

# Living Ancestors

Gabrielle Le Roux

In 2001 Gabrielle Le Roux had the privilege to meet and draw ten women over the age of a hundred in the Caribbean island of Dominica. They included Elizabeth Israel, known as Ma Pampo (see portrait) and recognised at the time as the world's oldest woman at the age of 126.

Research is being done as to why longevity is so high in Dominica and it seems that whether they study the air, the water or the earth they find that it is a special place. The beauty of the place alone could make a person live forever.

My son was born in the island and the trip was to take him to see his roots. At the airport was a banner announcing that the world's oldest woman lived there. I asked the Dominican friend I was staying with, Sister Nats, if she could arrange for me to meet and draw Ma Pampo. Nats suggested that as well as Ma Pampo I draw all the women over the age of 100 and so this project was born.

Meeting the centenarians was a joy, they were such characters and so different from one another in personality and history. And they have lived through so much. Strong faith, emotional resilience, plenty of hardship and a good sense of humour seemed to be the common thread between them.

Ma Pampo was blind but in good health and took no medication. She was lucid and warmly in touch with the people around her and with current events in the country. She told me she would live another fifteen years. Sadly she died at 128.

Ama, Aunty Rose, Aya, Ma John and Ma Cuffy had all been the party girls of their neighbourhoods, they had been very good dancers of the traditional dance 'bele'. Aya dressed in her traditional dress to be drawn. They all had a good knowledge of local medicinal plants.

Many were excited to hear that their portraits would be going to Africa and felt it was one way of returning to their ancestral roots. They liked the thought that their faces would be seen and their stories heard in different parts of the world.

Many of these portraits were done sitting on the beds of the old ladies, often the room would fill up with children and people who were interested to see the face develop on the page. There was excitement as each picture was finished and its first viewing was in the street where people would gather to comment.

Titled 'Living Ancestors', the portraits and stories were exhibited in Dominica and then South Africa and Uganda.

Gabrielle Le Roux is a feminist activist and self-taught portrait artist who used to run the Women's Media Watch in South Africa, a project that WACC supported. She now does projects of portraits and stories around social issues at the invitation of organisations in different parts of the world. Contact her at [livingancestors@yahoo.com](mailto:livingancestors@yahoo.com). The full exhibition can be seen at <http://www.fito.co.za> under multi media.