

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2004

We Pieced Together Cloth, We Pieced Together Culture: Reflections on Tongan Women's Textile-making in Oakland

Ping-Ann Addo

California College of the Art, paddo@cca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Addo, Ping-Ann, "We Pieced Together Cloth, We Pieced Together Culture: Reflections on Tongan Women's Textile-making in Oakland" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 469.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/469>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

We Pieced Together Cloth, We Pieced Together Culture: Reflections on Tongan Women's Textile-making in Oakland

Ping-Ann Addo, PhD
California College of the Art
Oakland, CA
paddo@cca.edu

Barkcloths, or *tapa*-cloths, are central to the cultural identity, social relations, politics, history, and contemporary religion of people from the South Pacific Kingdom of Tonga. These cultural processes are expressed symbolically in the creation and exchange of barkcloths as forms of *koloa*, meaning treasures in the Tongan language. Large and ornate Tongan barkcloths, are typically made from the beaten inner bark of the paper mulberry tree and are exchanged for ceremonial purposes. These textiles are designed and made only by women. Other forms of *koloa*, or treasures, include plaited mats, machine made and crocheted quilts, and decorated baskets.¹

Barkcloths, many of which are called *ngatu*, are created to provision and circulate within a system of gift exchange which scholars call the Tongan ceremonial economy. Tongans today state that for centuries they have been using *ngatu* for ceremonial gifts in Tongan individuals' life celebration events, such as weddings, birthdays, christenings, and funerals. Tongans refer to their obligations to give gifts as *kavenga*, literally meaning burden, but often translated as "cultural obligations." During ritual exchanges, gifts are usually presented to people above the gift giver in the social hierarchy as a way of recognizing their relationships to the wider kin group, to the chiefly classes, and to God whom they worship as Christians (Addo, 2004b; Kaeppler, 1995; Young Leslie, 2004). The social and symbolic value of *koloa* becomes apparent at *kavenga* ceremonies when groups of women from a given kin group gift cloth to women in another kin group.

Tongan women continue to exchange cloths in locations in their diaspora such as Oakland, CA and Auckland, New Zealand. Tongans have been emigrating from the Kingdom of Tonga for the past half century and have been taking with them textiles like *ngatu*. Today, there are as many Tongans living outside Tonga as living within. Material culture is one of the most important ways that Tongans in diaspora maintain relationships with those living in the Kingdom of Tonga. Through the continuation of the ceremonial economy, people express a sense of belonging to the Kingdom of Tonga and reveal the importance of extended family relationships to their cultural identities.

Until recently *ngatu* made from paper mulberry tree bark could only be produced in quantity in the kingdom of Tonga. This is because the raw materials are not usually cultivated outside of the Pacific in Tongan diasporic locations. However, Oakland, California was recently the site of this important process of cultural production. In late 2003 and early 2004 the California College of the Arts (CCA) and the California Academy of Sciences co-sponsored a year-long collaboration by twelve Tongan women

¹ *Koloa* is the category of wealth exchange items identified with, arranged by and gifted by Tongan women. In contrast, men and raise and gift times called *ngoue*, meaning the farm or the products of farming, including yams and other root crops, as well livestock, especially pigs.

tapa-cloth artists from Oakland to create a full-sized (15 ft. x 24 ft.) *tapa* cloth. CCA's Center for Art and Public Life administered this project to forge links between artists, Tongan communities, and the general public. CCA held educational programs, mounted a two-month long public art exhibition, and produced a catalog and video documentary about Tongan *tapa* cloth and Tongan culture in the San Francisco Bay Area. The project was called *Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture: Tongan Tapa Cloth* and it culminated in the creation of the *ngatu* by artists from the 'Otufelenite Tongan Community Group. In this presentation I will relate the collaborative process of producing this *ngatu* in Oakland and what that meant for the artists and their community's sense of identity in a multi-cultural contemporary United States setting. To the artists, this *ngatu* was their gift to their communities and to non-Tongans who wanted to learn about their culture. Using my perspective as project manager and a socio-cultural anthropologist, I will also highlight the ways in which these practices and their accompanying beliefs and important social relations were performed recently in Oakland.

Making *Ngatu* in Oakland

Ngatu-making usually begins with the preparation of the tough, white inner bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) in its fresh state or after strips of the bark have been dried and reconstituted by soaking them in water. Just as in the Tongan islands, the 'Otufelenite artists began their barkcloth production with the softening and beating of dried strips of paper mulberry bark (*hiapo*). All of the initial stages of mulberry bark beating (called *tutu*), patching holes in the beaten strips of bark (*monomono*) and then joining these strips into even larger sheets (*hokohoko*) were performed in Oakland by the 'Otufelenite artists. After working for four hours per day, two days per week, and over the course of several months on these processes, the artists had amassed enough beaten bark strips to make a *ngatu*. These pieces were stored under the mattress of one of the artists to keep them flat and to soften and smooth them out.



Fig. 1. 'Otufelenite artists perform *tutu* (beating out paper mulberry bark), Oakland CA, 2003.
Photo credit: The Center for Art and Public Life, California College of the Arts.

In Tonga, it is common for the activities of a family to be coordinated such that most family members have a role in the treasured textiles (*koloa*). Men often collaborate with women in their families to grow the plant raw materials for textile-making. They bring them home along with the root crops and vegetable leaves that serve as staples in most Tongans' island diets. For the *Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture* project, Tongan men carved the wooden equipment used by the women artists for making their *ngatu*. The wooden hammers and leaf pattern tablets were imported from Tonga especially for the project, so Tongans from many parts of the Tongan kingdom and the Tongan diaspora were indirectly involved.

Koka'anga at California College of the Arts

In early April 2004, the artists again assembled near CCA's Oakland campus to "dress" the worktable by attaching relief pattern boards to its surface. Then, on April 13, 2004 in a large, public ceremony, the artists performed the intermediate stage of *tapa* making, a process which required the most concentrated and cooperative efforts because the cloth would be assembled and dyed in just one-day. On this day members of Tongan communities for miles around came to the Far West High/Middle School, one of CCA's partner schools, to witness this historic event. Tongans know that more than just cloth is produced when a *ngatu* is made: transfers of knowledge take place. The social relations of production entailed in *ngatu* making reinforce Tongan social roles for women as the people who provide the most important valuables for celebrating important life transitions and rites of passage for people in their extended families (Kaeppeler, 1999).

For the 'Otufelenite women artists, being associated with the making of a *ngatu* garnered respect from others in their local Bay Area communities and beyond. It was in this spirit of respect and commemoration of the 'Otufelenite artists' status as women with special skills that the men in their communities performed a formal *kava* ceremony during the *koka'anga* ceremony.² The Tongan Consul General, Mr. Tevita Kolokihakaufisi, shared a drink of *kava* with the men. Also sharing *kava* was the Reverend Afuhia 'Akolo, pastor the Maama Fo'ou Tongan Methodist Church in Oakland, who blessed everyone assembled with a Christian prayer. After this prayer and some speeches of welcome by Tongan dignitaries, the men in the *kava* circle began to perform songs to commemorate the Tongan kingdom.

During the *koka'anga*, the artists sat together in facing pairs at the worktable, joining the strips of beaten bark (*feta'aki*) together by overlapping the edges and attaching them with a sticky, half-boiled root from the cassava or tapioca plant (fig. 2).³ As they

² *Kava* is a soporific drink made by mixing the dried, pounded root of the *kava* (*piper methysticum*) plant in water. It is drunk widely throughout the Pacific Islands as a social drink and it also treasured for its medicinal purposes. In Tonga *kava* is principally consumed by men and served by women. Important communal events and celebrations always involve men sharing *kava* in honor of special people who are involved.

³ One of the most popular contemporary adhesives is a paste made from a boiled wheat flour and water. Called *mahoa'a' faka-palangi*, (European arrowroot) it is an easily procured replacement for *maho'a'a* or the arrowroot tuber which, when boiled until half-cooked, acts much like a large "glue stick". The 'Otufelenite artists used half-boiled cassava roots for their adhesive; cassava is a staple food in the Tongan islands and can be purchased fresh from several stores in the Bay Area.

assembled the *ngatu*, the artists used wads of beaten white *tapa* apply *koka* to the expanding cloth, a natural brown dye. The relief patterns on coconut leaf and pandanus fiber boards that had been attached to the worktable below appeared imprinted on the cloth's upper surface. These fiber boards or tablets are called *kupesi*, which also means "pattern" in Tongan. Using all of the beaten *feta'aki* sheets, the *ngatu* expanded to 15 feet by 24 feet. The cloth was laid out in the sunny school yard of the Far West High School, a partner school of the Center for Art and Public Life. The cloth was again stored under the mattress of one of the artists until it was time for it to undergo the final decorative stage: *tohi*.



Fig. 2. 'Otufelenite artists perform *koka'anga*, assembling their *tapa* cloth, Oakland CA, 2004.

Photo: Courtesy, Opal Palmer-Adisa.

Choosing Decorative Designs

The decorative patterns used on *ngatu* range from ancient and long-standing designs that once belonged solely to chiefly Tongans to more recent ones that point to social and religious changes in Tonga and that incorporate Tongan words. All barkcloth designs are said to bring honor to chiefly people. At the start of the project, the 'Otufelenite artists agreed on the patterns that they would apply to their *tapa*. This was a very important initial stage of the collaboration because theirs was to be the first Tongan *tapa* made with all-natural materials in the United States. It was through these designs that the women imagined themselves teaching younger members of their families – especially those born and raised in the United States – about the rich heritage of the Tongan islands.

The artists debated whether to use pattern tablets that I had brought from Tonga or to create new tablets. Several of the Tongan women artists expressed the desire to create their own *kupesi* tablets and to depict motifs that reflected their lives in Tonga. "It would be something our children could relate to," said one of the artists. The artists eventually

agreed to use two island-made *kupesi* which, they said, would complement each other and form an appropriate “complete” *kupesi* set. These two highly-ranked designs are called the *manulua* and the *tokelau feletoa*.

The *kupesi* used by the ‘Otufelenite artists were *kupesi* ‘eiki (chiefly designs)⁴ dating back to at least the eighteenth century (Kooijman 1972). *Manulua* is a term from the Samoan language with which the Tongan language shares strong ties. It means “two birds” and is an abstracted depiction of two frigate birds flying past each other so that their wings appear like interlocked isosceles triangles.⁵ *Tokelau feletoa* is another *kupesi* that has several different explanations today. Some Tongan individuals liken this elongated lozenge design to the decorated walls of the fort of Finau ‘Ulukalala, a great chief of Vava’u in the north of the Tongan archipelago. Others say that it looks like the flesh of a perfectly filleted fish. These, the artists said, were designs that would lend chiefliness to a properly made *ngatu*.

Hand-Painting and Finishing the *Ngatu*:

On April 19 and 20, 2004, the women performed the third and final phase of *ngatu*-production in which they highlighted the rubbed-in *kupesi* designs with hand-painted strokes. This process, called *tohi* (which means to write or paint) took place on CCA’s campus, attended by CCA and Far West School students and community members.



Fig.3. Palema Tu'alau paints ngatu with the kupesi designs called manulua, Kingdom of Tonga, September 2000. Photo credit: The Center for Art and Public Life, California College of the Arts.

⁴ According to Kooijman (1972).

⁵ *Manulua* has been called the “vane swastika” and is a pervasive Pacific barkcloth motif, especially throughout Western Polynesia. Some sources attribute the spread of this motif to barkcloth decorating practices brought on the earliest voyages of Pacific Island peoples from the South East Asian mainland (Kooijman, 1972).

This process was the stage at which the individual artists could add their own flair to their final piece, but always in an aesthetic mode that highlighted the rubbed-in designs so that they were recognizable as the chiefly designs they had chosen earlier. Like the brown dye (*koka*) they had used for *koka* 'anga, and the black dye (*tongo*) was imported from Tonga for the project.

When it was found that more black dye was needed in time for the cloth-making, some of the women artists asked their Tongan relatives and friends for assistance. Many responded by donating their treasured stores of dye to the *tapa* production process, widening the involvement of the local Tongan community in the 'Otufelenite, Center, and Academy collaboration.



Fig. 4. Lead Artist, Siu Tuita, and other 'Otufelenite artists works on hand-painting (tohi) the tokelau feletoa design on ngatu, Oakland CA, April 2004. Photo credit: Ping-Ann Addo.

Exhibiting the Cloth, Exhibiting Culture

The Exhibit *Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture: Tapa from Tonga and the Pacific Islands* was a huge success. *Tapa* from the Department of Anthropology at the California Academy of Sciences' historic collection were shown along with the exhibit's focal piece, the 'Otufelenite *ngatu* (fig. 5). The opening reception on July 15, 2004 was attended by scores of community members, Tongan and non-Tongan alike. The artists and their families attended and our eldest artist, Falelala Tupou, celebrated her 90th birthday. Speeches of thanks were given by representatives from California College of the Arts and the Department of Anthropology at the California Academy of Sciences.

Men from the 'Otufelenite Tongan Community performed, for the first time, a song composed by Siu Tuita, Lead Artist on the Project. Between bursts of song – to the accompaniment of ukuleles and guitars – the men also prepared and shared the spicy ceremonial drink called *kava*. They also served *kava* for any willing reception attendees to taste, encouraging them to show their respect for the artists and artwork being celebrated on that day.

The *koka'anga*, during which *ngatu* artists apply the designs, is the most festive stage of Tongan barkcloth production. It is the stage of cloth assembly that mirrors the symbolic process of creating a strong Tongan community out of the efforts of many individuals and families, something which continues to be continually touted as the strength of diasporic Tongan communities like that of the 10,000 plus Tongans who live in the San Francisco Bay Area today.

Cloth, then, is a metaphor for Tongan society in a range of locations in the world. It is therefore fitting that cloth be categorized as a cultural treasures (*koloa*). *Koloa*, such as *ngatu*, serve as tangible, portable vehicles for cultural identity and as focal points for meaningful social connections between members of these transnational communities. To contemporary Tongans, knowing that Tongan cultural ways continue to be upheld in the diaspora is extremely important. Migration away from Tonga is a great concern for many people who live in the Kingdom. Young people who have emigrated from, or who were born outside of Tonga, may be referred to as *koloa*.⁶ They are the far flung treasures for whose return their families in the Kingdom of Tonga continue to hope.

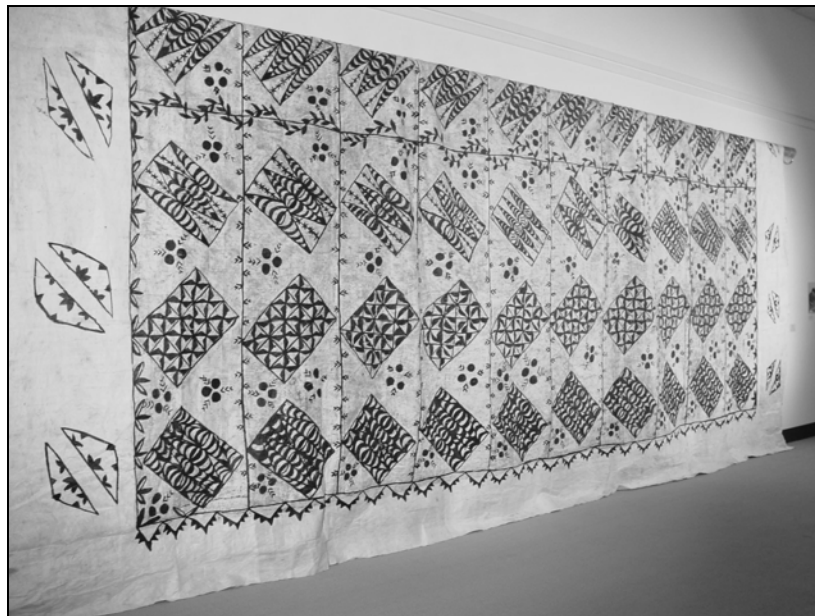


Fig. 5. The 'Otufelenite ngatu on display at the Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture: Tapa from Tonga and the Pacific Islands exhibit, Oakland CA, July-August 2004.
Photo credit: Hank Willis Thomas.

⁶ See Young Leslie (2004) and Addo (2004a).

Continuing Links

Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture has been a successful collaboration between California College of the Arts, the California Academy of Sciences and 'Otufelenite Tongan Community. For more information about the project, or to purchase a copy of the exhibit catalog (Addo, 2004a) or the video documentary "Pieces of Cloth, Pieces of Culture: *Tapa* Making and Community Collaboration", contact the Center for Art and Public Life, at the California College of the Arts, at 510 594 3763.

Works Cited

Addo, Ping-Ann

- 2004a *Pieces of Cloth, Piece of Culture: Tapa from Tonga and the Pacific Islands*; Oakland CA: Center for Art and Public Life, California College of the Arts and Department of Anthropology, California Academy of Sciences.
- 2004b *Kinship, Cloth, and Community in Auckland, New Zealand: Commoner Tongan Women Navigate Transnational Identity using Traditionally-Styled Textile Wealth*, unpublished PhD dissertation, New Haven, CT: Yale University.

Kaeppler, Adrienne

- 1999. *From The Stone Age to the Space Age in 200 Years: Tongan Art and Society on the Eve of the Millenium*, Nuku'alofa, Tonga: Vava'u Press.
- 1995 "Poetics and Politics of Tongan Barkcloth." In Smidt, Dirk A. M., Pieter ter Keurs, and Albert Trouwborst (eds.) *Pacific Material Culture; Essays in Honour of Dr. Simon Kooijman on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, pp. 101-121. Leiden, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde.

Kooijman, Simon

- 1972 "Tonga" in *Tapa in Polynesia*, pp.297-341. Honolulu: B. P. Bishop Museum Press. Ostraff, Melinda and Joseph Ostraff (dirs.)
- 2001 "*Kuo Hina 'e Hiapo*: The Mulberry is White and Ready for Harvest" (video production); Distributor: Documentary Educational Resources, Watertown MA.

Weiner, Annette

- 1989 "Why Cloth: Wealth, Gender, and Power in Oceania." In *Cloth and Human Experience* (Weiner Annette and Schneider Jane, eds.), pp. 33-72. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Young Leslie, Heather

- 2004 "Pushing Children Up: Maternal Obligation, Modernity, and Medicine in the Tongan Ethnoscape." In *Globalization and Culture Change in the Pacific Island* (Victoria Lockwood, ed.), pp. 390-413. Upper Saddle River, New Zealand: Prentice Hall.