

## THE LAPITA MOTIF THAT ‘GOT AWAY’

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## ABSTRACT

*A decorative motif, already of some antiquity, was taken into Oceania by the ancestors of the Fijians and Polynesians several thousand years ago and is still used by Fijian, Samoan and Tongan women when decorating bark cloth. This motif (see Figure 1), seen in numerous forms of material production in New Zealand, has become widely accepted as a representation of Pasifika/ New Zealand identity. The indigenous interpretation of the symbol is not well known beyond the islands and, by a process of association, the motif is now popularly (but erroneously) believed to represent a Frangipani flower. This shift appears to be due to a conflation of Oceanic peoples’ love of perfumed flowers with the constant use of photographs of the flower in tourist brochures and advertisements as an identifier of Pacific island-ness.*

## INTRODUCTION

Lengths of unpainted and painted bark cloth (commonly referred to as ‘tapa cloth’) were used for bedding and clothing in pre-European times in a number of Pacific island groups.<sup>1</sup> Unpainted bark cloth was also used for the wrapping of representations of the gods in Tahiti, the Cook Islands and Tonga (Kaepler 1997). Recently, following an almost total cessation of production of bark cloth in Atiu in the Cook Islands, there has been a small revival of the making of brown-dyed cloth costumes worn by ritual leaders and by dancers competing in national competitions. Today, lengths of the figured cloth are still worn by Fijian, Tongan and Samoan men and women as costuming on ceremonial occasions. In New Zealand the display in homes, public spaces and politicians’ offices of a length of dyed and painted ‘tapa cloth’ from Tonga or Fiji has become an ubiquitous signifier of local interest in or connection with the Pacific. Similarly, the cloth, whether plain or decorated, is now frequently utilised by designers for garments in ‘Pasifika’ fashion parades and in the various versions of ‘wearable art’ displays which are held each year in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Flower motif by Fatu' Feu'u, '*Figure with pandanus garland*'  
(Collection of the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand).

The scholarly theories (see Kirch 1997; Kirch and Green 2001) regarding the ancient migration of groups of people from western islands of what is now Indonesia are now widely accepted. About 3800 years ago (1800–1100 years B.P), having had some contact with groups of people living on the coasts of the main island of New Guinea, the travellers settled on the coasts of the Mussau Islands, in New Ireland, the Arawe group of islands off the southern coast of New Britain, (both in what is now known as the Bismarck Archipelago) and in the Northern Solomon Islands, an area termed 'Near Oceania'. Kirch and other archaeologists found signs of an important cultural change in the settlements. Kirch (2000: 88) states:

Several characteristics render these sites wholly different from anything preceding them in Near Oceania. First, they were good sized settlements ... situated on coastal beach terraces or built out over the shallow lagoons as clusters of stilt-houses.

Second, their occupants made, traded, and used large quantities of earthenware ceramics, of both plain and decorated varieties.

This group, who were Austronesian speakers (a language form which radically differs from the majority of the languages of New Guinea) then developed a distinctive set of cultural practices, including the making of decorated earthenware and the domestication of animals such as the pig and birds such as the Asian jungle fowl. They sailed to, and eventually settled, the islands of 'Remote Oceania', including the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. Extensive archaeological, linguistic, ethno-botanical and biological research has enabled the piecing together of a coherent narrative which links the Lapita people with Pacific peoples of the present day, particularly in the island groups classified as Polynesia, and in Fiji (the people of which have physical, cultural and linguistic characteristics found in both Polynesia and Melanesia).

The finding and dating of the distinctively decorated potsherds, known collectively as Lapita pottery, has been crucial to the theoretical formulations. These and related archaeological discoveries have particularly been supported by the finding of linguistic evidence of terminological continuities between the Lapita peoples and the languages spoken by contemporary Pacific peoples. This evidence includes the lists of terms used in seafaring, fishing, house building, for social categories and for body decoration, such as tattooing.

The archaeologist, Les Groube (cited by Kirch 1997: 67), who has worked in Fiji and Tonga, wrote as early as 1971:

There seems little reason to doubt that, by the end of the twelfth century BC [3200 YEARS BP] people with Lapita pottery had penetrated into the region we now call Polynesia.

In all probability, at this early date, the Fijian and Tongan Lapita populations were a closely related cultural community, the perfect candidate for (in linguistic terms) the pre-Polynesian (East-Oceanic) speech community. The subsequent isolation following separation led to the linguistic innovations which separate the Polynesian and Fijian languages.

Apart from language, another significant continuity is that of 'design principles', (Kirch and Green 2001: 195) once used in the production of Lapita pottery, and still reproduced in tattooing and in a variety of craft productions, such as in the painting and dyeing of bark cloth. These continuities are regarded as an important proof of a linkage between the past and the present. However, Kirch and Green (2001: 184) have commented that a problem for archaeologists

working in Oceania is that many of the artefacts made and used by the ancient peoples were created from non-durable materials, such as wood, bark and straw. Durable items of personal decoration have been excavated from various sites and include 'narrow shell bracelets, bangles or armbands of various kinds, small shell rings, small beads of shell and bone' as well as stone beads (Kirch and Green 2001: 187–188).<sup>3</sup>

#### TRACING A MOTIF

A particular motif (see Figure 1) has been used extensively by the Samoan-New Zealand artist, Fatu Feu'u (b. 1946), in paintings and murals, on sculptures and even on a commissioned design for a floor rug. Feu'u began to paint full-time in 1988 and his style and use of particular images became increasingly widely-known during the 1990s. Feu'u had adapted a Samoan form of the motif (four pointed ovoid 'petals'), which he had seen on a piece of 19<sup>th</sup> century *siapo*, because he felt that it particularly represented an important aspect of his cultural heritage (*fā'a Samoa*).<sup>4</sup>

In Samoa, the name *manulua* is applied to both a thin-armed version and the more flower-like, wide-'petalled' version of the motif, while in Tonga the motif is known as *manulua/potuuamanuka*.<sup>5</sup> As in Samoa, if the upper half of the motif is used on Tongan painted bark-cloth, it is claimed to be a representation of a bird in flight. Used whole, it is claimed to be a representation of two birds in flight. In Tonga, a motif in the shape of four inverted isosceles triangles, arranged diagonally in a cross form, is also known as *manulua*. This version of the motif is also commonly used on Fijian bark cloth (*masi*).<sup>6</sup> Feu'u has used that particular variation of the motif in some of his paintings (see Vercoe 2002: 192–193). In discussions of Feu's work, whether academic or popular, the motif which often dominates his paintings is invariably referred to as being the representation of a frangipani flower, a mis-identification as the frangipani has five petals (see Figure 2).

It is not surprising that, given the history of relations between Niue and Samoa from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century due to the sustained influence of and connection with the London Missionary Society (Ryan 1993), a Samoan influence might be seen in the local production of decorated bark cloth. The three variant forms of the motif can be seen, among many other motifs, on an example of 19<sup>th</sup> century Niuean *hiapo* held in the Melbourne Museum (Australia), and reproduced in a book by Pule and Thomas (2005: 122–123). Pule and Thomas have also reproduced a photograph of a beautiful Samoan 'tapa' cloth European-style dress, dated c.1890–1910, which prominently features the 'flower' motif.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2. Plumeria [Frangipani] flowers

(source: Kent Bridges, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2005,  
[http://gohawaii.about.com/od/hawaiianflowersandtrees/ig/plumeria\\_photos](http://gohawaii.about.com/od/hawaiianflowersandtrees/ig/plumeria_photos))

Clearly, a four-armed or four-‘petalled’ shape was a pleasing one for many craftsmen and craftswomen in Oceania, whether it was comprised of a set of pointed ovals or circles, four inverted isocles triangles, four thin triangles arranged diagonally (i.e. in an x-shape) or as a thin-armed vertical cross (+).<sup>8</sup> The origin of the motif is ancient in Pacific terms – it was one of the many designs incised or stamped on ceramic ware made by the Lapita travellers.

The motif appears on sherds of Lapita pots which have been found in numerous sites in the South-western Pacific, from New Britain and New Ireland in the Bismarck Archipelago of Papua New Guinea to beaches in New Caledonia and Fiji (see for example, Spriggs 1990: 113; Noury 2005: 58, 59, 77). The ovoid shape also occurs in a band or frieze design which Siorat (1990: 74) has termed the ‘trefoil theme’ and which Noury (2005: 76–77) has termed ‘*rosace*’ (‘rosette’). Noury reports that the use of this motif is particularly evident in material found at Apolo and Adwe, in West New Britain, and at Nenumbo, Lapita and Nessadou in the north of New Caledonia.

The motif was also used as a central design feature on turtle shell-decorated pendants and head ornaments on the island of Manus and on the island of Bougainville, both in Papua New Guinea (Jewell and Philp 1998: 73, 79). Manus,

the northernmost island of the Bismarck Archipelago, was one of the first stopping points in the Lapita people's migrations and one of the sites where the earliest (3850–3900 BP) specimens of the characteristic hand-shaped, fired pottery with incised decorations have been found (Spriggs 1990: 7, 19).<sup>9</sup>

Many of the motifs used in frieze-like bands on Lapita pots can be found in the decorative work of other ancient and modern communities world-wide.<sup>10</sup> These include cross-hatching, continuous bands of triangular shapes, 'Greek key' shapes, continuous bands of 'waves' or 'snake' forms, groupings of scallops, crescents, circles, chains, and loops, juxtaposed and separated spirals, crosses and bows – in short, a range of many possible combinations of geometric shapes and shapes drawn from nature. From time to time the bands on the Lapita pots include versions of the motif comprising four ovals (see for example Figure 27, Spriggs 1990: 113).

The Lapita craft-workers' choices of design elements and techniques remained consistent over time. By 1975 seventy design elements had been identified by archaeologists and by 1990 the number had increased to 122 motifs (Green 1990: 35–37). According to Green (1990: 37):

... besides two broad inter-areal clusters, Eastern and Western Lapita, this study also delineated sets of unique motifs restricted to regional areas, some of which were unique to individual sites and others of which were shared between several but not all sites within that region. ...

He continues:

For Polynesia it was possible to argue that tattooing and bark cloth manufacture existed in the Lapita period, even if not yet directly observable. Accepting that there are deep structures indicative of continuous cultural transmission it was also possible to propose that both *the rules for the production of the designs in tattooing and in bark cloth and the design motifs used in these media ethnographically still exhibited numerous parallels with those of the Lapita design system*. The parallels were too striking and numerous to be explained by chance or through analogues resulting from coincidence (my emphasis).

The islands of Tonga and Samoa began to be settled by people who travelled from Fiji about 3000–3800 years BP (Kirch and Green 2001: 116). Continuous

contact for marriage and trade was then maintained between the populations of these three island groups. Many of the Lapita patterns remained in the pot-makers' repertoire for almost two millennia. The production of the characteristic Lapita ware seems to have ended in Fiji about 200 CE and the craft of pot-making disappeared quite early in the occupation of Tonga and Samoa (see Irwin 1981; Marshall 1985). However, Fijian women continued to make undecorated cooking and storage pots and Tongans imported Fijian-made pots until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Notwithstanding the hiatus in ceramic manufacture in Fiji, its total disappearance from Tonga and Samoa, and the absence of archaeological specimens that might enable us to trace what was occurring in the making of less durable materials, the memories of the motifs and design system evident on Lapita pottery seem to have persisted and were reproduced in artistic practice. Thus we are able to see apparent design continuity of motifs on Lapita ceramics, as also seen in the bark cloth figuration of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa at the time of first Western contact and continuing to the present day.

#### THE APPEARANCE OF THE MOTIF ON BARK CLOTH

The life of figured bark cloth and decorated mats (*fala*) (made from dried *pandanus* leaves or from the bark of the coastal hibiscus), can be cut short by damage from insects, rain, the destruction of houses by cyclones, or by interment as corpse-wrapping or its use in the lining of a grave. However, museums world-wide hold examples of figured bark cloth created about 200–220 years ago and collected by European travellers in the Pacific. Additionally, European recordings of Polynesian tattoo designs were made in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is probable that the pre-European circular trade and other, later contacts between Tonga, Samoa and Fiji included exchanges of decorated cloth and fine mats, and thus enabled the on-going transmission and maintenance of particular design concepts. Samoan canoe builders, for example, were living in the Lau group of islands of Fiji in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. A gradually increasing Tongan occupation of the Lau group began in the 1830s and was formalised in 1853 (Campbell 2001: 92–95). This inter-island emigration diminished following the assumption of control of Fiji by the British in 1874.

Examples of Samoan *siapo* and Tongan *ngatu* which contain variants of the motif have been published in studies such as those by Neich and Pendergast (1997) and by Cartmail (1997) (see also Figure 3). Similar production techniques were used by women in both of these island groups. In Tonga the patterns are traced onto the cloth, which may have been dyed fawn, light brown

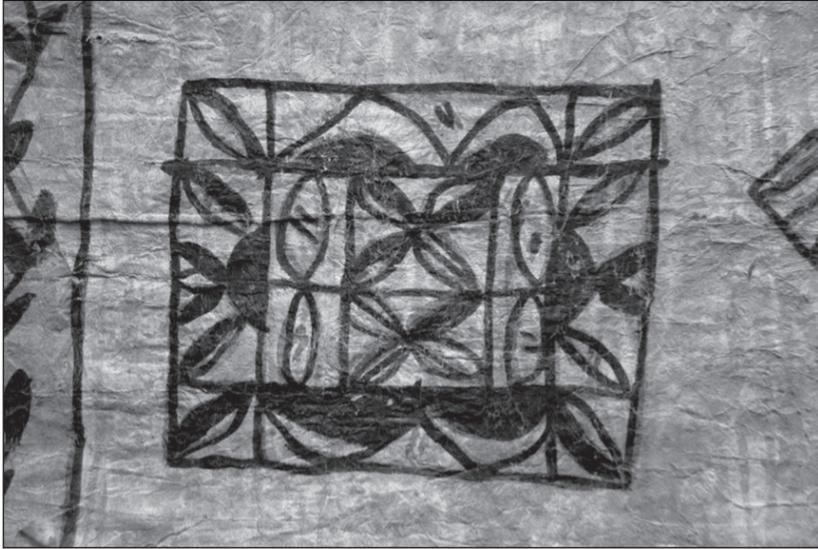


Figure 3. Tongan *ngatu* (c.1980s, maker unknown), with four-petalled flower motif (Department of Societies and Cultures, The University of Waikato. Photograph: Wendy Lee).

(*ngatu tahina*) or dark brown,<sup>11</sup> with the use of a small fibre- or wood-based rubbing board (*‘upeti* in Samoa; *kupesi* in Tonga). This is placed under the cloth which in turn is placed on a long board which functions as a work bench for a group of *ngatu* makers. The production of lengths of *siapo* has ceased in Samoa (formerly Western Samoa) but a small number of women living in villages on the island of Savai’i make small rectangular pieces for sale to tourists.

In Samoa patterns are incised in the wood of the pattern-board, while in Tonga the patterns are made from lengths of sennit (twined coconut fibre) embroidered or fixed onto a base board which is then padded with a mat of several layers of fibres obtained from the sheath of a coconut leaf. Tongan *ngatu* makers alternate the use of several different pattern boards when making the prestigious fifty-section *ngatu* known as *launima*. The traced design is more firmly outlined, and parts may be overpainted and additional motifs added by freehand. In Tonga the *ngatu* lengths that are produced are identified by both the dominant designs and the background colours which have been used.

In Fiji the white background, combined with the use of red-brown/ochre and black, together with the repetition of precisely drawn geometric designs, gives

the commonest form of painted bark cloth (*masi kesa*) a striking appearance. Designs were produced with the use of a fibre rubbing tablet (sometimes misnamed *kuveti*).<sup>12</sup> Today designs are commonly produced with the use of a stencil cut on a banana or other large leaf or on a piece of firm plastic, and the motifs painted onto the white cloth with the addition of carefully drawn free-hand decoration. Rod Ewins, who has published extensively on aspects of *masi* production and design (Ewins 1982; 2004; 2007), suggests (*pers. comm.* 19.2.08) that the wooden boards with raised patterns held in the British Museum (see Jewell and Philp 1998: design page 15) ‘were possibly a post-European innovation’ and ‘possibly an imitation of the Samoan “upeti”’.<sup>13</sup> He considers that once such boards were collected and taken abroad by Europeans it is likely that the Fijian *masi* makers returned to the use of the fibre rubbing tablets.

Ewins states that most of the motifs used by makers today are linked to specific regions in Fiji. The curvilinear motif of four oval elements discussed in this paper and the rectilinear form are only used by makers of *masi* on the island of Taveuni. He has commented (Ewins, *pers. comm.* 18.12.2007) that: ‘In Somo-somo, the chiefly village of Taveuni, it [the motif] is called *vavani*, which is a name derived from its having four (va) – elements’. However, in a brief discussion on the significance of the names of *masi* motifs and designs (2004: 174–5) he urges researchers to be wary of accepting some local names (‘nicknames’) which he asserts are sometimes derived from introduced western artefacts, and which may simply be used as reminders for the makers of particular designs.

The makers of *masi* use a repertoire of geometric shapes in their designs working within clearly defined grids. The shapes chosen for inclusion include variations on the motif being discussed, but not all the motifs used could be ascribed to the makers’ memories of Lapita designs.<sup>14</sup> Many of the Lapita curvilinear patterns were very elaborate, in shapes reminiscent of decorated capitals of ancient Greek columns (see Spriggs 1990: 88, 89). These patterns would have been more easily incised in wet clay than reproduced by the stencilling method or by the use of a pattern board.

The sources of designs used by the *masi* makers or the names assigned to motifs, however, were not Ewins’ (2004) main interest. Rather, he persuasively argues that there is an obvious continuity between the design aesthetics of *masi* and Fijian social concepts; a continuity which was present in the Fijian pre-Christian past and continues to underpin contemporary Fijian society (2004: 161). He suggests that:

... the form and figuration of *masi* draw directly on the same sources

of cognitive understanding, spiritual belief, and social knowledge that have generated the symmetries, reciprocities, and resonances that can clearly be seen to operate in Fijian social structures and processes.

Ewins' argument regarding the links between design and indigenous social structures and processes in Fiji can also be applied to Tonga where spiritual and social values were embodied in the *ngatu* (*koloa fakatonga*, 'Tongan treasure'), which was made for and presented to the chiefly people, with appropriate demonstrations of obeisance.<sup>15</sup> Respect and deference are still demonstrated in the formal gifting of craft goods, such as *ngatu* and mats, as well as kava, yams, taro and pigs (and, latterly, tinned corned beef).

Adrienne Kaeppler (2002: 293), in a discussion of the use of the triangular form of the *manulua* motif in 220 year-old examples of *ngatu*, suggests that particular 'metaphors and allusions are embedded in the designs'. This could well be the case but, given the antique origins of the motif, these metaphors and allusions were probably locally conceived and applied.

In Fiji, Samoa, and certainly in Tonga, it is likely that the ownership of the remembered ancient designs used to decorate bark cloth was not a communal one, but a privilege of chiefly women.<sup>16</sup> This was certainly the case in Tonga prior to the widespread acceptance of Christianity; the manufacturing of *ngatu* was done by commoner women at the request and under the supervision of the wives of chiefs. The women lived in the chief's household or on his land as wives, daughters and sisters of the chief's farm workers. The making and embroidering of the pattern board (*kupesi*) was done by the higher-ranked women (Mariner 1818: 280; Dale 1996: 393).

The late Maxine Tamahori's (1963) thesis on the making of *ngatu* is one of the definitive works on the subject of bark-cloth manufacture in Tonga. During her very thorough fieldwork she obtained important historical information on how the manufacturing of *ngatu* changed after the conversion of Tongans to Christianity. Tamahori was able to interview women who remembered what occurred during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early twentieth century in relation to bark cloth production and the choice of motifs.

Tamahori (1963: 132) attributed the breakup of the chiefs' 'courts', in which commoner women worked under the supervision of the chiefly women, to Wesleyan missionary influence. However, the manufacture of bark cloth and *ngatu* still continued at the behest of chiefly women who made and held the

*kupesi* and prepared some of the dyes. During the late nineteenth century and during the early years of the twentieth century, groups of women, known as *kautaha*, came together for the purpose of making *ngatu* (Tamahori 1963: 130, 136). Tamahori noted that “The women of rank who were the repositories of all the refinements of *ngatu* manufacture, as well as the custodians of the tablets, were still asked to direct [or “chair”] the activities of the various groups’ (1963: 136). She continues:

The tablets held by the woman of rank were given to her *kautaha* and although she might take little active part in the assembling of the *ngatu* it is probably that for some years yet she still made the *kupesi* tablets. Many of the *kautaha* still treasure the tablets made by the women of rank who first presided over their activities. Over the next 50 years these chiefly women gradually withdrew from *kautaha* activity, making their final renunciation by giving up the making of tablets ... (1963: 137).

Commoner women then began to exercise creative freedom to create their own designs. Tamahori goes on to conclude:

These changes in *ngatu* making organisation have had the greatest influence upon the decorative aspects of the craft. The making of tablets (*kupesi*) was a new field to the women. It was not very likely that at any time they were deliberately taught the craft by the traditional makers, so that learning by emulation was necessarily carried out in the less complex medium, the embroidered tablet. *The traditional motifs had origins in many cases unknown to the ordinary woman* (1963: 138; my emphasis).

This is not to say that some non-chiefly women did not deliberately aim to remember and reproduce ancient designs and motifs. The indigenous assignment of a name or identity to a motif (*pace* Ewins) is one of the ways in which it might survive and remain in the design repertoire, because the naming indicated a significant history. In the Tongan case, the history involves the Tongan transliteration of *manalua* of the name of the Samoan island of Manu’a (see endnote 6). This name commemorates the intertwining of the histories of the peoples of Samoa and Tonga through trade, marriage and warfare over thousands of years.

Kaepler (2002: 293) reports that there is a clearly observable change in the choice-making of design motifs in Tonga from the nineteenth and twentieth

century. More 'naturalistic' designs were used such as the 'visual allusions' to nature, including depictions of trees and leaves. Unfortunately, she does not specify at what point in the nineteenth century this change could be clearly discerned, although it would not be surprising if it coincided with the decreasing influence of chiefly women over pattern choices. Neich and Pendergrast (1997: 41–59) illustrate their discussion of *ngatu* with photographs of examples produced in Tonga in the 1930s through to the 1970s. The motifs include *man-alua*, *tokelau* (an elongated triangle in-filled with crescents) and designs taken from nature such as single flowering plants and fish, which are not commonly seen today. A particular *ngatu* design contains the framed motif of a crown allied with the name 'Elizabeth R.', referring to Queen Elizabeth II who visited Tonga in 1953 (Neich and Pendergrast 1997: 46).

#### CHOOSING MOTIFS TODAY IN TONGA

Many elderly and middle-aged Tongan women first learned to make a *kupesi* while attending secondary school. The late Queen Salote (Tupou III) facilitated the establishment of the *Langa Fonua ae Fefine* (Nation Building by Women) in 1954 to encourage the learning of modern domestic skills, as well as the maintenance of traditional women's arts (Wood-Ellem 1999: 264). Members of the *Langa Fonua* groups were encouraged to make traditional handicrafts for sale to tourists so as to be able to finance household and village improvements. Shortly after the founding of *Langa Fonua* Queen Salote decreed that the making of *kupesi* should be a mandatory part of the secondary school curriculum for girls to ensure that young women were knowledgeable about local craft traditions. A student was permitted to choose a motif. The outline was constructed, using the techniques previously described, on a rectangular base made from a padded pandanus leaf, with the sennit string-like fibre made from the sheath of a coconut frond.

Lengths of *ngatu* and particular types of woven mats are termed *koloa* (treasure) and are intrinsic to gift exchanges between families, particularly during life-changing rituals, for the wrapping of a corpse prior to burial and for prestations to members of the Royal house and other members of the Tongan nobility (Cowling 1991; Small 1997). Today, any Tongan woman who chooses to do so may create a length of *ngatu*. She usually does so in the company of other women such as close relatives or neighbours. This grouping of ten or twelve women who work cooperatively (much as women would have done under the direction of a chief's sister or wife) is known as a *koka'anga*.<sup>17</sup> Some of the women may work full-time during the week and may buy the beaten bark cloth from makers who have stalls in the Nukua'alofa or Vava'u markets.

It is not uncommon for women living in the Ha'apai group of islands to offer to exchange mats with women living in Tongatapu. In this case, the motifs may be chosen by the women commissioning the *ngatu* and are impressed on the *feta'aki*, which is then painted with the base colour. The hand painting of the design is completed by an individual or group in Ha'apai.<sup>18</sup>

The *kupesi* used to impress the designs on the particular lengths of *feta'aki* is owned by a member of the group, or it may be borrowed from another family member or friend. The projected length of the *ngatu* and choice of motifs depends on the personal aesthetics of the potential owner or perhaps on the intended destination of the *ngatu*. The named motifs which are chosen for incorporation on a length of *ngatu* come from both an extensive 'catalogue' retained in people's memories and in family-owned *kupesi*.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes the designs used are original, particularly when freehand drawings are incorporated, but more commonly, they reproduce familiar patterns. Less imaginative *ngatu* makers (or very patriotic ones) will use one of the most popular motifs; that of representations of the Tongan coat of arms ('*Sila* [Seal] *o'Tonga*'), perhaps with borders depicting the Norfolk pines located near the King's Palace in Nuku'alofa (*hala paini*). Other symbols of royalty include a depiction of a lion, of an eagle and a dove. Elements of the decorations used in 'contemporary' (that is, nineteenth and twentieth century) Fijian, Tongan and Samoan *masi*, *ngatu* and *siapo* reflect other European influences – for example, the use of heart and snowflake shapes, of the Christian cross and the shape of the club as featured on playing cards. The squares containing the motifs may be interspersed with depictions of *maile*, a sweet smelling vine used to decorate pavilions built to shelter members of the Tongan Royal family on special occasions, such as the King's birthday.

In New Zealand, while it is common to see teetering piles of Tongan-made *ngatu*, together with large, decorated mats, displayed as the customary elements in the ritual gift exchanges at important events (for example, weddings, funerals, baptisms and 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations), it is likely that boldly-painted, locally made lengths of *ngatu* have also been included. And while the base material used by *kautaha* (groups of Tongan women living in New Zealand) is white, factory-made cloth (see Addo 2004),<sup>20</sup> the design motifs used are invariably sourced from the commonly-remembered pool of traditional motifs.

## CONCLUSION

A particular motif, comprised of four pointed ovals or 'petals' or four triangles, is both a reminder and legacy of voyaging ancestors, having travelled in the

artisans' memories and in various artistic forms, a very long way in time and space, from Taiwan to the eastern islands of Indonesia, through the Pacific to New Zealand.

The motif has a long history of reproduction, first in the incised decoration of Lapita pots, then (or simultaneously) in the work of the design creators of Fijian *masi*, Tongan *ngatu* and Samoan *siapo*. Finally, Fatu Feu'u's frequent incorporation of the motif in his artworks has caused it to become widely-known in New Zealand and widely copied by makers, both amateur and professional, of a variety of decorative objects.

In 1996, Karen Stevenson, without specifically mentioning the motif, ascribed much of what she called 'the distinctive Pacific accent' seen in 'consumer culture in New Zealand' to the commercial and popular influence of Feu'u's artworks (1996:18). Nicholas Thomas, in a brief discussion (1995:203–4) of the movement of the motif into the commercial and public domains in New Zealand, seemed to imply that the commoditisation of the motif had been with Feu'u's consent and even connivance. It seems that the motif which Feu'u made so accessible to people in New Zealand, has 'got away' from the artist and from its island 'homes' into a wide range of media.

This type of 'borrowing' also occurred with the appropriation of the colours and the more common designs of Tongan *ngatu*. For some years these have been commercially reproduced in New Zealand in many forms, including in gift wrapping paper, as well as on the cloth used to make Pacific style dresses and skirts and men's tropical-style shirts, using textiles produced in Japan (cf. Addo 2003:157). The commodification process has been further developed by stallholders in markets in Tonga selling lengths of *ngatu*, as well as fans, handbags and purses, which are covered in pieces of the cloth enhanced by clear lacquer. The same goods are imported into New Zealand and can be seen for sale in Tongan stalls at weekly 'Polynesian' markets, such as that in Otarā in South Auckland.

*Ngatu* is also used in the décor of homes featured in design magazines in the form of blinds, bedcovers, lampshades and wall hangings. This popularity was partly due to the availability of the quantities of *ngatu* sold by emigrant Tongan women in New Zealand who had more than they wished to keep for future ritual occasions. A recent development (since the late 1990s) has been the over-painting of pieces of *ngatu* by Tongan amateur artists, with depictions of fish, dolphins and even mermaids, again for sale on weekend market stalls in Auckland. The Niuean-New Zealand artist, John Pule's work also contrib-

uted to this trend as he used unframed pieces of white bark cloth as canvas on which he has created narratives using pictograms in *hiapo* style, as well as some Niuean traditional motifs.

The motif, not even acknowledged as being ‘after Feu’u’, is now firmly located in the consciousness of the New Zealand public. There are a multitude of contemporary examples of its use. The 2007 New Zealand Post series of Christmas stamps included a Pacific-themed 50c stamp, while the six-year old designer Sione Vao, of Tongan descent, utilized a slimmer version of the motif (see Figure 4). Another recent example of the use of the motif in the form used by Feu’u was on a quilt and cushions placed for sale by the individual maker on the popular website, ‘Trade Me’ in November 2007.

The motif has also been commercially reproduced on plaster wall plaques, on tiles, on silver jewellery, on the set walls of a television program screened in November 2007, presumably because the program featured local stand-up comedians of Pacific descent. It was even used to decorate the sides of the top



Figure 4. New Zealand Post Ltd. 2007 Christmas stamp

layer of a popular All Black rugby player's wedding cake in December 2007. The motif has also become the official logo for the Government of Samoa's tourism publicity. Moreover, a version, using four cowry shells, is used as the distinguishing logo of Fijian tourism advertisements.

And what of the botanical mis-identification of the motif? In discussions of the motif, both academic and popular, it is invariably reported as representing a *frangipani* flower. Cuttings of the *frangipani* tree were imported into Pacific islands following colonisation at various times in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once established the cultivation of the trees then became quite widespread due to their propagation by local people. The sweet-smelling flower became particularly important in Hawaii where it is known as *Plumeria* and where it has been incorporated in the millions of *lei* (neck garlands), made of real or artificial flowers, which have been presented or sold to tourists for many years. The flower is now seen as part of Hawaii's 'heritage' and is reproduced in many forms, including jewellery, but also is used in tourist brochures to signify the 'glamour' of Hawaii and other Pacific island groups.

The romantic association of the frangipani flower with the Pacific has even been given a mystical, spiritual aspect. The motif has been incorporated in the logo of the popular Pasifika Festival which is held in Auckland each February. The Festival website states that the motif is a representation of the *Frangipani* as 'depicted in central Polynesian *siapo*' [and] which symbolised the 'female element' or 'female side of mankind'.

A long process, involving the cultural and aesthetic transformation of some natural materials, has been intrinsic to the social and spiritual histories of many Pacific island peoples. Following the experiences of sustained contact with Europeans, a range of non-indigenous elements were incorporated into the histories and practices, but continuities remained. An ancient motif, used by the artist Fatu Feu'u as a reference to his Polynesian and Samoan identity, and located both within the New Zealand and Pacific Island context, has become commoditised and accepted as a popular signifier of the country's Oceanic identity. This motif has been given a new identity and name, because of an association of ideas linked to the remembered sensory experience of people seeing, wearing and smelling a non-indigenous perfumed flower. The result has been that the flower, the *frangipani*, which had become an important marker of Hawai'ian identity, and a generic Pacific island icon, is now seen in New Zealand as the signifier of island-ness, for both immigrant Pacific peoples and the rest of the population.

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## NOTES

- 1 *'Tapa'* is the generic name in Oceania for the white cloth most commonly made from the inner bark/bast of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonettia papyrifera*), brought from S.E. Asia by the ancestors of the settlers of the Polynesian islands.. (The bark of breadfruit and of banyan fig trees was also used in the Cook Islands). Bark cloth was also made in areas of West Irian, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Lengths of *tapa* cloth, decorated with designs intrinsic to a particular island culture were, and still are, used for costumes and in prestations and gift exchanges in Fiji, Tonga and in Samoa. In Tonga *'tapa'* is the term for the unpainted border of a length of decorated cloth. The unpainted cloth (*feta'aki*) is known as *ngatu* when it is decorated.
- 2 A recent example of the eclectic mixing of cloth traditions can be seen in the work of fashion designer Samita Bhattacharjee, who had emigrated to New Zealand from India in 2001. She initiated a project, 'Poly'nAsia, where she combined the use of *tapa* cloth, locally produced by Tongan women in Auckland, with traditional *kalamkari* cloth decoration from South India, in garments which she designed (Bhattacharjee 2005).
- 3 Other items used for body decoration include yellow turmeric powder, red and white clay, necklaces and anklets of dog's and shark's teeth and of boars' tusks and vertebrae, plaited coconut fibre, necklaces of flowers, seeds, vines, cowrie shells (large and small), human hair, in lengths or plaited or woven, and feathers incorporated into headdresses, cloaks, necklaces and bracelets. Having learned of the significance of the colour red for Tahitians and Hawai'ians during his first

voyage, on the second and third voyages Captain James Cook took red parrot feathers obtained in Tonga (Kaepler 1978a: 37; Kaepler 2004: 95; Salmond 2003: 217) and pieces of red cloth for exchange purposes and as gifts for high-ranking people in those islands.

- 4 In her report on an interview with Feu'u, Pandora Fulimano Pereira (2004: 5) states: 'His iconography is an amalgam of graphic patterns from *siapo*, tapa-making, and *tatau*, tattoo; stylised elements such as frangipani, *gogo*, tern, *anufe*, caterpillar; and objects of evident symbolic potential, handprints, paddles, scales'.
- 5 The addition of *manuka* to the name for this motif is interesting because 'manuka' points to a Samoan origin for the motif. *Manuka* equates to Manu'a, an island in the Samoan group. The traditional Tongan house style is known as *fale fakamanuka* ('house in the Samoan style') (Helu 1999: 319).
- 6 Kaepler (2002: 202) has reproduced an example of the use of this motif on a piece of *ngatu* 'collected during the third voyage of Captain Cook (1776–1780)'. This shape can also be seen being reproduced by Tongan women over-painting *ngatu* in a photograph in Drake (2002: 57).
- 7 The dress is in the collection of the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, Australia.
- 8 The vertical form is sometimes interpreted as pointing in the four major wind directions—north, south, east and west.
- 9 Recent discoveries at Nukuleka village on Tongatapu in Tonga have been dated to 2900 years ago.
- 10 For example, there is a reproduction of a stone carpet from Nineveh, c.645 B.C. in Goody's book *The Culture of Flowers* (1993: 34). The caption identifies the two plants in the borders of the carpet. The first is the lotus, the second, the palm, but unfortunately the flower in the main part of the carpet is not named.
- 11 A recent innovation in Tonga has been the use of pink as a background colour. This colour is obtained from *umea*, a red clay found on the islands of Vava'u and on the island of Eua and is applied using a piece of tapa dipped in water (Rohorua *pers. comm.*, 28.10.2008).
- 12 Rod Ewins states (*pers. comm.* 19.2.08) that '*kuveti*', sometimes used in museum and scholarly descriptions of Fijian pattern boards, 'is a hybrid between central

- Fijian *kuveji*, (pron. kuvetchi), and the Lauan *kupeti*'. See also Ewins (1982: 8) for an illustration of a Samoan '*upeti* which he says is 'similar in type to the Tongan/ Fijian *kupeti*'.
- 13 One of these *kupeti*, dated 1920, is 49 cm in length. The pattern comprises four horizontal sets of the motif under discussion. On design page 19 in the same book there is an illustration of a sample piece of *siapo* (no date given) with the boldly painted motif. This closely resembles Feu'u's adaptation with the centre of the flower clearly defined.
  - 14 Green (1979: 30) reported that following a short investigation it had been found that fifty-two Lapita motifs (out of 130) have been reproduced in Oceanic barkcloth and tattoo designs. The barkcloth examples, some of which dated from 1790, were predominantly from Tonga, Fiji, Futuna, Samoa and Hawai'i.
  - 15 Prestations were made to the chiefs who in turn paid ritual tribute to the gods to ensure the on-going fertility of the land.
  - 16 A thicker form of *tapa*, made from a number of layers rather than with the usual two layers glued together, was made by priests in pre-contact Cook Islands such as Mangaia and was used to wrap wooden representations of gods (see Kaeppler 1997; Cowling 2007). It is possible priests also made the cloth in Fiji, as lengths of undecorated, white bark cloth were hung in temples as 'a path for the gods' (Ewins 2004: 170).
  - 17 See Arbeit (c.1994) and James 1988 for descriptions of the making of *ngatu*. A 27-minute film entitled '*Kuo Hina 'E Hiapo: The Mulberry is White and Ready for Harvest*' was made in 2001 and shows the planning for and making of a length of *ngatu* by a group of Tongan women in Oakland, California, the first time such an event had occurred in the USA (Addo 2005).
  - 18 See Cowling (1991) for a discussion of exchanges between women's groups in Ha'apai and Tongatapu.
  - 19 Senior relatives (such as the mother or the father's eldest sister) of a man who has inherited a chiefly title and has therefore to be acknowledged in a public ceremony witnessed by the King, are likely to command the making of a *launima* (thirty or more metres in length) to be gifted to the monarch. These women decide on what designs will be used.
  - 20 Similar groups have been formed by Tongan women living in California (See Addo 2004 and 2005).

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