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Making *Siapo* in Leone Today

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American Samoa, also known as *Tutuila*, is one of nine Samoan Islands located in the South Pacific with the coordinates **13 35 S, 172 20 W** or 2,566 miles SW of Hawaii. It became an unincorporated United States Territory in 1900 and although it has many modernized ways, *Tutuila* perpetuates its living rich culture. One component of cultural practice that has endured is *Siapo*, the ancestral art of bark cloth painting.

I am a 4th generation *siapo* maker from the village of *Leone* on *Tutuila* island and making *siapo* has continued to be the backbone of my art fabrication today. The *siapo* makers past and present and each material used to make *siapo* continue to inspire my creativity, with the desire to pass on this traditional knowledge to the next generation.

This paper is an elucidation of my work as a traditional *siapo* maker and a contemporary artist. It is about the process of *siapo* making, how I've strived to bridge the knowledge I've acquired in *siapo* as a whole to embrace my community and the wider diaspora while managing my artistic walk as a *siapo* maker in today's world.

This presentation of my thoughts and observations about *siapo* is divided into three areas of focus: first, looking at *siapo* from the standpoint of an artist, journeying through the process of fabrication and motif utilization on traditional and contemporary levels; second, looking at *siapo* in the educational arena; sharing it with others to promote its authentic richness in a modern age; and third, interacting with the outside world; contributing to the dialogue, sharing what I know, while attempting to perpetuate it as my ancestors did.

It is my profound hope that these writings inspire others to delve deeper into their own forms of art making while igniting a rebirth for the love we all have as makers of art.

My *siapo* master, the late Auntie Mary J. Pritchard, in her account SIAPO: Bark Cloth Art of Samoa, shared a familiar saying among *siapo* makers, "*E teu lava e le u'a ana mea: the u'a takes care of its own.*"¹ This saying has had the greatest impact on me now more than ever. The entire method of bark cloth processing to a finished painted bark cloth has ingrained in me a deeper appreciation of my ancestors and the physical hard work needed to create these works. My understanding and respect for each of the natural materials used to create *siapo* are valuable gifts from the *vao* (forest) and one must nurture them, and respect them, using only what is needed.

What I remember distinctly about *siapo* when I was young was not just the *mamanu* (motifs and patterns) on the bark cloth but the smell of the dyes being used to paint them, especially the

¹ The Samoan word *u'a* refers to the paper mulberry bark from the *Broussonetia papyrifera* species. SIAPO: Barkcloth Art of Samoa, American Samoa Council on Arts, Culture and Humanities, 1984. 22.

pungent smell of squeezed bark scrapings of the *o'a* brown dye.² This is the main dye and its scent is a cross between a wholesome clean smell and a musty dank smell. There is nothing that compares to it. But despite its powerful scent, it is the *u'a*, paper mulberry that has become the most significant material for me personally. When anyone mentions *u'a* to me, I envision the process of making *u'a* which includes the growing and maintaining of a patch of trees, harvesting, cutting, peeling, cleaning, scraping, beating and drying the bark into a finished piece of paper mulberry. The patience, nurturing, and handling of the *u'a* is crucial because it is our natural canvas. On it will be inscribed the ancestral patterns and motifs that have been a part of our identity for centuries. Traditional *siapo* is utilitarian, and its purpose includes ceremonial presentation and dress, clothing, shrouds, uniforms, coverings and dividers for the home. *Siapo* is also modern, used to adorn purses, hats, jewelry, and wall panels, just to name a few.

In the last decade or so, I have increased my *u'a* production. Before, we used to support families from the outer islands who make *u'a* by buying their bundles of paper mulberry. It made it easier for those of us who had full time jobs and didn't have the time to make the bark cloth. By buying *u'a* in bulk, it also enabled us to concentrate on the gathering of the natural dyes from the various plants and trees to design and make finished *tapa*³ or *siapo* more efficiently. Despite my own bark cloth production today, I still look forward to getting together with kin to have a day of looking at *u'a* and buying their supply to continue to support them.

When I decided to revive my *u'a* making, I spent much time with *siapo* maker from one of the outer islands, *Toaiva Mulipola*, who helped to refamiliarize me with it, especially when it came to the conditioning step before the bast (inner bark) is beaten (Illustration One). I forgot how back breaking it was to make *u'a*! Samoan bark cloth fabrication includes sitting cross legged on the ground with a *papa valu u'a* (scraping board) leaning against a pole or wall in front of you. Fresh water is used continuously and poured gently over the bast while you hold an '*asi* (shell) to scrape debris upwards and off the rough side while widening the fibers of the fresh bark. This is only the scraping part, before the *u'a* gets beaten. *Toaiva* would laugh at me saying I'm too skinny and the work is too hard for me. But regardless of her teasing me, we somehow endured. The bits of reminders from her were so important, like rolling the inner bast inside-out after separating it from the outer bark and placing it into fresh water for a few minutes before scraping and then making sure when I beat the *u'a* with my *i'e*, a wooden beater, that I use the smooth side of the beater for the finishing move. These steps lead to good quality bark cloth. The aroma of freshly beaten paper mulberry is clean and natural and the feel of the cloth once it is dried is similar to that of crisp linen. For storing purposes, the *u'a* is carefully folded and usually stored under or in between woven mats or a mattress. Sheets of *u'a* can also be carefully rolled into a bundle together and stored for later use.

² The *O'a* brown dye comes from the *Bishofia javanica* species of tree.

³ *Tapa* is another word used to refer to finished painted bark cloth produced throughout the Pacific.

Illustration one. Conditioning the bast of u'a or paper mulberry, Collection of the Author

Regarding design and motif utilization, there are three pieces I have selected that exemplify the journey of my *siapo* work. These examples define the process of fabrication and motif utilization on traditional and contemporary levels. Each of the works convey acculturation, the mixing of tradition with contemporary components. Although they are traditional in nature, it is their fine arts purpose that, to a degree, exist outside of tradition.

My most contemporary piece is “Self -Portrait” (Illustration Two). In 2007 I had the opportunity to showcase in two group shows: *Turning Tides: Gender in Oceania Art*, and *Island Affinities: Contemporary Oceania Art*, in California. I designed a *siapo mamanu* (freehand style of bark cloth painting in which the motifs are painted directly on to the bark cloth) that broke away from tradition mainly because of the inclusion of collaged images of photographs and written names. Using the *o'a* brown dye, the four names *Puletu*, *Tuimaleali 'ifano*, *To'omalatai*, and *Peña* were painted on the *u'a* with *paogo* brushes.⁴ These are the maiden names of my great great grandmother, great grandmother, grandmother, and mother. The photographs adhered to the *siapo* include my father Heinrich A. Meredith and his chiefly title *Atualevao*, an image of family members in *Leone* dating back to the early 1900's, a photograph of my mother and brother, and coordinates of a piece of land we own. To complete the piece, on a large plexiglass pane separate from the *siapo* is a portrait of my face painted in black. Its placement, shielding the *siapo* from view, requires the viewer to look closer attempting to see the collaged images. This partial view of seeing and not seeing defined my identity at that point in time. The passing of my father who for me was the direct link to my Samoan heritage was devastating. I had unanswered questions about our family, culture, and protocol. And the source for this knowledge would physically no longer be there for me. The Samoan motif *fa'aualoa*, the centipede, which refers to hardship and longsuffering framed both top and bottom of the *siapo*. It was perfect for this piece. But I was hesitant to send “Self-Portrait” to the exhibitions. I had doubts. Was I overstepping my boundary with traditional *siapo*? Was I “using” this traditional art form for my own gain? Did I have the right to manipulate its surface? Would this piece become an open door

⁴ The dried keys of the Pandanus fruit, *Pandanus samoensis* is used for our brushes.

for others to exploit the use of *siapo*? This questioning and hesitancy finally came to a head after discussing my plight with my Aunt Marylyn Pritchard Walker (Auntie Mary J. Pritchard's daughter), who lovingly gave it her blessing and reassured me that despite any contemporary influences, *siapo* would have the ability to withstand and maintain itself. Period. End of discussion. I sent it to the exhibitions.

Illustration two. "Self-Portrait", Mixed Media, 2007, Collection of the Author

It was well received and would later become a topic of discussion in a paper by Dr. Bernida Webb-Binder who writes regarding "Self-Portrait", "Meredith unites two aesthetic and formal traditions in the contemporary context of modernity, globalization, transnationalism, and other conditions of Being in our time."⁵ She goes on to say, "the effect of simultaneously not seeing and seeing through the Plexi to the tapa and photographs creates a double image of Meredith's identity as an artist and as a member of a family of artists and a member of Samoan culture, as *Siapo* IS one of the primary symbols of Samoan culture."⁶ Dr. Webb-Binder's description of "Self Portrait" hit home for me and I am ever grateful to her for her commentary. Overall, "Self Portrait" rejuvenated my position as a *siapo* maker, both in a traditional and contemporary setting. With the blessing from a senior *siapo* maker to move forward with my making of *siapo*, my self-doubt and insecurity fell by the wayside.

⁵ Webb-Binder, "Oceania as Center in the Pacific American Art of Regina Meredith," 2008., 3.

⁶ Webb-Binder, 3.

Illustration three. *Siapo mamanu*, 2019, Collection of the Author

In 2018 I received a commission for a *siapo* to be integrated into a large (48"x 84") glass conference table being fabricated for a government director's office. I created a *siapo mamanu*. (Illustration three). I worked in the traditional way from start to finish, painting the motifs in symmetrical formation. The *ago*⁷ yellow dye with the *lama* black dye⁸ and *o'a* brown dye would work well together for this piece. Our *ago* yellow dye comes from the Turmeric root which grows abundantly in sunny places. A piece of the root is dug up, cleaned, grated and squeezed. Adding a bit of the brown *o'a* dye to the squeezed *ago* enhances its hue into a more golden shade. The installation of the conference table into its space was probably the most difficult part of the commission, but once everything was set into place, as expected, the entire *siapo* conference table was a handsome addition to the director's office. The *siapo* here reflects a presence, an awareness of cultural identity and values. It is where important decisions are made by dignitaries, confirming that *siapo* is utilized outside of its ceremonial purpose and represents cultural values in a modern way. This piece for me defines the versatility of the artform.

My most recent endeavor is an ongoing project. *Ole Olaga i le Taimi Nei: Living in the Now* is the making of *siapo* face masks (Illustrations Four, Five and Six). When the Covid-19 pandemic first surfaced many months ago, it was stressful to watch the news because of the continuous rise in the numbers of infected people and spread of the virus worldwide. As I write this paper, both Samoa and American Samoa do not have any Covid-19 cases. Despite this fact, as an artist, I feel

⁷ *Curcuma longa*

⁸ The source for our black dye comes from the Candle-nut tree or *Aleurites moluccana*.

compelled to reach out to safeguard others. Therefore, I started making masks of painted bark cloth, thinking of them as protective shields for warriors going into battle infused with *mana*⁹.

As an example of the traditional motifs used in *siapo*, the central motif of *siapo* mask #40 (Illustration Four) is the *fa'a lau paogo*, the leaves of the Pandanus tree (*Pandanus odoratissimus*) with the *fa'a vae tuli*, a motif that resembles the letter “v” to represent the footprints of the migratory *Tuli* bird (Pacific Golden plover). On each side of the mask are the *fa'aatualoa* centipede with small lines called *tusili'i* to accentuate the edge of the mask. The motifs emanate resilience, respect, endurance and perseverance in a number of ways. The *fa'a lau paogo* motif refer to the leaves used for weaving our mats. This includes the *'ie toga*, our finest woven mat which is considered the most valuable in Samoan culture because it is used for many important ceremonies. The weaver must have an undeniable amount of know-how and patience as weaving a fine mat can take long periods of time to complete. When the *'ie toga* is shown in cultural events, words of admiration and respect are verbally said to acknowledge its presence. Samoan motifs and patterns may seem decorative at first glance, but their derivatives are intrinsically connected to Samoan culture.

After each mask is painted, I sew them together with a cotton lining and elastic bands using a pattern. I was only going to make fifty-nine masks, but by overwhelming requests, a series has developed of sixty masks¹⁰ each and has kept the project alive. A note accompanies each mask stating that they are not equivalent to N-95 masks nor can they be machine washed. Their management rather is to be worn on occasion and placed in the hot sun for lengths of time. Using the sun to sanitize *siapo* is a longtime practice. This ongoing project has made me feel more connected to the outside world.

⁹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mana: The power of the elemental forces of nature embodied in an object or person (in Polynesian, Melanesian, and Maori belief).

¹⁰ When I began the project, I was 59 years old. Now that I am a year older, the mask making is divided into a series of 60.

Illustration four. Siapo Mask #40/60 Series II, Ole Olaga I le Taimi Nei: Living in the Now, collection of the Author

Illustration Five. Siapo Mask # 50/60 Series II, Ole Olaga I le Taimi Nei: Living in the Now, Collection of the Author

Illustration Six. Siapo Mask #53/60 Series II, *Ole Olaga I le Taimi Nei: Living in the Now*, Collection of the Author

I will now turn to *siapo* in the educational arena. As an art educator, my work in education culminated into the development of a course listed as Art 161, *Indigenous Art Forms of Samoa* at the American Samoa Community College (ASCC). After presenting a paper at a conference in Adelaide Australia entitled “Art Education in Samoa” in 1992, I realized that our higher education art courses focused on western concepts. Creating Art 161 focused on teaching the art forms of Samoa, with related vocabulary and cultural terms, placing our cultural arts into their cultural context. Master Samoan artists were invited to share their expertise in a studio classroom setting. Those masters included at one time wood carver the late Sven Ortquist, siapo maker the late Aunt Marylyn Pritchard Walker, *elei* (rubbing method) fabric designer Tupu Tuiasosopo, and *siapo* maker & traditional Samoan tattoo master Su’a Uilisone Fitiao. With some of our masters having passed on, other artisans who were taught by them now come in to share their knowledge with students. Today this course is the most popular of all art courses offered at ASCC. Students can relate to the content and apply their artwork to contemporary life (Illustration seven).

Recently the National Park of American Samoa (NPAS) announced a request for proposals to help “Perpetuate Samoan Traditions by Teaching Traditional Practices”. I submitted a proposal through the ASCC Art Department. We were awarded funds to support the continuation of creating traditional artforms through Art 161 while partnering with the Park’s Visitor’s Center educating visitors about traditional practices. Our three-year collaboration with NPAS has been successful with a win-win situation where all involved have helped to fulfill the mission of perpetuating Samoan traditions through education and outreach (Illustration Eight).

Illustration Seven. ASCC Art 161 students performing at a college event wearing and dancing with their handmade siapo mamanu.. Collection of the author.

Illustration Eight. ASCC Art 161 students working on a large (96" x 96") siapo mamanu with project lead Su'a Uilisona Fitiao (third from the left) for the National Park of American Samoa. This siapo mamanu now adorns the NPAS Visitor's Center.

As an art educator, engaging with students of all ages is important to me. Oftentimes its after school when children get a chance to do art activities. Organizations like the Boys and Girls Club

of American Samoa help to support the inclusion of the arts in their programs. The opportunity for children to see and feel what it is like to make a *siapo* is rewarding. I strive to establish a love for our cultural arts within them (Illustration Nine).

Illustration Nine. Children enrolled in the Boys and Girls Club of American Samoa after school program learning about Siapo.

My third and final area of focus is the interaction with the world beyond our shores and the making of *siapo*. Contributing to the dialogue of bark cloth fabrication and care in museums has become a significant part of the journey. To venture abroad and share *siapo* is an honor, especially as a representative of our cultural arts for American Samoa. Dr. Adrienne Kaeppler, Curator of Oceanic Ethnology at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. invited me as a community scholar for the Wilkes *Tapa* Project she coordinated at the NMNH in 2013. Other community scholars included *tapa* makers from Fiji and Rarotonga (Cook Islands).

Illustration Ten. Examining an artifact with Greta Hansen, NMNH Conservator (retired) and Dr. Adrienne Kaeppler. 2013.

We worked closely with a team of conservators stabilizing *tapa* collected during the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842.¹¹ The project was invigorating and beneficial to all who participated. It included stabilization practices, material analysis, and getting the chance to share our similarities and differences in *tapa* fabrication. Getting to see some of the valuable artifacts in the museum's collection was a plus (Illustration Ten). This project led to other opportunities, such as returning to the NMNH under a grant that would enable the study of more *tapa* from Samoa in the collection.¹²

Tapa: Situating Pacific Bark cloth in Time and Place, a project from the University of Glasgow has been the most current collaboration to date, where we were invited by Professor Frances Lennard of the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History to share *siapo* with others. The project focus included three collections from prestigious museums in the UK and the intent that “multidisciplinary research will combine investigation of the artefacts’ provenance, history and cultural context; analysis of their materials and manufacture; research into conservation assessment and treatment methods to improve the collections’ condition; and exploration of contemporary making and use...”¹³ In 2018, my husband and colleague Su’a Uilison Fitiiao and I presented a few workshops for conservators there, sharing the process of bark production for *siapo* making. The chance to collaborate with conservators who care for *tapa* in museums in the UK was for us a priceless exchange of knowledge (Illustration Eleven).

¹¹ <https://www.sil.si.edu/DigitalCollections/usexex/learn/Philbrick.htm>

¹² Recovering Voices grant co-recipient, Su’a Uilison F. Fitiiao and I researched 21 *tapa* from Samoa that became a published paper entitled, “*Saili’iliga ma suesuega e faatatau i Mamanu Siapo: Initiating a Dialogue about Samoan Siapo and Motifs*”. Charleux, Michel., *TAPA : From Tree Bark to Cloth: An Ancient Art of Oceania From Southeast Asia to Eastern Polynesia*, Union Europeanne, 2017, 250-7.

¹³ <https://tapa.gla.ac.uk/project/>. A follow-on project entitled “A Living Tradition: Expanding Engagement with Pacific Barkcloth” available with virtual workshops and forums.

Illustration Eleven. Working with museum conservators in a bark cloth making workshop, University of Glasgow, 2018.

Illustration twelve. A siapo mamanu from Leone village, Tutuila that is a part of the collection at the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, UK.

The most heartfelt moment for me on this trip was getting the chance to see and touch a *siapo mamanu* made pre-1897 that is housed at the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (Illustration twelve). It is tagged as being from *Leone* village, *Tutuila American Samoa* and what appears on the *siapo* itself is a name, most likely that of the *siapo* maker. This *siapo* confirmed for me that

the women of my village were avid *siapo* makers. And I am honored to be walking in their footsteps. Making *Siapo* today in *Leone* and elsewhere is a gift to me. “*E teu lava e le u’a ana mea*: the *u’a* takes care of its own” has proven tried-and-true, bringing me full circle.

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