

UC Santa Cruz

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

Title

History, Culture, and A Tale of Two Queens: Exploring the Ngatu in 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures at Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga, 2023, with a Preface by Elham Salari

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/350437g1>

Journal

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association, 25(1)

ISSN

1018-4252

Authors

Lythberg, Billie

Salari, Elham

Publication Date

2025

DOI

10.5070/PC225164849

Copyright Information

Copyright 2025 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

BILLIE LYTHBERG

History, Culture, and a Tale of Two Queens: Exploring the *Ngatu* in ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures at Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga, 2023

with a Preface by ELHAM SALARI

Abstract

This article reproduces a gallery talk introducing the cultural and historical significance of three ngatu (Tongan barkcloths) from the Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection, which were central to the 2023 exhibition ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures at Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga. Ngatu, made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, are integral to Tongan culture, functioning as both practical and ceremonial objects. They are used to mark important life events, including weddings, funerals, and royal ceremonies, and represent a material link between past and present. The article explores how ngatu embody Tongan time, where the present is a dynamic intersection of past and future. It also highlights how ngatu symbolized the deep connection and mutual respect between Queen Sālote Tupou III of Tonga and Queen Elizabeth II. During Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Tonga in 1953, lengths of ngatu were laid out for her, both in her honor and to contain her mana (spiritual power). One of these cloths later accompanied Queen Sālote’s coffin when she was returned to Tonga after her death in Auckland in 1965.

Keywords: *Tongan barkcloth (ngatu), Koloa tukufakaholo, Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures, Tongan cultural heritage, Tongan diaspora, tapa, barkcloth, museum collections, Polynesian art, Queen Sālote Tupou III, Queen Elizabeth II, mana, ceremonial objects, Tongan time continuum, Pacific art exhibitions, contemporary Tongan artists, Tongan visual traditions, royal pathways and rituals, Hawkes Bay Museums Trust*

Preface (by Elham Salari¹)

Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga–Hastings Art Gallery is the home of contemporary art in Hawke’s Bay, Aotearoa New Zealand. Located in the heart of Civic Square in

Hastings-Heretaunga, the gallery works with artists and local communities to grow creativity within the region, and to explore the role of arts and culture in the world we live in. The gallery, which opened in the 1980s, presents a lively program of local, national, and international contemporary art.

On a crisp Saturday morning in October 2023, Dr. Billie Lythberg engaged a captivated audience at Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga–Hastings Art Gallery with a talk that delved into the world of *ngatu*, Tongan barkcloths (Fig. 1). The talk was an integral part of the public programs accompanying the exhibition *‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures*, featuring art by leading Tongan artists Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck and Sopolamalama Filipe Tohi. Dr. Lythberg was an investigator on the Ancient Futures research project funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand, and co-creator of the Māori TV documentary series *Artefact*. Her talk showcased three Tongan bark cloths borrowed from the Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection as part of the exhibition. She also invited audience members to handle barkcloth and barkcloth materials she had brought with her (Fig. 2) to engage with the qualities of the *ngatu* on display in the gallery, which could not be touched. The talk wasn't just about art; it helped to bridge a gap in information about the *ngatu* held in the Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection.



Figure 1. Billie Lythberg describing the barkcloths loaned to *‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures* from the Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection. Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga–Hastings Art Gallery, October 2023. Photograph courtesy of Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga–Hastings Art Gallery.

History, Culture, and a Tale of Two Queens: Exploring the *Ngatu* in ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures at Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga, 2023 (by Billie Lythberg²)

The ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures project, supported by a Marsden Grant from the Royal Society of New Zealand Te Apārangi, brought together scholars and artists to investigate and interpret late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Tongan art forms and their enduring influences. The project examined Tongan and European exchanges of the period, focusing on both the historical and contemporary implications of these encounters.



Figure 2. Foreground: *Feta‘aki* (beaten paper mulberry bark), paper mulberry bark roll, *ike* (barkcloth beater), *kupesi* design tablets and materials, and printed images displayed on a large piece of barkcloth. Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga–Hastings Art Gallery, October 2023. Photograph courtesy of Billie Lythberg

The exhibition ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures included contemporary pieces by Tongan artist-investigators Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck and Sopolamalama Filipe Tohi, and was presented in Nuku‘alofa (2019), Auckland (2021), and Hastings

(2023). At Auckland’s Pah Homestead, the exhibition also included historic Tongan artifacts chosen by Dyck and Tohi from the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, and Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. In Hastings, the Hastings City Art Gallery (HCAG) Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga displayed three *ngatu* (Tongan barkcloths), also selected by Dyck and Tohi, from the Hawke’s Bay Museums Trust collection (Fig. 3). These additions enriched the exhibition’s contemporary works with layers of historical and artistic dialogue. This article reproduces a gallery talk, given in Hastings as part of the exhibition’s public programming, that introduced the material, cultural, and historical significance of *ngatu*.

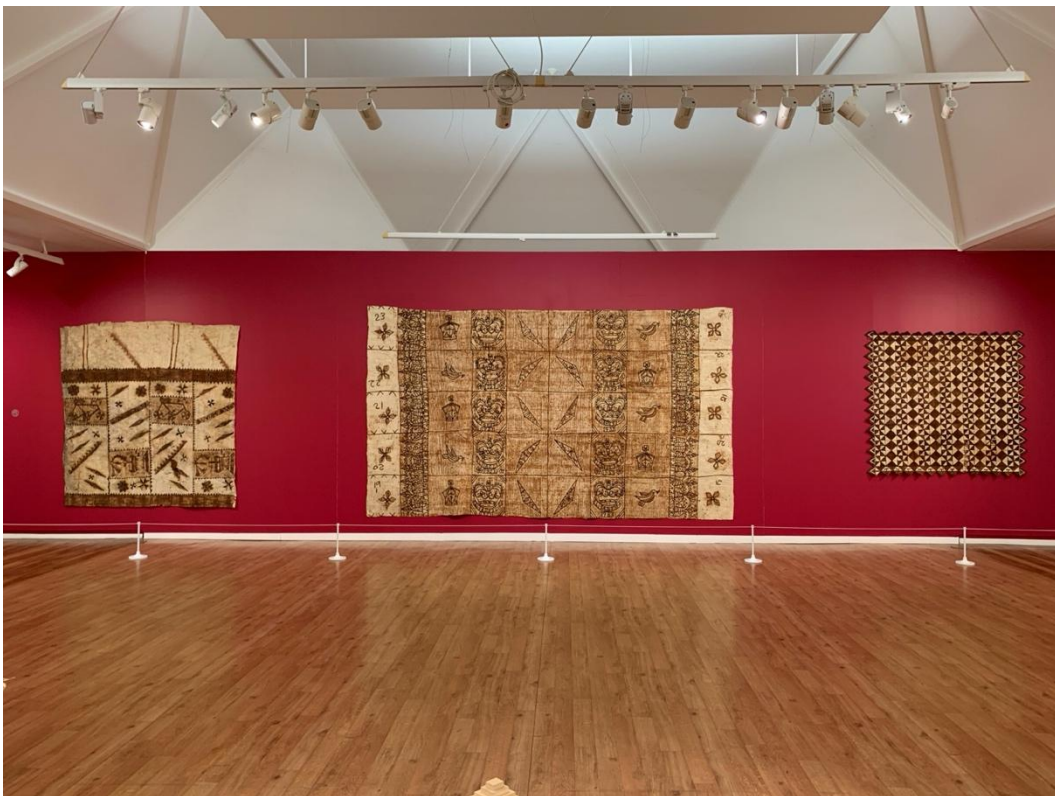


Figure 3. Installation view of *‘Amui ‘i Mu’a/Ancient Futures*, Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga, October 2023, showing three *ngatu* (Tongan barkcloths) on loan from the Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection (left to right: MTG 8145, 8073, 8084). Photograph courtesy of Billie Lythberg

Tongan Barkcloths and Koloa Tukufakaholo: Wealth to Pass On

Ngatu are practical and ceremonial cloths made from the inner bark of paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*, known as *hiapo* in Tonga) saplings. Barkcloths are

made throughout Oceania, and their prevalence across such a wide area is no accident. The paper mulberry is one of several plants referred to as a “canoe plant” because it was transported deliberately into the Pacific on oceangoing *waka* (canoes) from the Asian Mainland or Taiwan from about 3000 BC onwards. Its value is attested to by the care taken by the ancestors of Pacific peoples, some of whom we now know as Tongan, to ensure it survived their blue-water sailing so they could plant it in new homelands and continue to make cloth.

In modern Tonga, *ngatu* are made and exchanged at important life events such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals. They are an essential gift, along with fine mats and elaborate baskets full of scented oils and toiletries, often referred to as *koloa* (treasure), a term that has some equivalence with Māori *taonga*. These material items are part of the broader category *koloa tukufakaholo*, which translates literally as “wealth” to “pass onto someone.”³ This category includes both tangible objects, such as historic sites and artforms, and intangible aspects of Tonga’s cultural heritage including oral traditions, ceremonies, myths, and performative arts.⁴ *Koloa tukufakaholo* implies the transmission of these forms of cultural heritage through time and space, and from person to person or generation to generation. Both tangible and intangible *koloa tukufakaholo* are valued for their formal qualities (aesthetics expressed in terms of harmony and beauty) and their functional purposes (their performativity or utility) within Tongan society.

Ngatu exemplifies the literal meaning of *koloa tukufakaholo* in that, as a material object with a specific function as a “gift”—in a Tongan context—it is literally wealth to be passed on. *Ngatu* are also associated with oral traditions and proverbs that describe or allude to their materiality and use. *Ngatu* barkcloths convey meaning through their forms, colors, and motifs, and they are ranked or valued differently through these.

The way that Tongans conceptualize *koloa tukufakaholo* differs from a Western museological model in that Tongans emphasize the maintenance or preservation of intangible cultural heritage over and above the preservation of its tangible manifestations. While museums preserve objects like *ngatu*, Tongans keep making them and being inspired by them; the exhibition at Hastings City Art Gallery is testament to this process. Tongans continue to make *ngatu* and use them in accordance with a Tongan time continuum, in which the present is conceived as the dynamic conjunction of past and future. As anthropologist and historian Hūfanga ‘Okusitino Māhina explains, “In Tonga, it is thought that, concurrently, people walk forward into the past, and walk backward into the future, where the allegedly unchanging past and indefinable yet-to-happen future

are historically altered and culturally ordered in the tensional, ever-moving present.”⁵

It is within this notion of the Tongan time continuum that the lineage of *ngatu* is located, linking even the most contemporary *ngatu* to the first *hiapo* saplings carried to Tonga by Polynesian ancestors. But as Māhina cautions, “the onus of preserving the past and mapping the future—whether [it] be for culture’s sake, humanity or future generations—rests squarely on our shoulders in the present.”⁶ In part, this responsibility must be borne by the museums that care for *koloa* and by the galleries that bring them out into the light. The enduring significance of *koloa* such as *ngatu* is illuminated by contemporary artists and scholars, including Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, who urge us to look closely at historic examples in order to see their legacies in contemporary art practices.

Managing Relationships with Barkcloth

Beyond their significance as treasured textiles, circulation as gifts, and exhibition in gallery and museum contexts, barkcloths are also creative technologies that manage transitions across thresholds—often quite literally; *ngatu* are used as wrappings and ground coverings because they can defuse and contain *mana*, or the potency of people. The journals of eighteenth-century European expeditions record exchanges that were marked with barkcloth for this reason, often in enormous quantities.

There is an example of this at the Museo de America in Madrid: a large *ngatu* known as “Malaspina’s carpet.”⁷ During the visit of Alessandro Malaspina to Vava’u in 1793, there was a fracas and several shots were fired by his men. A shipboard journal records that the next time Malaspina’s crew came ashore, a huge carpet made of barkcloth was laid out for them to walk and sit upon.⁸ This was a particularly Tongan way of managing tension. After this trouble-free visit, the thirty-meter-long *ngatu*, and the *mana* it had absorbed, was bundled up and gifted to the Spanish to take away.

Huge lengths of barkcloth are also laid out to honor people of great *mana*. It is purported that the feet of Queen Sālote, the most beloved of Tonga’s monarchs, never touched Tongan soil, and she afforded Queen Elizabeth II the same treatment in 1953. *Ngatu* was laid out to honor the British monarch, but also to contain her *mana*, which I will discuss in detail below. A large section of one of

these cloths honoring Queen Elizabeth (Fig. 4) was central to the Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga showing of 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures.

Making Barkcloth

The making of huge Tongan barkcloths involves three basic steps. The inner bark of the paper mulberry is removed from carefully cultivated saplings and beaten with a wooden mallet against a long wooden anvil to spread the fibers into thin strips that are pasted together into sheets of *feta'aki* (single-layered plain, undyed barkcloth). This is individual work, with a percussive quality that helps to mark Tongan time (see Butler and Lythberg, this issue).



Figure 4. *Ngatu* section of five *langanga* (barkcloth sections), Tonga, c. 1953. Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection (MTG 8073). Hastings City Art Gallery, October 2023. Photograph courtesy of Billie Lythberg

Next, women come together to work at a *papa koka'anga*, a barkcloth-making bench, across which layers of *feta'aki* are pasted together at right angles to one another using parboiled starchy root vegetables.⁹ They are simultaneously rubbed with tree-bark dyes or a red clay (*umea*) over raised patterns called *kupesi*, and the initial decoration emerges.¹⁰ I describe some commonly used *kupesi* in detail in the next section. This process is called a *koka'anga*, “the doing of *koka*,” referring to one of the tree-bark dyes—hence *papa koka'anga* describes a “bench [for] the doing of *koka*.” This is collaborative work, accompanied by singing and the smells of vegetal dyes and pastes. When it is complete, the cloth is laid out in the sun to dry.

After it has dried, the cloth is given to one of the women who made it; she does the final stage of *ngatu* decoration by overpainting the patterns with coconut oil. This seals the surface of the barkcloth, while also imparting both shine (*ngingila*) and scent. The significance of these perfumes is sometimes indexed by *kupesi* motifs in the style of flowers or garlands.

The women who come together to *koka'anga* take turns receiving completed cloths and using them for their gifting obligations in Tonga's highly stratified and ranked gift economy. To appropriately make and bestow a *ngatu* is to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of Tongan society and its organizational symbolism. In gift contexts, *kupesi* are vitally important.

The Significance of Kupesi Design Templates to Ngatu and Women's Working Groups

The *kupesi tui* (embroidered tablets) now predominantly used in the creation of Tongan barkcloth are made with a two-layer base consisting of pandanus leaves (*paongo*) and the suede-like outer sheath of coconut leaves (*kaka*). Sometimes the pandanus leaf is uppermost, and the *kaka* provides a thick, supportive base; other times this structure is reversed. The patterns are created by stitching coconut leaf midribs called *tuaniu* or *tu'a niu*, to the layered tablet to form a design.¹¹ The midribs are sometimes further embellished by winding threads of coconut fiber (*kaleve'i pulu*) around them before attaching them to the substrate. Dried midribs are used to create straight lines, and fresh midribs are used for pliable, curved lines. They are stitched together using hibiscus fiber (*fau*), coconut fiber, or thread

and modern needles. Embroidered *kupesi* made in this way are remarkably resilient, long-lasting, and can be used to produce both geometric and naturalistic motifs.

Kupesi are a central component of the *koka'anga*. They are the rubbing tablets and relief patterns placed directly on the *papa koka'anga*. The process of joining pieces of *feta'aki* upon the *papa koka'anga* and rubbing over them with dye causes the raised patterns of the *kupesi* to be printed into the barkcloth. The word *kupesi* is used for both the design tablets placed upon the *papa koka'anga* and the patterns or motifs they produce in the *ngatu* made upon it.

Kupesi tui are the most commonly used *kupesi* templates in Tonga today. The embroidered tablets are highly valued, as they represent not only the time used to make them, but also the potential to create numerous *ngatu* from them over their lifetime, which may span twenty or more years. There is potential for individual *kupesi* to be put together into different sets to make *ngatu* with different appearances. The value of *kupesi tui* is encoded in the proverb: “*Hangē ha fakatau kupesi*” (“like buying a *kupesi*”).¹² This describes the difficulty of parting with priceless things, implying that *kupesi* are so precious they will not usually be offered for sale. The value of *kupesi* underlines the importance of *tauhi kupesi*, or caring for *kupesi*. The word “*tauhi*” is the same as used in the conjunction *tauhi fanau*, which means “to care for a child.”¹³

Prior to the implementation of the Tongan Constitution in 1875, the making of *kupesi* had been the sole domain of chiefly women and included designs applied directly to the *papa koka'anga* with sophisticated wrapping of cordage, literally tying up a *papa koka'anga* with one geometric design, sometimes for extended periods.¹⁴ Part One of the Tongan Constitution, the declaration of rights, freed Tongans to “use their lives and persons and time to acquire and possess property and to dispose of their labour and the fruit of their hands and to use their own property as they will,” effectively emancipating commoners from servitude. Following this political change, when the dynamics of *ngatu* production shifted away from the control of the chiefly women, commoner women gradually took on the role of preparing *kupesi*, largely choosing to expand the repertoire of the portable *kupesi tui* tablets. The potential to make curved lines, and therefore more naturalistic designs, using these embroidered *kupesi* tablets greatly expanded the potential imagery of the *kupesi* maker, stimulating “an artistic efflorescence that might not have occurred without them.”¹⁵

Kupesi Designs and Heliaki

Tongan people believe that “*ngatu* or *tapa* cloth is like a history book to those who understand it. Each stencil or *kupesi* tells of something that has happened in the past.”¹⁶ Thus, every *kupesi* is a potential pathway to deeper understanding or historical documentation. A key feature of the *kupesi* used to decorate *ngatu* is the concept of *heliaki*, often translated as “metaphor.” The similarities a metaphor transfers between two concepts, and the tension this transference creates between literal and figurative meanings, are only productive when linguistic and cultural awareness precede them.

In a Tongan context, *heliaki* inflects poetry, oratory, visual arts, and performance; manages relationships between people and groups; and balances privileges and responsibilities. Without the ongoing transfer of knowledge, the meanings and significance of Tongan cultural items such as decorated barkcloths becomes opaque.



Figure 5. *Ngatu*, Tonga, mid- to late twentieth century, Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection (MTG 8084). Hastings City Art Gallery, October 2023. Photograph courtesy of Billie Lythberg

Kupesi and the Ngatu from the Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection

There are several themes within the *kupesi tui* that are evident in the barkcloths loaned for the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures exhibition. One of the barkcloths on display is a decorative piece likely made for a special event, its edges specially cut into triangle points for aesthetic appeal (Fig. 5). Its rhythmic *kupesi* depict *man-ulua* (two birds)—a *heliaki* for the coming together of two people of equivalent rank. It is possible—though impossible to be certain—this barkcloth was used at a wedding or other important ceremony, perhaps as a covering for a table or dais.



Figure 6. *Ngatu* section, Tonga, c. 1920. Hawkes Bay Museums Trust Collection (MTG 8145). Hastings City Art Gallery, October 2023. Photograph courtesy of Billie Lythberg

Some *kupesi tui* record historical events, such as the visibility of Halley's comet in 1910, Tonga's purchase of a fighter jet toward the efforts of the Allied forces during World War II, the first seaplane to visit Tonga, and Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Tonga in 1953.¹⁷ Some encode the significance of Tonga's first public buildings, such as churches and concrete water towers, and others record the appearance in Tonga of Western material culture such as guitars.¹⁸

These sorts of *kupesi* serve both to introduce new events or concepts and to commemorate them; there do not appear to be any *kupesi* that record desires or aspirations for things. One explanation for the appearance of technologies new to Tonga on Tongan barkcloth is that through the incorporation of such images into products from Tongan soil, specifically *feta'aki* and plant-based dyes, formerly foreign concepts become Tongan. Niuean artist John Pule has described this rather poetically in relation to Niuean *hiapo* (barkcloth): "The mixing of Niuean and European imagery sometimes appears unsure about the fibrous nature of growth, but when painted some images became immersed in the bark's property, exposing it to the soil's saliva. This area of soil is present in every *hiapo*."¹⁹ This is especially relevant to those *kupesi* that also record Tongan versions of the names for these objects, such as "*Koe Kalamafoni*" ("this is a gramophone") making them part of the Tongan *fonua* (land). Inscriptions like this add to the significance of the motif illustrated and may be used to name certain *kupesi* that are commonly used together in the sets known as *kupesi hingoa* (named *kupesi*). One function of *kupesi hingoa* is to make new things familiar. The barkcloth segment in Figure 6, cut from a larger cloth made circa 1920 (and see similar in Butler & Lythberg, this issue), depicts two bicycles and two elaborate gramophones, and is a terrific example of the "making Tongan" of foreign objects.

Arguably the most prevalent function of the *kupesi hingoa* in use today is to allude to the nobles and royal families of Tonga. Individual *kupesi tui* include representations of animals and fish that are *heliaki* for the villages with which they are associated, such as the flying foxes of Hihifo and Kolovai.²⁰ Specific types of foliage and the garlands made from them also encode associations with certain villages; for example, the *mapa* fruit is associated with the village of Pelehake. The *kupesi hingoa* set known as *hala paini* is the most common one in use today.²¹ It combines images of the pine trees lining the road to the royal palace in Nuku'alofa (*hala paini* translates as "pine pathway") with the *sila* (seal) of Tonga. Accompanying the *sila* there is usually a lion adapted from European representations of monarchy, alluding to King Tupou I, and an eagle representing the United States but also alluding to the Tongan state.²² When *kupesi* such as these are used, it

does not necessarily mean that the *ngatu* is being made for the person to whom the *kupesi hingoa* refers; rather, it acknowledges their continued importance in Tongan society and associates the *ngatu* with their status.

The very best *ngatu* are made from smooth white *feta'aki* that have been pasted together to make a smooth cloth and decorated with well-colored dyes. The *kupesi* used are chosen to provoke an emotional response, such as those that allude to the history and prowess of the Tongan monarchy. The *kupesi* and the space-dividing lines between them are laid out carefully, and the lines are straight. The *tohi* or overpainting is carefully performed and aligns well with the *kupesi*. The *ngatu* will have "scale," being preferably large and complete (i.e., not cut into sections). In addition, if the *ngatu* is to be gifted, it will be of an appropriate type, with appropriate *kupesi*, for the recipient and the occasion, and finally, if it is a gift, it will be well presented.

This final characteristic is very important. As anthropologist Nicholas Thomas reminds us,

barkcloths are not solely, or not exactly, works of art: the terminological debate is ultimately unproductive, but it is important to remember that these were not made for aesthetic appreciation in a narrow sense, but rather to constitute sanctity, to define a ceremony, to wrap around a body, to bear knowledge or to effect a gift. These art forms were embedded in the lives of Pacific Islanders and in many places, and in many ways, they still are.²³

Three-Dimensional Works of Art

The way *ngatu* is presented demonstrates what performance and museum studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called "the location of authenticity in a moment of aesthetic reception."²⁴ *Ngatu* takes on heightened significance and a certain three-dimensionality when presented in carefully folded bundles of *koloa*, as rippling sheets held high by lines of women, or covering enormous pathways. Art historian Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk described the aesthetic reception of a large *ngatu* presented in a performative way:

The continuous, repetitive patterns are meant to be viewed from a distance and to heighten the appearance of length as a thirty-five-to seventy-foot tapa oscillates and trembles in the hands of the

women presenting it in a ceremonial context. Tapa's two-dimensional medium is transposed into a floating three-dimensional sculpture, a kind of performance piece that is meant to be experienced in its entirety.²⁵

Likewise, when *ngatu* and other textile *koloa* are wrapped around individuals to prepare them for marriage and other important life events, the individual body is transformed into a representation of collectivity and they “represent more than their individual selves . . . formed into embodiments of their respective *kainga*'s [kindred's] history, wealth, value, potency, knowledge of tradition and ability to generate resources.”²⁶

Ngatu are not merely two-dimensional artforms, as they are often displayed in Western galleries but have the capacity to wrap, contain, and transform space, as they are folded, unfolded, spread out on the ground, and wrapped around bodies. They are malleable textiles with sculptural and transformative potential and applications.

Ngatu Pathways to Honor Two Queens

Returning to the *ngatu* made for the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Tonga in 1953 (Fig. 4), pathways formed by *ngatu* are most significant when they are constructed for members of the royal family, and the collective effort is evident in the *ngatu* laid out by Tongans to protect and respect the monarchy. Lengths of *ngatu* have long been used to line pathways for members of the royal family to walk along, even for their cars to drive along. This is a way of honoring the family and containing its *mana* and *tapu* (“sacredness”), keeping the road safe to walk on afterwards.²⁷ For the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Tonga in 1953, *ngatu* was prepared in great quantities to cover the paths along which she and Queen Sālote walked. According to Kenneth Bain, former secretary to the government of Tonga, “Each village of Tongatapu made fifty yards of *tapa* [*ngatu*] . . . in all there was over a mile of *tapa*.”²⁸ Afterwards, the *ngatu* were divided into small pieces and given to the British sailors at Queen Sālote's instruction, as a sign of respect for Queen Elizabeth II, whose exalted status was acknowledged and appreciated by Queen Sālote.²⁹ Because the monarchs had walked on these *ngatu* and exposed them to their *mana*, the *ngatu* could not be allowed to circulate in the Tongan gift economy, but by their division and distribution this *mana* could be safely contained and distributed, and the exalted status of the queens preserved. In significant

ways, this process recalled the presentation of “Malaspina’s carpet” 160 years prior.

The section of this *ngatu*, now in the Hawke’s Bay Museum Trust Collection, is five *langanga* (barkcloth sections) cut from a piece that was likely a *launima* (fifty *langanga* long). The *langanga* are numbered—“19” through “23”—on the borders of the cloth. The *kupesi* depict the crown of Queen Sālote alternating with doves. The repeating crown of Queen Elizabeth II is anchored by her name in Tongan transliteration, “Elisabesi–R,” with the suffix standing for “Regent,” along with the year of her coronation and visit to Tonga, “1953,” with alternating *kupesi* that include flowers. Along the inner borders of the cloth are abstracted renditions of “the exalted *sisi* (ornamental girdle) of Ulukalala,” with the inscription “Koe sisi peka o Ulukalala” recalling the chiefly line of Finau ‘Ulukālala. Together, these *kupesi* encode hereditary status.

Unlike the cloth from which this piece was cut, and indeed most of the *ngatu* made and used for the queen’s visit and subsequently divided for redistribution, there is one *launima* now at Te Papa that was kept intact and in the royal household’s stores before it was used again in 1965 in close proximity to Queen Sālote herself.³⁰ This time, though, it took her on a different pathway; it was folded beneath her coffin when she was returned to Tonga by the Royal New Zealand Air Force after her death in Auckland. What had so cemented the connection between the two queens that this *ngatu* made for the visit of Queen Elizabeth II was kept and later used to support Queen Sālote in this way?

Queen Sālote became famous worldwide for the respect she showed Queen Elizabeth II even before the British monarch made her visit to Tonga. During Elizabeth’s coronation parade in 1953, all carriages bearing royal guests had their tops open on the way to Westminster Abbey. On the return from the abbey, it rained heavily, and all carriages were closed—except for that of Queen Sālote, who, in an act of humility and respect, remained visible and engaged despite being exposed to the downpour. Her willingness to endure the rain that day as an active participant in the coronation parade until its conclusion drew cheers from the people lining the streets, and the event retains a special place in the memories of Tongans and British alike:

The press was ecstatic and Queen Salote became a household name overnight. June babies were christened Charlotte (of which Salote is the Polynesian form), a racehorse was named after her and she was the subject of topical songs: “Linger longer, Queen of Tonga.” The *Manchester Guardian* wrote of “the magnificence of

Her Majesty the Queen of Tonga, smiling broadly in a spiteful downpour and heartily waving a powerful bare arm, happy as though all the sun of the friendly islands were beating down.” The *Daily Telegraph* reported that she received biggest cheers of the day, except for The Queen herself and Sir Winston Churchill and that, later, a woman went up to her car in Knightsbridge and call out “Good luck. You were marvellous.” The *Telegraph* concluded that “Queen Salote, whose genial dignity matches her proportions, has won an extraordinary quantity of affection from the British people.” The *Times* described her as “the outstanding overseas figure of the celebrations.”³¹

Her actions were a high point in a relationship of shared respect between the two female monarchs, enacted in multiple ways over more than three decades.³² And so, it transpired that one of the *ngatu* made for the Tongan pathway of these two queens in 1953, infused with *mana*, supported Queen Sālote’s final voyage to her beloved home. After Queen Sālote’s body was returned to Tonga, the *ngatu* was gifted to the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) by the Tongan royal family. Three years later, in 1968, the receiving officer, Flight Lieutenant McAllister (the pilot of the plane that carried the Queen’s body back to Tonga), presented the *ngatu* to the Dominion Museum (Te Papa’s predecessor).³³ The RNZAF chose to honor and keep the *ngatu* as a historical document of sorts at the Museum of New Zealand, and their decision to do so was upheld and supported by Tongan officials.

In 2010, Te Papa exhibited the *ngatu* along a single wall, referring to the way it had been used in Tonga. Nicholas Thomas explains that

the metaphor of the path is fundamental to the imagining of relations of alliance and affinity. The long strip of cloth gives material form to the path, but does more than make a relationship visible: its presentation by a long line of people also makes their collective action, and their very collectivity, manifest. Neither society in general nor a particular group such as a clan simply exist; a sense of collectivity cannot be present in people’s minds unless a group somehow appears and acts as a whole . . . It is in this context that collective products, such as large pieces of barkcloth, are especially important. The art form is part of a process of self-revelation and has a particular importance at a moment of presentation, when everyone’s efforts converge; at other times, the cloth’s significance may lie in the prospect or memory of such ceremonial events, or in a particular history of exchange-paths.³⁴

It is tempting to imagine that the *ngatu* had been kept for precisely this purpose, to remember quite literal exchange paths and further cement the significance of the relationship between the two queens. So too, the piece on display at Hastings City Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga in 2023 recalls the *mana* of the two queens who walked upon it, and their converging pathways of great power and respect.

Billie Lythberg is of Swedish, Scottish, and English descent. She is a senior lecturer in the Department of Management and International Business at Waipapa Taumata Rau|The University of Auckland, and an affiliated researcher of Vā Moana–Pacific Spaces at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau |Auckland University of Technology. She has worked with Māori and Moana colleagues on multiple projects for the Royal Society of New Zealand, including the Marsden Grant-funded ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures project. She publishes extensively, curates and critiques exhibitions, and develops documentaries for broadcast television.

Notes

¹ Elham Salari is audience and learning manager at Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga–Hastings Art Gallery.

² The talk this article presents draws from Lythberg’s research and writing over two decades, including research previously published in an article in *Tuhinga: Records of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*, see endnote 30.

³ Edgar Tu‘inukuafe, *A Simplified Dictionary of Modern Tongan* (Auckland: Polynesian Press, 1992), 176, 234.

⁴ Kolokesa Māhina, “Koloa Tukufakaholo: Issues and Challenges Involving the Management of Tonga’s Cultural Heritage,” *Tenth Tongan History Association Conference: Tonga from the Stone Age to the Space Age* (Nuku‘alofa: Unpublished, 2003).

⁵ ‘Okusitino Māhina and Semisi Fetokai Potauaine, “Kula and ‘Uli: Red and Black in Tongan Thinking and Practice,” in *Tonga: Land, Sea and People*, ed. Tangikina Moimoi Skeen and Nancy L. Drescher (Tongan Research Association, Nuku‘alofa Tonga: Vava‘u Press, 2011). See also Epeli Hau‘ofa, “Autonomy and Creativity: A Tribute to the Founder of ‘Atenisi,” *Polynesian Paradox: Essays in Honour of Futa Helu*, ed. I. Campbell and E. Coxon (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2005).

⁶ ‘Okusitino Māhina, personal communication, 2003. Cited in Kolokesa Māhina, “Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa: The Case of the Intangible Heritage,” *ICOM General Conference* (Seoul: Unpublished paper, 2004).

⁷ Museo de América, Madrid, Spain, no. 70479, 29.56 x 3.28 m.

⁸ “A este mismo temor debimos atribuir poco después el nuevo obsequio que se nos hizo desplegar una largo alfombra desde la orilla hasta la casa del cava . . .” May 25, 1793. Alejandro Malaspina and José de Bustamante y Guerra, *Viaje político-científico alrededor del Mundo por las corbetas Descubierta y Atrevida al mando de los capitanes de navio D. Alejandro Malaspina y Don José de Bustamante y Guerra desde 1789 a 1794, publicado con una introducción por Don Pedro de Novo y Colson, teniente de navío académico correspondiente de la réal de la historia* (Madrid: Imprenta de viuda é hijos de abienzo Isabel la Católica, 1885, 4 y Paz, 6), 271.

⁹ Parboiled starchy root vegetables used to make *ngatu* include the *maho'a Tonga* (Polynesian arrowroot, *Tacca leontopetaloides*), *manioke koka'anga* (cassava or tapioca, *Manihot esculenta*), and *misimisi* (common flowering canna lily, *Canna indica*).

¹⁰ Tree-bark dyes include *koka* (red cedar, *Bischofia javanica*), *tongo* (native mangrove, *Rhizophora mangle*), and *tuitui* (candlenut tree, *Aleurites moluccana*).

¹¹ Maxine Tamahori, “Cultural Change in Tongan Bark-Cloth Manufacture” (MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1963), 78.

¹² ‘Okusitino Māhina, *Reed Book of Tongan Proverbs; Ko E Tohi `a E Reed Ki He Lea Tonga Heliaki* (Auckland: Reed Books, 2004), 151.

¹³ Ping-Ann Addo, *Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture: Tapa from Tonga and the Pacific Islands. An Exhibition Catalog* (San Francisco: The Center for Art and Public Life, 2004), 48.

¹⁴ Phyllis Herda, “The Changing Texture of Textiles in Tonga,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 108, no. 2 (1999): 154–55.

¹⁵ Adrienne Kaeppler, “The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, Metaphor and Allusion,” in *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*, ed. Anita Herle, et al. (Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2002), 292.

¹⁶ Tupou Posesi Fanua, *Tapa Cloth in Tonga* (Nuku'alofa: Taulua Press, 1986), 11.

¹⁷ Roger Neich and Mick Pendergrast, *Pacific Tapa* (Auckland: David Bateman, 1997), 44; Adrienne Kaeppler, “Airplanes and Saxophones: Post-War Images in the Visual and Performing Arts,” in *Echoes of Pacific War: Papers from the 7th Tongan History Conference Held in Canberra in January 1997*, ed. Deryck Scarr, Neil Gunson, and Jennifer Terrell (Canberra: Target Oceania, 1998). Inscribed “*Ko e vaka-buna*” (“this is an airplane”), the *ngatu* that is Canterbury Museum catalog number E172.130 is part of the Rugby Pratt collection, collected by him in 1922. The provenance held by the Canterbury Museum describes it as celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of the landing of Rev. Walter Lawry in Mua, Tongatapu, and depicting double and outrigger canoes.

¹⁸ Kaeppler, “Tongan Barkcloth,” 298–9, 306.

¹⁹ John Pule, “Desire Lives in Hiapo,” in *Hiapo: Past and Present in Niuean Barkcloth*, ed. John Pule and Nicholas Thomas (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 2005), 19.

²⁰ Kaeppler, “Tongan Barkcloth,” 300.

²¹ “The origin of the Hala Paini kupesi set can be traced to Lopeti Cocker of Folaha. The original design for the kupesi was made by Father Gregory Kailao, a Roman catholic priest from Ma’ufanga, who taught art and music at ‘Api Fo’ou College. Lopeti made the first Hala Paini stencil set in the 1920s. Since that time many Hala Paini stencil sets have been made by Lopeti, by the women of Folaha, and by others. Although traditionally the work of women, Lopeti and other men were, and still are, well known for creating stencil sets.” Adrienne L. Kaeppler, *From the Stone Age to the Space Age in 200 Years: Tongan Art and Society on the Eve of the Millennium* (Nuku’alofa: Tongan National Museum, 1999), 36.

²² Kaeppler, “Tongan Barkcloth,” 305.

²³ Nicholas Thomas, “Preface,” in *Paperskin: Barkcloth Across the Pacific* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2009), 9.

²⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Confusing Pleasures,” in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 203.

²⁵ Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, “To Beat or Not to Beat, That Is the Question: A Study on Acculturation and Change in an Art-Making Process and Its Relation to Gender Structures,” *Pacific Studies* 14, no. 3 (1991): 54.

²⁶ Heather Young Leslie, *Tradition, Textiles and Maternal Obligation in the Kingdom of Tonga* (PhD diss., York University, 1999), 269.

²⁷ Fanny Wonu Veys, “Materialising the King: The Royal Funeral of King Tāufa’āhau Tupou IV of Tonga,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2009): 141.

²⁸ Kenneth Bain, *The Friendly Islanders: A Story of Queen Salote and her People* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), 34.

²⁹ Bain, *The Friendly Islanders*, 62.

³⁰ It is catalog number FE005172 and discussed in more detail in Billie Lythberg, “Polyvocal Tongan Barkcloths: Contemporary Ngatu and Nomenclature at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,” *Tuhinga: Records of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa* 24 (2013): 85–104.

³¹ Stanley Martin, “From the Archives: Queen Salote of Tonga,” Royal Over-Sea League, February 22, 2018, <https://www.rosl.org.uk/from-the-archives-queen-salote-of-tonga>.

³² “Queen Salote received every honour that the monarch of the United Kingdom could confer on her. She was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in 1932 and promoted, in 1945, to be a Dame Grand Cross, thus providing her with that pink mantle that was to be so useful eight years later. When Queen Elizabeth II visited Tonga during her extensive Commonwealth tour towards the end of 1953, she made Queen Salote a Dame Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (GCVO). In 1965, the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George was opened to women and, shortly before her death in that year, Queen Salote was made the first Dame Grand Cross (GCMG).” Stanley, “Queen Salote of Tonga.”

³³ Nina Tonga, “Queen Sālote on the World Stage,” Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (blog), September 5, 2014, <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2014/09/05/queen-salote-on-the-world-stage/>.

³⁴ Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 143.