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“Ngatu Led Me North”: Reflections on ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures at Pah Homestead

Abstract

This article, written as a personal response, follows two ngatu (Tongan barkcloths) from Canterbury Museum to Auckland’s Pah Homestead for the ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures exhibition, which showcased the interconnectedness of Tongan material culture, identity, and visual language. The exhibition, part of a five-year collaborative project, featured works by senior Tongan artists Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck alongside museum artifacts. This personal response highlights how Tongan artists are reclaiming cultural heritage and reasserting Indigenous knowledge in museum spaces, forging new pathways for understanding and representation.

Keywords: ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures, Tonga, Tongan art, Oceania, ngatu, barkcloth, Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi, Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, Tongan diaspora, customary arts, exhibitions, Tongan visual language, Cultural heritage reclamation, Indigenous knowledge systems, Museum decolonization, Tongan material culture, Pacific artists in Aotearoa, Ethnographic collections

At the start of 2021, the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, made preparations for a *ngatu tahina* and a *ngatu tapa’ingatu* (Tongan barkcloth) in the collection to travel north.¹ The two cloths’ destination was Pah Homestead, an art gallery in Auckland, where they were to be included in the exhibition *‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures*. Though I had met the project delegation when they visited Canterbury Museum, where I am curator of Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous human histories, I knew little about the exhibition before I arrived on its opening night, where I saw both *ngatu* displayed among other manifestations of Tongan knowledge, visual language, and social systems.

Ethnographic collection items are skillful innovations resulting from a person’s or people’s political, social, and economic systems and practices. The management of such items requires a level of care historically overlooked but ever-increasingly practiced, prompted by members of origin communities, including their transnational *whanaunga/aiga* (family). There is a rising number of Pasifika

artists and scholars reexamining and recontextualizing museum objects, spaces, and records. Similarly, museums worldwide are not only unraveling the stories of Euro-American “exploration” and “great discoveries” to which their Pacific collections are attached; they are now systematically processing the unethical ways they have historically amassed their ethnographic hoards. Indigenous peoples’ access to their own heritage material has become a key aim for museums, which are increasingly striving to shed their colonial-laden systems and practices regarding community access.

‘Amui ‘i Mu’a/Ancient Futures featured works by senior Tongan artists Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, alongside creations of Tongan manufacture carefully selected from museum collections across Aotearoa. The exhibition was the outcome of a major five-year collaborative project in which a team consisting of scholars—Billie Lythberg, Phyllis Herda, Melenaita Taumoe-folau, and Hilary L. Scothorn—joined Tohi and Dyck as they traveled worldwide to examine museum artifacts sourced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century encounters between Tongan islanders and Europeans.

During their tour of museum collections, the *‘Amui ‘i Mu’a/Ancient Futures* project team encountered a sector-wide issue that museum professionals deal with daily: historic written records associated with Indigenous objects are often sparse, if not biased or assumptive. Well prepared, the team acknowledged and practiced Tongan values such as *faka’apa’apa* (respect) when approaching these records and museum staff. This created a shared sense of accountability, informing and guiding their multidisciplinary, multisensory examination of Tongan artifacts or arts, *nima mea’a*. The team’s experiences led to an exchange that ensured Tongan material was sighted, handled, and acknowledged once more under the gaze of their own. They exchanged more knowledge as they worked with host museum staff to reinstate Tongan names, related terminologies, construction techniques, and practices.

Tohi and Dyck have long been captivated by Tongan forms of expression. Finding solace, challenge, and realization in the cosmos of *lalava* (systematic lashing), the forms of *kali* (head rests), iconography within *akau* (clubs), and the texture and graphics of *ngatu* and *kiekie* (waist ornaments/garments), much of their early reference points were restricted to images in catalogs and publications. The opportunity to uncover Tongan objects around the world and spend time participating in their care can only have prompted an urge to create and share—to practice the continuum of Tongan visual language.

Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi was born in Ngele’ia on Tonga’s main island, Tongatapu. He immigrated to Aotearoa in 1978 and in the 1990s started exhibiting

and articulating a life philosophy through the practice of *lalava*. Tohi subsequently began developing *lalava* and its related aspects in sculpture, experimenting with stone and wood. He became increasingly curious about the possibilities of extending the mediums through which he could communicate the technological significance of *lalava* all around the Pacific. Other significant strands of inspiration for Tohi, reflected in his work, are the intricate *kupesi* (designs/patterns/formations) of *akau*. Carved to cover the entirety of paddles and clubs, *akau kupesi* reflect some visual components of *ngatu kupesi*. In either medium, an optical illusion is created by the highly ornate *kupesi* layer, a universe that cradles the suspended forms of animals such as birds and turtles, as well as people.

Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck was born and raised in Auckland, although spent many of her summer holidays in Vava'u, Tonga, developing and maintaining village and family connections. Dyck's visual language draws on Tongan textiles and fiber works. Her exploration has led to an unpacking of *ngatu kupesi*, *sisifale* (ornamental openwork apron), textured *kiekie*, and tightly woven and patterned *kato*, *fala*, and *helu* (baskets, mats, and combs). Her multimedia approach reflects the resourcefulness of Pasifika peoples and is enriched by enduring Tongan references.

For *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*, both artists extended their understanding and practices of Tongan visual language. They compiled their worldwide experiences, conversations, and discoveries into a formidable showing of Tongan ethos, knowledge systems, and cultural continuity.

Opening Night Reflections—March 16, 2021

Walking up to the Pah Homestead (Fig. 1) on the opening night of *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*, I became preoccupied with the building's distinctive features: its green grounds, manicured foliage, irregular facade, and superficial trimmings. The venue projects the architectural tastes of the late nineteenth century in its relaxed Italianate style. It was a fitting venue for this show; its mix of heritage and contemporary forms mirrors the makeup of *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*. It is located firmly in the Pacific and celebrates the creative endeavors of Pacific peoples.



Figure 1. The Pah Homestead, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, completed 1879. Photograph by Emily Chalk. Courtesy of The Pah Homestead

There was a queue on the steps at the main entrance. Inside, the noise of the crowd hit my sober ears and I started retreating. Then, to my right, I saw the blue and green hues of an ocean on canvas—wave after crashing wave until the rhythmically painted earthy lines aligned my senses enough to breathe. This was Dagmar Dyck’s *M.A.P.S.* (2020; see Dyck, this issue, Fig. 5).

Propelled forward to stand before the white expanse of hanging *kiekie* that is Dyck’s *Paper Strings* (2015), the noise from the crowd muted to a blur. I allowed the work’s monochrome hue to wrap around me until my mind found a stillness—so rare nowadays—and I smiled. A handmade clean slate. Fantastic. The busy blurred mass of the crowd separated into faces—people unknown but smiling and welcoming. At ease now, the noise morphed into sounds of laughter, music, and island conversations, beckoning me to explore *‘Amui ‘i Mu’a/Ancient Futures*.

The morning room’s feminine spread included Dyck’s *Sisi Fale* (2021) installed against one wall, with flowers no longer draped over picture frames as *lei* but allowed to float around moving images of preparations and creations (see Dyck, this issue, Figs. 3–4). Further along were her untitled working drawings from 1994: gouache and pencil lines—tentative but poignant—laid sparsely on framed paper, hanging like portraits of loved ones gone (see Dyck, this issue, Fig. 11).

I turned to meet a stone bird—Tohi’s andesite sculpture *Manuvaka* (2008)—sitting quietly on the wooden floor, fat with a knowledge of flight paths (see Tohi, this issue, Figs. 4–5). Long cut lines on the surface enhance its stable stature and its precise beak, brimming full, with much to tell.

There was an intended quietness about the spacious drawing room. Tohi’s sculpture *Haufakalava* (2001) sat so close to the wooden floor it was as if the

floorboards had formed into layers of hardened fibers (see Tohi, this issue, Fig. 1). Looking around the room, I saw that the *lalava* was revealed from different angles—abstracted and repeated in color, resized, and minimized under muted hues.

The little drawing room emanated warmth despite its fireplace being unlit. The glowing embers from Dyck's *Reflection of an Existing Order* (2021) made me stay there a while to warm up (see Dyck, this issue, Fig. 9). There was much to get through, and I had yet to even glimpse the *ngatu*. I reflected on the Tongan collection items that I care for as curator at Canterbury Museum and the significance of this exhibition in creating a platform to understand their position within a continuum of Tongan arts, and to represent them better.

I came to stand at the ballroom doorway. Both Canterbury Museum *ngatu* were finally visible. The *Ngatu Tahina: Figures and Trees* engulfed nearly the entire west wall of the ballroom. *Ngatu Tapa'ingatu: Gramophones and Clocks* hung on the north wall (see Butler and Lythberg, this issue, Figs. 7–8). These two *ngatu* document flying foxes and the *toa* (ironwood) tree branches in which they roost, as well as a prized gramophone and the clock on the Royal Chapel in Tonga. These barkcloths left the islands in 1922, two of eleven gifted to Reverend Major Albert Rugby Pratt. They had traveled well from Christchurch and were now in the right company.

The role of all artists, their ongoing practices, and their considered knowledge-gathering and sharing has become a vital layer in how museums can better engage and include origin communities in the managing and interpretation of their cultural material. *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures* has been a robust initiation into how senior Tongan artists are engaging with historic *ngatu*, punctuating a Tongan arts continuum. With a number of contemporary Tongan artists excelling in varying mediums and modes, I look forward to seeing many more interpretations of Tongan ontology found in our local museums.

Hatesa Anoni Seumanutafa (Niue/Siamani/Sāmoa) is curator of Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous human histories at the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work focuses on connecting Oceanic innovative, scientific, and aesthetic heritage materials, practices, and knowledge with contemporary interpreters and educators. Her research priorities are provenance research for the museum's repatriation efforts, collections-based research toward identifications, restorations, records reconciliation, and developing best-practice museological methods.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this exhibition review was published in *Art New Zealand* 179 (Spring 2021): 88–92.