

AMNH Feature

Ko e bale o Masiu: The prize of Masiu (AMNH 80.0/9203)

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Tongan barkcloths are traditionally made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, *Broussonetia papyrifera*, known in Tongan as *hiapo*. The bark is beaten with a hardwood mallet on an anvil until its fibres spread to form supple sheets. Women usually beat bark alone, but fall in to a rhythm with their audible – albeit unseen – neighbours. The ringing of their mallets and anvils creates a soundscape ubiquitous in Tonga; tapa beating ceases only on Sundays and during the observation of a period of mourning, and is akin to the beating heart of the Tongan nation. Groups of women come together to paste their sheets of beaten bark into double-layered fibrous cloths, and decorate them with motifs commemorating important events, people, places and things through naturalistic or figurative depictions and the important Tongan allusory technique called *heliaki* (to say or illustrate one thing but mean another).

This striking Tongan barkcloth is likely to have been made in west Tongatapu, an area of Tonga renowned for the large colonies of flying foxes (*Pteropus tonganus*) that roost in the villages of Kolovai, Ha'avakatolo, Tofoa and Ha'ateiho. The barkcloth's recurring *kupesi* (motifs) are arranged into a system of formal grids, and feature plants, flying foxes and birds in flight and at roost, and domestic items including vases of flowers. Naturalistic motifs such as these did not become popular in Tonga until the late nineteenth century, and this *ngatu* can be securely dated to 1902, when it was gifted to Helen Fahnestock Campbell by Tae Manusā, a Tongan noble.ⁱ Significantly, Campbell's husband, Clarence Gordon Campbell, took photographs of the gift presentation, which also included two fine mats; glass-plate negatives survive, showing the *ngatu* and mats with Tae Manusā and her entourage, and the Campbells' daughter, Helen, whom Tae 'adopted' and upon whom she conferred the name 'Ofa in memory of her own late daughter, 'Ofa-ki-Vava'u.ⁱⁱ Another photo clearly shows the *ngatu* hanging up behind Tae's daughter Victoria Kaufusi.ⁱⁱⁱ Adrienne Kaeppeler, curator of Oceanic Ethnology at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution, believes these are the earliest known photographs of *ngatu* with naturalistic patterns *in situ* in Tonga.^{iv}

This piece of barkcloth has been cut from a larger cloth, which is likely to have been up to 30 metres long, and its edges have been trimmed. Its decorations are arranged in strips that run the length of the cloth. At either edge, a line of text – though hard to decipher – repeats the words 'KOE BALE O MASIU': 'the wreath or prize of Masiu'. Next, there are floral arrangements in bottles and vases, and circular forms that may represent round tables or tablecloths. These are followed by elegant flying foxes and birds with their wings outstretched in flight. Though the birds look like gannets, they may be doves, *lupe*, symbols of peace. The *lupe* motif in use today is more stylised, depicting a fat dove flying in profile, but the doves depicted here are commensurate with other naturalistic depictions of this period and the ceremonial occasion suggested by the text and flowers, which was possibly held in a church environment. The flying foxes on this *ngatu* closely

resemble those on a piece held at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology that is one of the earliest known examples of a naturalistic *ngatu* in a museum collection;^v like the birds they are depicted in an elegant form in comparison with the bats that appear on contemporary *ngatu*. Next, branches of trees with leaves like needles depict *toa* trees (ironwood) in which the bats roost.^{vi} The dense, heavy wood of the ironwood tree (also known as 'she oak', *Casuarina equisetifolia*), is used for *Ingatu* making tools, including *ike* (bark beating mallets), *tutua* (bark beating anvils), and *papa koka`anga* (barkcloth making tables). Single branches of spatulate leaves represent the shiny, fragrant leaves of the *maile* (*Alyxia oliviformis*) used to make garlands; in this instance they are likely to refer to a wreath worn as, or to celebrate, the prize of Masiu.^{vii} These rows of motifs repeat, interspersed with other geometric motifs and naturalistic motifs that have yet to be deciphered.

The flying foxes are a significant *kupesi* in Tonga. Tongatapu's flying foxes are the living descendants of a gift exchanged between Tongans and Samoans, both of whom celebrate the flying fox in their art practices. Whereas the flying fox motif used here is a naturalistic depiction, in Samoa the same animal is depicted as an elongated triangle called *pe`a* (the word for flying fox). This motif is an important element in Samoan tattoo, and *pe`a* is the name given to the striking torso and leg tattoo complex worn by Samoan men.

According to Tongan and Samoan legends, Tongatapu's flying foxes descend from a pair presented in ancient times to the Tongan Monarch by Sina, a Princess of Samoa. The pair comprised one white flying fox and one black flying fox with a golden mantle. Since their arrival in Tongatapu, the flying foxes have belonged to the Tongan Monarch and have received their Royal protection. This important barkcloth, and those made since with similar motifs, celebrates these sacred flying foxes and, by association, the nobles of the villages in which they roost, the Royal family of Tonga to whom they belong, and the chiefly families of Samoa from whom they were first received.

Though most of the flying foxes seen today are of the black and gold variety, the white flying fox is said to appear among them for important occasions such as Royal weddings, coronations, and funerals. Tongan poet Karlo Mila celebrated their significance to the Royal family and Tongan identity in a poem to honour the late Tu`i Pelehake Uluvalu, Tonga's 'prince of the people', killed in a car accident in San Francisco in 2006.

We will don black
and like a flock of flying foxes
our grief will take flight

Ours will be a sacred flight
through the deep of night
and the dark of sea,
back to the beginning
back beyond memory.

We will head to Lapaha
navigating the stars
we will leave the sun behind
and enter the moon
wings of skin stretched over fingers
trying to touch death.

– Karlo Mila, *Honouring Tu‘ipelehake*^{viii}

Lapaha is the site of the ancient Royal tombs of Tonga, known as *langi*; Mila uses *heliaki* to compare the Tongan people to flying foxes, clad in funerary black, flocking to Lapaha to mourn the passing of their prince.

Recalled in legend, upon barkcloth, and in poetry and song, the flying foxes are revered in Tonga and it seems unlikely that they have ever – officially – been hunted, despite their being said to taste succulent during their breeding period in March each year.^{ix} Hunting them is illegal, and anyone who endangers the colonies is punished.

The Tongan Monarchy’s safeguarding of the flying foxes, one of the largest colonies of *Ptopus tonganus* left in the wild, has been recognised internationally. In 1996, the late King of Tonga, His Majesty King Taufa‘ahau Tupou IV, was named Indigenous Conservationist of the Year by the Seacology Foundation, for his continued protection of these animals in what is possibly the oldest wildlife refuge in the world.^x In return, the flying foxes, which are strict vegetarians, fulfill an important ecological role by pollinating flowers and dispersing seeds throughout the Tongan forest.

Barkcloth continues to be made in large quantities in Tonga and the Tongan diaspora. Some contemporary Tongan barkcloth makers substitute synthetic cloth for beaten bark, and commercially prepared dyes and paints for plant-based pigments, to create textiles with altered materiality. These barkcloth innovations, by their very nature, tread carefully the line between overt innovation and commitment to the maintenance of the Royal family and Tongan chiefly lineages, and often incorporate iconographic motifs in their honour. A Tongan barkcloth made with synthetic materials in New Zealand in 1996, now part of the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, features a modern version of the flying fox motif used here. The use of this motif on a synthetic barkcloth made only recently in the diaspora maintains important links to the Tongan homeland and professes its makers’ ongoing allegiance to the Tongan Monarchy.^{xi}

Acknowledgements: My research visit to the anthropology collections at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, was made possible by a Collection Study Grant awarded by the Richard Gilder Graduate School, and facilitated by Dr Jennifer Newell, Curator of Pacific Ethnology at AMNH. I am grateful to Karlo Mila for permission to reproduce her poetry, and to the No‘o Fakataha Tongan Artists Collective for helping me interpret the motifs on this barkcloth.

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- ⁱ Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, metaphor and illusion', in *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*, eds. A. Herle, N. Stanley, K. Stevenson, R.L. Walsh (Adelaide: Crawford House, 2002), p. 300.
- ⁱⁱ Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, metaphor and illusion', p. 300.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, metaphor and illusion', p. 300.
- ^{iv} Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, metaphor and illusion', p. 300.
- ^v Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, metaphor and illusion', in *Pacific Art: Persistence, Change and Meaning*, eds. A. Herle, N. Stanley, K. Stevenson, R.L. Walsh (Adelaide: Crawford House, 2002).
- ^{vi} No'ō Fakataha Artists Collective, Personal Communication, Auckland, 30 June 2013.
- ^{vii} No'ō Fakataha Artists Collective, Personal Communication, Auckland, 30 June 2013.
- ^{viii} Used with permission from Karlo Mila, *A Well Written Body*, (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2008), p. 26.
- ^{ix} Siu Pouvalu, *Roosting behavior of Pteropus tonganus in Tongatapu*, Unpublished Earthcaching Project, University of South Pacific, 2-9 July 2011.
http://www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/faculties/fste/geography/Earthcaching/students/Siu/Siu_Report.pdf
Accessed 4 March 2013.
- ^x <http://www.seacology.org/news/newsletters/9601.03.htm>
Accessed 4 March 2013.
- ^{xi} Billie Lythberg, 'Polyvocal Tongan barkcloths: contemporary ngatu and nomenclature at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa', in *Tuhinga* 24 (2013): 85-104, p. 97.