Made in Oceania

Made in Oceania:

Proceedings of the International Symposium on Social and Cultural Meanings and Presentation of Oceanic Tapa

Cologne, 16-17 January 2014

Edited by
Peter Mesenhöller
and Annemarie Stauffer

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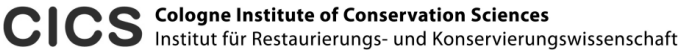

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CONTENTS

Part II: Tapa in Museum Collections—Conservation and Presentation

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PETER MESENHÖLLER
AND ANNEMARIE STAUFFER

Both anthropologists and conservation scientists are fascinated by Oceanic barkcloth, or tapa as it is known by its generic Polynesian name. Historic tapa designs are often ›living cultural heritage‹, but today's objects also combine content, form and tradition in new ways and are intimately connected with the social and cultural identity of individuals, groups or even nations. With tapa being completely alien to European traditions, conservation scientists are challenged by the material and its restoration and preservation. Questions of storage and adequate presentation in exhibitions touch upon both disciplines – particularly when cultural requirements of source communities come into play.

Bringing together renowned scholars of both disciplines, this volume is based on the papers held at the international symposium *Made in Oceania*, jointly organised and hosted by the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences at the University of Applied Sciences and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum of World Cultures in Cologne from 16 to 17 January 2014, along with the exhibition *Made in Oceania: Tapa – Art and Social Landscapes* (2013-14). They present cutting-edge research into the social and cultural contexts of tapa, the possibilities and challenges of restoring and conserving historic and recent examples and their presentation in exhibitions.

The first section of the present volume provides both historical context of tapa held in western museum collections and its perspectives and dynamics in contemporary societies. While Adrienne Kaeppler and Pauline Reynolds draw on some of the earliest collections to point out historic processes of creativity and the role of women involved, Anna-Karina Hermkens and Fanny Wonu Veys analyse recent fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and Tonga to discuss issues of belief and values about gender relations and identity, social duties and cohesion. Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai and Sean Mallon reflect on authenticity, indigenous concepts

of art and the role of tapa in diasporic communities and new globalised contexts.

The second part focuses on challenges and new approaches in the conservation, restoration and presentation of tapa. In their introductory paper, Steven Hooper et al. contribute to practical insights into the conservation of one Fijian barkcloth and add to the knowledge of stylistic changes, presenting a case study in historic collections and how they continue to embody meaningful relationships. Robin Bastian et al. share their experience in the manifold challenges they faced in the course of the preparations for the Cologne exhibition *Made in Oceania*, especially with three dimensional objects like *kap japi* headdresses from Papua New Guinea. While already the raw material of tapa – mostly bark from the paper mulberry tree – requires expert knowledge, various colours, adhesives and other materials, size, fragility and adequate storage add to the spectrum. Regina Zobel and Marie-Claire de Poulpiquet here report on recent developments at the Vienna Weltmuseum and the Smithsonian Institution's Department of Conservation in Washington. Monique Pullan shares her experience with the cleaning of a barkcloth from Erromango in the British Museum's Conservation Studio; members of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre who worked with the British Museum were asked about their opinion on how to proceed before decisions were made. The contributions in this chapter shed a light on the joint responsibility of curators and textile conservators when dealing with tapa in exhibitions and storage and, therefore, will be a most informative asset especially to the training of future museum anthropologists and conservators.

The symposium *Made in Oceania* was made possible through generous financial support by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation to which we extend our sincerest gratitude. The editors would further like to express their thanks to the members of the organising committee of the symposium – at the Institute of Conservation Sciences (CICS), University of Applied Sciences, Cologne: Dr. Anne Sicken, Dipl.-Rest. Angelika Klassen, Dipl.-BW Edgar Wokurka, Katja Löhlein and Fanny Röttgen; and at the Cologne Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum of World Cultures: Sarah Fründt MA, Oliver Lueb MA, Dipl.-Rest. Petra Czerwinske, Prof. Dr. Klaus Schneider and Dr. Burkhard Fenner. *Made in Oceania* has had a long gestation, and the editors especially like to thank both the contributors and the publisher for their unfailing patience as this book took shape.

Cologne, April 2015

PART I:

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MEANINGS OF OCEANIC TAPA

CHAPTER ONE

CULTURE, CONSERVATION AND CREATIVITY: TWO CENTURIES OF POLYNESIAN BARKCLOTH

ADRIENNE L. KAEPPLER

Since the late 18th century, visitors to Polynesia have been fascinated by the fabrication of barkcloth from the inner bark of certain trees. Many pieces of the cloth were collected, starting with the three voyages of Captain Cook and continuing into the nineteenth century, including hundreds collected during Cook's voyages and about 250 pieces on the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842. Some of the pieces were made into dresses for Europeans to wear and marvel at including the use of a large piece collected on Cook's second voyage obtained in Tahiti by George and Reinhold Forster. Young George gave a piece to Caroline Michaelis, the daughter of a Göttingen professor, who had the cloth made into a ball gown. Caroline described her dress in January 1779 to her friend Julie von Studniz:

> I received a large package of this cloth from him [George Forster] with a very nice note. To keep my promise, I had made a shepherdess outfit like one sees at the gala night, to wear to the ball. The material is white and the whole is decorated with blue ribbon, and is, in truth, very pretty. But you would have to see how much this dress, when I wore it for the first time, was touched and looked at, I can still say at present that it is unique and inimitable, until now at least, it will perhaps stay so, because I believe that Forster has no more of this material which is necessary for such a test. (SCHMIDT 1913, I: 9-10)

Unfortunately, we do not know if she wore it again or what happened to the dress. However, other dresses were made from barkcloth, including an early one in the Bishop Museum, Honolulu. This dress was given to me by the collector John Hewett to wear at the opening of my exhibition »Artificial Curiosities« at the Bishop Museum in 1978. Of course, I did not wear it but gave it to the collection. Several other barkcloth dresses are

in Museum collections, including one in the Pitt Rivers Museum, which was given to them in 1934 by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, one in the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and another in the Bishop Museum from the sale of missionary effects.

Another, well-known garment made of barkcloth from first or second voyage was madeby Mrs. Cook for Captain Cook to wear at court when he returned from third voyage. The Tahitian barkcloth was made into a waistcoat and embroidered by Mrs. Cook. As Cook did not return from the third voyage, the waistcoat remained with Mrs. Cook and her family until it was exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, held in London in 1886 with the »Collection of relics of the Late Captain James Cook«. After the exhibition, the collection was acquired by the Government of New South Wales; the ethnographic objects went to the Australian Museum, Sydney, and the waistcoat to the Mitchell Library. A photograph of the exhibited waistcoat was included with a special copy of the Catalogue of the exhibition, which is also now in the Mitchell Library (see KAEPPLER 1978a: 130, 282; KAEPPLER et al. 2009: 125).

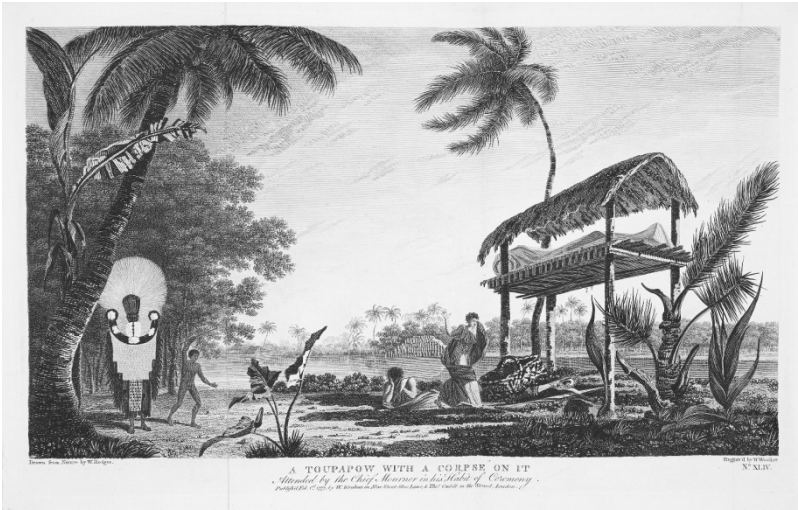

Fig. 1-1 Engraving of a chief mourner after a drawing by William Hodges on Cook's second voyage. Cullman Library, Smithsonian Institution (photo: Donald E. Hurlbert).

Many of the pieces collected during Cook's three voyages are listed in my catalogue of Cook voyage collections (KAEPPLER 1978a). There, for

example, I listed for Tahiti sixty pieces in museums, 18 large pieces from Tonga, and numerous pieces from Hawai'i. This is in addition to pieces in private collections and the unknown number of pieces that were cut into samples and pasted into books, such as those put together by Alexander SHAW (1787). The samples of barkcloth in these relatively rare books must have come from individuals on the ships and 18th century auctions and dealers. In addition to the five page introduction of anecdotes copied from the journals of Cook and others, there is a two page printed list of the specimens of cloth numbered from 1 to 39, which (as any of you who have checked these will know) does not correlate with the pieces pasted into the volumes. At the end of the list there is a note that says: »N.B. Of Alexander Shaw, No. 379, Strand, London, may be had some fine specimens of the tree, with the bark«. So, Shaw also had barkcloth pieces to sell as well as the pieces he cut up. Since my initial 1978 note that I knew of about 30 copies of the Shaw book, the recent census by Donald Kerr of Dunedin lists 63. The number keeps expanding and may reach 80 or perhaps even 100! One of these rare volumes was exhibited in the Cologne exhibition *Made in Oceania*.

Culture

Dresses, sample books, and museum collections are the legacy of what happened to Cook-voyage barkcloth after it was brought back to Europe, but I want to look first at how barkcloth was used in the cultures that made this remarkable cloth. I begin with Tahiti, as this is where cloth made from bark was first encountered on Cook's first voyage. The technique was described in the journals as follows:

The cleaned and soaked strips of inner bark were laid out in two or three layers, with the longitudinal fibres laid lengthwise to form a collage a foot wide and 12 yards long. After laying overnight, much of the water evaporated and the fibres began to adhere together. The collage was then beaten with a four-sided wooden beater, each face carved with straight lines or furrows of different widths. By this process the layers were felted together to form one large piece, which might then be folded several times and again beaten to make a very soft and thin cloth.

Eighteenth-century Tahitian cloth was bleached white, left in its natural state, or dyed a solid colour. Occasionally it had stripes in red or yellow or it was printed with tiny whole or half/circles, printed by dipping the end of small bamboo or other reed into the dye and placing it on the cloth. In the nineteenth century, distinctive Tahitian designs developed

from dipping a fern or other plant leaf into dye and transferring the dye to the barkcloth thereby transferring the shape of the leaf.

Fig. 1-2 Engraving of four dancers in barkcloth clothing after a drawing by John Webber during Cook's third voyage. Cullman Library, Smithsonian Institution (photo: Donald E. Hurlbert).

One of the most elaborate uses of barkcloth in the Society Islands was the draping of the house in which a chief was laid in state and the ritualised performance of the chief mourner who put on a spectacular display of grief at the death of a chief or other important person. A priest or close relative of the high-ranking deceased brandished a shark tooth-edged stave, was dressed in an elaborately constructed costume, and accompanied himself with a pair of pearl shell clappers. One of the most important parts of the dress was a sparkling chest apron made of rows of thousands of tiny slips of pearl shell sewn together with fine coconut-fibre sennit, which formed a kind of shell textile. The face of the wearer was covered with a mask of pearl shells and turtle shells with only a small peep-hole through which to see. This pearl shell mask was the base for the upper crescent consisting of the tail feathers of the tropic bird. The mask was attached to a barkcloth head covering that held it in place. Other long pieces of barkcloth formed a skirt and ties and a long barkcloth apron like front panel that was decorated with carved pieces of coconut shell. The costume was completed with a barkcloth cape and sometimes a feathered

cape and tassels [fig. 1-1]. At the time of the conference, a mourning costume was on show in Bonn in the Kunsthalle, in the exhibit of the Treasures of Florence, Italy, as the contribution of the Florence Ethnographic Museum. Another use of barkcloth in the Society Islands was for clothing and there are excellent illustrations of how it was worn, such as the drawings of Mai (or Omai) made in England and drawings by Cook's expedition artists for dancing and ceremonial giving [fig.1-2].

Much of my early field research was carried out in Tonga, beginning decades ago and continuing. Much barkcloth in Polynesia is derived from the inner bark of the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), which is stripped from the plant stem and the outer bark removed and discarded. In some islands other plants are also used. The soaked inner bark is beaten with a wooden beater into long strips, which are pasted or felted together and decorated – the former being characteristic of West Polynesia and the latter of East Polynesia. My field research has dealt with the process of making the textiles and the dyes (which have changed over time), the aesthetics of the finished product, and how it was, and is, used. In Tonga the production of barkcloth (*ngatu*) continues to be extremely important for use at home and as an export overseas. The uses of barkcloth, also continue, especially for traditional ceremonies and rituals, such as funerals and weddings [fig. 1-3].

Conservation

During the past three years the Anthropology Department of the Natural History Museum at the Smithsonian Institution has had a major project on the conservation of barkcloth from the United States Exploring Expedition, one of the founding collections of the Smithsonian. The Conservation Laboratory is located in a modern facility in Suitland, Maryland, about half an hour by shuttle from the Museum and where all of the ethnographic materials are stored. Here research is being carried out in order to understand the nature of the basic raw materials and how they have been changed and modified for use as this is important for the long-term preservation of the collections. Our conservators have many resources available as they try to understand the story of each tapa piece, ranging from the original source materials of plants cultivated or harvested wild, to the manufacturing process utilising wooden beaters and embellishment with both plant- and mineral-based colourants, to the long museum history of well-intentioned but often damaging long-term exhibition and/or overcrowded storage. Written sources from early botanists and others visiting Polynesia, as well as from today's tapa makers, provide

information about the traditional manufacture and collection of the pieces. Museum collections staff contribute information about the history of exhibition and collections care at the Smithsonian, which helps the conservators understand the condition of each piece.

Fig. 1-3 Tongan *ngatu* presentation following the *mautohi* ceremony (signing of the marriage licence) for the wedding of the Crown Prince Tupouto'a to Sinaitakala Fakafanua, 10 July 2014 (photo: Linny Folau for Vava'u Press).

In some cases, small folded bundles of tapa were gently opened to reveal the skills and creativity of Polynesian women working over 170 years ago to transform plant bast fibre into cloth. Our team consisted of Greta Hansen (Head Conservator), four part time conservators hired for the project – including a paper conservator and Anne Claire de Poulpiquet from France, who worked on our very difficult fragmentary oiled pieces (see her paper in this volume). We also had several volunteers and graduate students from Spain, Korea, Australia and the US. We worked with Smithsonian Institution scientists as well as community scholars from Hawai'i, Fiji, Samoa and the Cook Islands to stabilise and re-house this remarkable collection gathered by American sailors and scientists on the US Exploring Expedition 1838–1842. The large modern laboratory provided

enough space to open and stabilise the often large and fragile tapa pieces [fig. 1-4]. Using conservation protocols developed over many years, each tapa is humidified to relax fold lines where breaks occur. Tears and losses are stabilised using Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste. Evidence of cultural use is retained and documented. Critical to the project are high-resolution images that will give researchers and cultural practitioners in the Pacific remote access to the very large and often highly decorated tapas. Also, much thought has been given to appropriate long-term storage of these research collections. We prefer flat storage on large light-weight screens rather than rolled storage because the screens allow ease of access while minimising handling [fig. 1-5]. Today, only the extremely large ones are rolled. Smithsonian botanists, as well as colleagues from other institutions, are working to identify the source plants used in barkcloth manufacture. We are exploring the use of scanning electron microscopy (SEM), DNA sequencing and stable isotope analyses for difficult species identifications of bast fibres and beaten plant fibres. Our Community Scholars have prepared tapa samples using traditional dyes to aid us with the plants, dyes and colourants applied to tapa in the Smithsonian Institution collections and to determine better estimates of the rates of dye fading. Gas chromatography-mass spectrometry is used to identify the dyes which colour the tapa. We have also held workshops and study days for conservators, museum professionals and students, and we grow Hawaiian paper mulberry and other plants in our greenhouse to use for experiments. In addition, we have brought eight Community Scholars from Hawai'i, Fiji, Samoa and the Cook Islands to assist them in recovering knowledge of lost processes of making barkcloth as well as its present day conservation. We also learn from them and add their input into our documents.

We have been fortunate to have assistance from other departments within Natural history, and photographer Don Hurlbert has been done the difficult photography of the large pieces from the balcony between the storage buildings.

One of the problems working with the Hawaiian material is that there are other plants that have been, or may have been used, such as *mamaki* – a nettle, which has still not been satisfactorily identified, and this brought us to a research project arising from the conservation. That is, what is the process of making the cloth from *mamaki,* which must be different from using paper mulberry? Why does it deteriorate differently, and how can it be successfully conserved?

We also need to know more about other plants used in other islands, including breadfruit and banyan. It is difficult to tell the differences between them and how the conservation should be altered for each. It is

also ethnographically important to find out what plants are used – as some of them are known to be used only for sacred purposes. In the meantime the conservators are working away on this detailed work, which takes infinite patience.

Fig. 1-4 Anthropology Conservation Laboratory at the Smithsonian Institution in Suitland, Maryland. Left: Natalie Firnhaber, centre: Caroline Kenny, right: Greta Hansen, far right: Eloise Vitiello (photo: Michele Austin-Dennehy).

The project is focused on the collection from the United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842), under Lt. Charles Wilkes, which was the first international hydrographic and scientific survey undertaken by the US government. The squadron of ships circumnavigated the globe under sail, surveyed and charted nearly 300 islands of the Pacific, mapped 800 miles of the coast of Oregon, and confirmed the existence of Antarctica as a continent. The thousands of objects and specimens brought back on the expedition became a founding collection of the Smithsonian Institution. The voyage included scientists and artists as well as Navy personnel.

Of about 250 barkcloth pieces collected, a number were exchanged during the 19th century to other institutions, such as the Ethnographic Museum in Copenhagen and some pieces never came to the Smithsonian Institution. About184 pieces remain, of which about 125 pieces are from West Polynesia, but their proveniences are not clear. I have been examin-

ing pieces in detail for clues to their area identity but this is not as straightforward as it may seem.

During my four decades of research on West Polynesian barkcloth (primarily in Tonga, but also in Fiji and Samoa), what is becoming more and more clear is that barkcloth as we know it from fieldwork during the second half of the 20th century is quite different from barkcloth in museum collections from the 18th century and the 1840s. Most researchers from Fiji, such as Rod Ewins and Steven Hooper, focus on contemporary manufacture and barkcloth use in their fieldwork. I have focused on metaphor and allusion in Tongan barkcloth design (KAEPPLER 2002), while also beating and making *ngatu* with Tongan women. The late Roger Neich worked with Samoan women on preparing *siapo*. But none of this is much help in trying to identify US Exploring Expedition pieces.

Fig. 1-5 Flat screen storage for barkcloth at the Museum Support Center, Smithsonian Institution, Suitland, Maryland. The barkcloth on the opened screen is from Lau, Fiji (photo: Greta Hansen, Smithsonian Institution).

Creativity

I will focus now on a few pieces from Fiji or perhaps from Fiji from the Exploring Expedition collection. Of the 125 pieces from West Polynesia, 54 are said to be from Fiji (not counting the many turbans).

Researching the many Fijian pieces it is immediately apparent that there is a great deal of variation and remarkable creativity, which also makes it difficult to separate the Fijian pieces from Samoan and Tongan pieces and how these three cultures have influenced each other over time. Our Community Scholars were often surprised how different the designs and motifs from 1840 were from those made in recent years and today. They were also surprised by the fine texture of the Fijian pieces. In Fiji, barkcloth (*masi*) was considered a »valuable«, and making the cloth was the work of women, but they could not wear it. *Masi* was sacred to men and women as well as the gods, and often considered a marker of transition and transformation. It was the highest form of women's labour and the principal valuable in ceremonial exchanges. As described by Marshall Sahlins, the installation of the Tui Nayau as paramount chief of Lau, Fiji, the new title holder is considered to be a »stranger-king« who repeats the legend of the ancestral holder of the title who came to power from the sea. At various points he is led along a path of barkcloth by local chiefs of the land. This pathway was of a type of barkcloth considered Tongan.

> Later, at the kava ceremony constituting the main ritual of investiture, a native chieftain will bind a piece of white Fijian tapa about the paramount's arm. The sequence of barkcloths, together with the sequence of movements to the central ceremonial ground, recapitulate the correlated legendary passages of the Tui Nayau from foreign to domestic, sea to land, and periphery to center. The Fijian barkcloth that in the end captures the chief represents his capture of the land: upon installation, he is said to hold the »barkcloth of the land« (*masi ni vanua*). (SAHLINS 1985: 85)

SAHLINS goes on to explain that the »chief's accession is mediated by the object that saliently signifies women« and that his acquisition of the »barkcloth of the land« signifies that »he has appropriated the island's reproductive powers« (1985: 87).

A piece of barkcloth was hung from the rafters of the godhouse, *bure kalou*, to serve as a pathway for the god to descend to the priest (but I cannot find a description of such a cloth, that is, was it plain white, black, or decorated?). Numerous *masi* turbans in the collection are still folded as carried by the chief. These are exquisitely fine and white and a female wood sculpture in the collection wears barkcloth to adorn the head.

Perhaps the oldest description of tapa making on Fiji is that of Charles Wilkes, Commander of the Exploring Expedition. The Expedition spent three months in Fiji, in the Koro Sea and along the coasts of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Here is part of the description:

> They always beat two strips of tapa into one, for the purpose of strengthening its fibres, and during this operation it is diminished one-fourth in length. The bark is always kept moist by water, which unites with the gluten. Although it contracts in length, a piece of two inches wide is not unfrequently beaten out to eighteen inches in width. They find no difficulty in joining the pieces together, for the sap is sufficiently tenacious for that purpose, and the junction is often so neatly done as to escape detection. After the tapa is made, it is bleached in the sun, as we are in the habit of doing with linen; and that which they desire to have figured, undergoes the following process, called kesukesu. Strips of bamboo, of the size of the little finger, are fastened on a board; on these the tapa is laid, and rubbed over with a sort of dye, or juice, from the fruit of the laudi, which only adheres to the tapa where it touches the bamboo; it is then washed with a thin solution of arrowroot, which gives it a kind of glazing. (WILKES 1845, III: 337-38)

This is an important quote because of the sentence, »[t]hey find no difficulty in joining the pieces together, for the sap is sufficiently tenacious for that purpose, and the junction is often so neatly done as to escape detection«. That is, the pieces are not pasted as is characteristic of other areas of West Polynesia, but are joined together in a manner similar to felting, which is more characteristic of East Polynesia.

Fig. 1-6 Manikin dressed in Fijian barkcloth from the US Exploring Expedition, reconstructed after a drawing by Theodor Kleinschmidt from 1877. *Maginificent Voyagers* exhibit (1985), National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 1985.

There are essentially two main varieties of barkcloth among the US Exploring Expedition Fiji materials. First there are the various »Fijian cloths« from different parts of Fij, which are primarily black and white with some highlights of red [figs. 1-6 and 1-7]. The second type includes a few large pieces from the Lau Islands and resemble what we would call today *ngatuvakafiti* [see fig. 1-5] (indicating that they are made in the Tongan way, by rubbing on a *kupesi,* with a section along one or more edges of black/white small designs that resemble the stencilling that is done in Fiji today). However, as there is no use of the terms *ngatuvakafiti* or *ngatuvaktonga* in the US Exploring Expedition journals or in the Smithsonian records, I am assuming that these are later terms.

Fig. 1-7 Fijian barkcloth from the US Exploring Expedition with characteristic designs in black and white with red highlights. Museum Support Center, Smithsonian Institution (photo: Donald E. Hurlbert).

There are some pieces identified as Samoan, which may be Fijian and some identified as Fijian which may be Samoan or Tongan. One of the former is a very large piece identified as Samoan, which is primarily black, with what appears to be turmeric on one side. It is felted (not pasted), and therefore unlikely to be made by Samoans [fig. 1-8].

Peter BUCK (Te Rangi Hiroa) published his thoughts on the manufacture of Samoan *siapo*, noting that »Samoans divide their present methods into two*: tutusi* or *mamanu* (painting) and *elei,* rubbing« (1930: 306). He also noted (1930: 312), that cloths prepared by the rubbing process receive names according to the size and the uses to which it is put: *siapo*, though a general name, also denotes the shorter-sized pieces suitable for use as a kilt; the reward given to a talking chief for calling the *kava*, is referred to as one or more *siapo potu*, a sheet larger than a *siapo*, often used as a small screen; *pupuni*, a large sheet used as a screen to shut off an end of a house.

PRATT (1911) also gives terms for large pieces of barkcloth: *potu* refers to the *siapo* screen from behind which an *aitu* (spirit) spoke; *tai namu*, a mosquito curtain; *ululima,* a large sheet measuring fifty widths of an ‘*upeti* tablet (rubbing board); and *uluselau,* a very large sheet measuring 100 widths of an ‘*upeti*.

Thus, Samoans were well acquainted with different sizes of cloth used for a variety of purposes, and I suggest that the black piece in question

above was made in Fiji and exchanged with an important person in Samoa who used it as a screen to shut off the end of a house and/or as a screen from behind which an *aitu* (spirit) spoke.

Fig. 1-8 Barkcloth in process of conservation in the Anthropology Conservation Laboratory, Museum Support Center, Smithsonian Institution. The barkcloth is attributed to Samoa, but it may be from Fiji (photo: Greta Hansen, Smithsonian Institution).

Another identification problem is between Tonga and Fiji. Although only a few pieces of barkcloth are attributed to Tonga, several have well known Tongan designs [see fig. 1-4]. They might be just mislabelled or it is possible that they were collected in Samoa, Lau, or Fiji.

With these and many other questions, research continues on culture, conservation, and creativity!

CHAPTER TWO

DYNAMICS OF BARKCLOTH AND IDENTITY AMONG THE MAISIN OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

ANNA-KARINA HERMKENS

For the Maisin people, living along the south coast of Collingwood Bay (Oro Province, Papua New Guinea), barkcloth, or tapa as it is locally called, is important. This importance is exemplified by the phrase »Maisin is tapa«, which was often said as I tried to find my way through the meanings of barkcloth among the Maisin. And indeed, especially in the village of Airara where I did my research, it was evident that tapa is not just a traditional garment; it provides a link with the past and provides dreams for the future. In fact, tapa constitutes beliefs and values about gender relations and identity, mediating relations between the individual and the social, and connecting the living with the ancestors, God, and the Church, mediating between humans and their ancestors, and with one another (see also SCHNEIDER 2006: 204).

At the same time that the Maisin identify themselves with tapa [fig. 2-1], others also tend to view the Maisin through their barkcloth. Today, Maisin women are the main producers of tapa in the region and beyond, and many neighbouring and more distant cultural groups have stopped manufacturing barkcloth; but also, groups who have no tradition of wearing barkcloth, wear Maisin tapa as a ›traditional‹ garment during festivities and cultural performances. Moreover, since the 1980s, the Maisin people have been able to promote themselves via the display and exhibition of barkcloth at international art festivals and museums abroad. In the mid-1990s, the Maisin came to the attention of environmental activists when villagers launched a public campaign to prevent the national government from permitting commercial logging on their ancestral lands. In this context, the Maisin were presented as a tribal people whose ancestral barkcloth art could save the rainforest and bring development into their lives at the same time (BARKER 2008). The Maisin were invited to participate in exhibitions in the US and five Maisin women travelled to

Philadelphia to experiment with tapa designs on various kinds of textiles in an artist in residence workshop at the Fabric Workshop and Museum. Currently, Maisin tapa is sewn into fashionable outfits [fig. 2-2], and Maisin tapa designs are printed onto cotton and transformed into various types of garments and accessories like ties. Maisin tapa is therefore crossing its local ›boundaries‹: in addition to its role in constituting local identities, it is acquiring new value as a neo-traditional symbol of regional and national identity.

Fig. 2-1 Maisin dancers wearing their tapa loincloths at a church festival near Tufi village in north Collingwood Bay, 2001 (photo: Anna-Karina Hermkens).

Making tapa: creating female and male identities

Among the Maisin, all women, even those who come from other areas and married into the Maisin community, are expected to learn how to beat, design and paint barkcloth. As in other areas of Oceania, barkcloth is made from the inner bark of the domesticated paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), locally referred to as *wuwusi*. Tapa trees are in general planted in gardens, but also at the back of people's houses in the village. Women plant and maintain the *wuwusi*, and they decide when *wuwusi* are mature enough to be harvested and transformed into either rectangular-shaped women's skirts (*embobi*), long strips of male loincloths (*koefi*), or

smaller pieces of tapa that are usually made for sale. Unlike in Polynesia, where women will often pound the cloth together (KOOIJMAN 1988; KAEPPLER 1980, 1995), Maisin women do this by themselves. Sitting with their upper bodies straight and legs folded underneath them, they will single-handedly beat, and subsequently pound, the scraped bark on a heavy wooden log, called *fo*. This position is maintained for several hours, and poses considerable strain on women's bodies, especially on their backs and legs. It thus requires considerable strength and endurance to beat the bark into a smooth and flattened piece of cloth. Importantly, this technique of beating tapa resonates with Maisin »gendered body techniques« (MAUSS 1979: 97-123). As I show elsewhere (HERMKENS [forthcoming]) beating and pounding, but also drawing and painting tapa are techniques that produce a gendered identity for the body. From a young age, Maisin girls are socialised to keep their upper bodies straight and legs closed together, covering their thighs and knees with a loincloth, while sitting and or working, as it is believed that women's thighs are the locus of both sexual attraction and dangerous substance. Women are expected to work hard, have endurance, be modest and submit to their husbands, brothers and fathers. The making of tapa replicates and reinforces these cultural notions about women's bodies, and how women should sit, work, talk, and behave in general.

Fig. 2-2 Tapa dress made by fashion designer student Elsie Bilah Wei from Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea (photo: Elsie Bilah Wei).

It can take several days or even weeks before a woman finds the time or an occasion to start designing. In the meantime, the cloth is kept between a folded pandanus mat. By sleeping on the mat, the wrinkles in the barkcloth are removed and as such ›ironed‹, but it also keeps the barkcloth smooth. So Maisin women are not only connected with barkcloth through the processes of beating and pounding the cloth, women's bodies actually straighten and soften the barkcloth when they sleep on it. Describing the physical merging of body and cloth, one woman expressed: by sleeping on it we imbue the barkcloth with »a little part of ourselves« (CHOULAI/LEWIS-HARRIS 1999: 213). In a similar manner, each drawing that is applied to the barkcloth contains a part of the woman who designed it. The designing of barkcloth requires both creativity and technique (a steady hand). Maisin refer to these skills as *mon-seraman*, thereby addressing both the mental (*mon*) and physical or technical (*seraman*) capacities of making good barkcloth. Maisin silently acknowledge that not everyone is as skilled as her neighbour.

Most women look at the cloth, create a mental picture and subsequently draw it with four fingers on the barkcloth surface, although women also draw designs in the sand, testing them without spoiling valuable cloth. The four fingers stand for the four black lines that meander and curve parallel to each other, creating three ›veins‹ of which the central veins are left white and the outer two are filled up with red pigment. This does not imply that drawing is a projection of thought. Both the mental and the actual drawing of designs are processes of thinking that not only interact, but also correspond with the tapa surface. The rather coarse fibrous texture of the barkcloth influences how the lines can be applied, resisting some movements and facilitating others. The whole practice of making and drawing tapa is thus part of a process in which the women artists and the tapa cloth are participants (see also INGOLD 2013: 21).

Maisin women make two types of designs: clan, and general. Each patrilineal clan has its own tapa designs. Maisin believe that when emerging from a hole in the Musa area, each clan ancestor brought his clan emblems, *kawo*. Clan emblems can vary from types of magic, social conduct, and fire, to drums, dancing gear, and tapa designs (*evovi*). The tapa clan designs are named and often figurative, visualizing mountains, animals, or specific artefacts that relate to the clan ancestor's travels and his claims on land, animals and artefacts. As such, clan tapa contains information about ancestral journeys, land claims and relationships between specific clans.

While men control the narratives dealing with the journeys associated with particular landmarks as well as designs, the knowledge concerning