew as tall as 15 feet, and the leaves at the top of the clump looked just like a bouquet of flowers.

Only the mature Terite reeds could be cut for weaving and the boys knew this well. Still their grandmother reminded them:

"Look for the tall, mature plants," she said, "and don't forget it is the forest you are going into, so put on your tall rubber boots."

The boys changed their clothes and went to San

Raphael for Terite. They had to go deep into the forest, for the Terite plants that grew at the edge had already been cut by other people.

Soon they found what they wanted and, using a cutlass, they cut the stems from the roots and made bundles.

Ma Mathilda was very pleased.

“Thank you, boys,” she said. “Now we have to prepare these stems for weaving.”

Soon all were at work. First they cut off the leaves from the top. Then they decided about the colours they wanted, choosing the three natural colours of cream, brown and black that the Caribs used.

The bundles of Terite were divided into two. The green bark in one lot was scraped off with knives. When it dried this would be cream in colour. Then using their knives they split the stems. Splitting a Terite stem requires some skill. First a cut is made across the top of the stem, and a split is made down to about three inches. Then two short pieces of sticks are placed in the cut and these are then pulled down the entire length of the stem. The Terite stem is long and smooth and straight and splits evenly. A second splitting takes place, this time to remove the inner core which is used for lining baskets. The stems, with the green bark left on, dry brown in colour.

“Boys,” Ma Mathilda said, “carry half of the brown Terite down to the river and bury them at the side of the river. Look for Ambrose and he will show you where it is best to bury them. Mark the spot well

so that we can find them in about three days' time, when they will turn a lovely black colour."

Soon the day came and everything was ready, and Ma Mathilda gathered up her cream strips and her brown strips and sent the boys to collect the black ones from the river mud. Everything was just right, and Ma Mathilda selected the pieces she wanted, cut them to the required length and began the weaving.

She placed her Terite strips on a table while weaving. Her Carib mother used to put them on the floor and used her feet to hold them in place while she wove them.

The boys wanted to know all about the Carib designs and Ma Mathilda was only too eager to talk about them.

"You see," she said to her grandsons, "the Caribs made their designs from the animals they saw. For example, the brown and black design on the back of the Mapepire snake was copied by the Caribs. These snakes live a lot in the Terite plants, you know."

She then told them that the Caribs had designed a special "open stitch" pattern to make the baskets in which they caught fish.

"All their designs had a purpose," Ma Mathilda said. "And you know they had a special design too in the strips of woven Terite which they hung outside their homes and which served the purpose of identification about where different families lived."

"Just like we put numbers and names on our houses today?" one of the boys asked.

“Yes,” said Ma Mathilda, “just like that. We have house numbers. The Caribs used to put up house designs.

Ma Mathilda told them that the Carib designs were being used today just as they had been used many years ago and long before Columbus discovered Trinidad.”

Ma Mathilda continued to weave and she had already made some “Wife Leaders” and a few table mats when Ma Maria came in to visit. Ma Maria was carrying her special handbag which she had made herself of Screw Pine leaves. Screw Pine is a plant that grows in thick clusters and often grows very big indeed. Its leaves are long and narrow and there are spikes at the edges.

“That handbag looks nice,” said Ma Mathilda who was a very friendly person.

“Thank you,” said Ma Maria. “But this Screw Pine takes so long to prepare!”

Screw Pine grows wild all over Trinidad and the people in Eastern Trinidad use it a great deal. But once it has been gathered, the process of preparing it for use is a long one. First, the spikes have to be removed from the leaves. Then the leaves are rolled from bottom to top, tied with string and boiled to remove some of the green colour. It is then put out in the sun to bleach until it turns cream.

“What’s going on in there?” asked Miss Tilly who was passing.

“As you see,” said Ma Mathilda, “we are admiring each other’s work.”

Miss Tilly came in. She had some mats in her hand which had been made from the leaves of the Khus Khus Grass.

Everyone admired her fine work.

“I like Khus Khus Grass too bad,” said Miss Tilly. “These mats will stay green all the time. Khus Khus grass always stays green, that is why it is sometimes called ‘vert-ti-vert’.”

“That is one plant with many uses,” said Ma Mathilda. “The leaves could be used to make those plaited floor mats everybody likes so much. And as you know, the roots smell so sweet, just like perfume, you could put them in the clothes cupboard and all your clothes smelling sweet and fresh.”

“And don’t think that is all,” said Miss Tilly. “It is the root of this very Khus Khus grass that preventing the soil from washing away on hillside and slopes.”

“You could say that again.” said Ma Maria. “Khus Khus grass is the best thing out. I hear there is a big factory in Foster Road, Sangre Grande, where they making Khus Khus grass floor mats so good that everyone feel it must be coming from overseas.”

“I’ll tell you one thing,” said Ma Mathilda, “this country is so full of plants we could use, is a shame more poeple don’t make things for their house. You know how much money they could save?”

“Yes, indeed!” agreed Miss Tilly. “We have Sisal which people can sew into shapes or can weave or plait as well as make rope with it. Then we have Big Thatch from Tobago to make men’s hats, not to mention the Banana tree and Bamboo and Torchon and Mamoo.”

“And don’t forget about Coconut and Swamp Grass,” said Ma Maria. “Is dozens of things you could make with them two any day.”

“We really are lucky to have all these plants,” said Ma Mathilda. “And last week somebody tell me they even using Hibiscus and Stinging Nettle.”

Everyone laughed.

Ma Mathilda turned out such lovely work that her daughter decided to keep some for herself. And Ma Mathilda had to promise the other ladies that she would teach them how to weave Terite into so many beautiful designs.