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REFLECTIONS ON RE/CREATING MISSING COMPONENTS OF THE ’AHU HEVA TŪPĀPA’U FOR THE PERTH MUSEUM (SCOTLAND)

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ABSTRACT: This piece is an exploration of thought processes, logistical planning, research and creative practice involved in conceptualising and making the missing barkcloth components of an ’ahu heva tūpāpa’u (chief mourner’s regalia) that went on permanent exhibition for the opening of the new Perth Museum in Scotland in March 2024. The regalia is possibly one of around ten collected in Tahiti by Captain James Cook during his second Pacific voyage, with one of these ending up in Perth via the collections of Dr David Ramsay. During the voyage, or possibly during its life in Perth, the regalia became separated from some of its barkcloth components. This paper is a record of the process that went into making the replica pieces.

Keywords: tapa, barkcloth, dyes, Captain James Cook, replica, Tahiti, mourning ritual

I came to my creative tapa (or ’ahu) (barkcloth) practice as a means of conducting research: after years of searching through museums—thanks to a Churchill Fellowship and various overseas museum projects—I then took the next step of learning to make tapa. My first lesson was in the Marquesas Islands after cutting an aerial root of a banyan tree that grew near a fast-flowing creek with my friend Kiki Barsinas. We made a lovely length of fibrous brown tapa that day. Some years later, with my ’Ahu Sistas,[1] I made tapa from the bark of a breadfruit tree growing in my backyard on Huahine (in French Polynesia/Mā’ohi Nui). A devoted practice, however, began much later, during my PhD when I received an Indigenous seed grant to travel to Hawai‘i and learn from such masters as Dalani Tanahy, Reni A‘ia‘i Bello, Wes Sen and Verna Takashima. My PhD by creative practice is an exploration of the lives of my tupuna vahine (foremothers) and their friends: 12 women who travelled on the *Bounty*, some of them kidnapped, and who founded the culture I belong to. The PhD and the tapa practice was a way of trying to understand the world those women were born into. With this newfound

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skill, I then began replicating examples of historical barkcloth clothing from the 1700s and 1800s that those women made and wore, today held in museum collections throughout the world. The first replicas I created are a series of Pitcairn Island tīputa (ponchos) from the 1800s: one made with cotton, silk and calico which I dyed with natural dyes, now in the collection of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Reynolds 2018); another made during a workshop on Norfolk Island that I conducted with my daughter, Mauatua, now held in the Norfolk Island Museum Trust collection; three miniatures (created during the ’Ahu: Ngā wairua o Hina workshop in 2023 in Tahiti; see Te Awa and Reynolds 2024) that are within the collections of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Te Fare Iamanaha Museum of Tahiti and the Islands; and another titled “My Grandmother is a Tīputa” that will be on exhibition at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery in Wellington in October 2024.[2] I am currently in the process of making enough tapa with my son, Oihanu, to re-create the clothing worn by Mai (who, like my children, was born on the island of Ra’iātea) in *Portrait of Mai (Omai)* painted by Joshua Reynolds in the 1770s in England.

The process of replication can serve as a form of research that allows for a new set of understandings of the original: how it was physically made, what it is composed of and the efforts that were made by the artists who worked on the original. The process of making can help us understand the epistemological world of the makers and of the wearer of the original work. Replication of original treasures/objects (tao’a) can bring life to the original. While writing about, or discussing, an object is generally theoretical, the act of remaking and replicating can be a way of honouring the work of those who made the original elements. The process can offer insights that might not have been evident otherwise.

In Tahiti in the 1700s, my Tahitian ancestors witnessed the heva tūpāpa’u (mourning ceremony) and the mesmerising sight of a high priest wearing an ’ahu heva tūpāpa’u (mourning regalia). Our oral and written histories tell me that at least one of my Tahitian tupuna vahine was of a standing that would have allowed her to get close enough to James Cook in Tahiti to watch him suffer through a painful massage to help relieve his rheumatism during his first Pacific voyage. My ancestress was probably also there when Cook witnessed, and Joseph Banks participated in, a mourning ceremony. On his following voyage, Cook was determined to obtain some sets of ceremonial mourning regalia to take home. He eventually procured around ten complete sets, and today, like many of our ancestral treasures, they are scattered around the world. The most complete ’ahu heva tūpāpa’u is held in the British Museum collections, and considerable time and effort by the museum’s curatorial, conservation and scientific teams have been poured into understanding and studying it as well as any remaining documentation.

I was glad to be asked to help with the analysis of the tapa components and then later to help track down the remaining examples collected by Cook. I am not ashamed to admit that I no longer consider this work. It has now become a bit of a personal obsession, taking me further into the world of my ancestors of the 1700s, like a portal into their understandings of life and spirituality. There is barely any information remaining about the intricacies of meaning of the regalia, which is humbling. I know so little, yet I intimately and intensely know the splendour of these ensembles.

One ʼahu heva tūpāpaʼu is at the Perth Museum, Scotland, and the components, because of their sheer size and range of materials, had been stored separately in the Perth Museum's storerooms, as in Figure 1. It is perhaps due to this, or perhaps in transit between collectors and delivery, that the original barkcloth components are no longer with the rest of the regalia.

The existing elements are exquisite. On reflection and in discussion with the Perth and British Museum teams, I jumped at the chance to re-create some of the tapa so that a more complete regalia might go on exhibition in the Perth Museum's new galleries. This is part of a ground-breaking wider project to bring Indigenous people to the table to consider how galleries are curated. I could not be sure of the size of the original components, so I based my work on the carefully documented information by Monique Pullan and her conservation team at the British Museum.

The British Museum's mourning clothing consists of many layers: two tīputa, a barkcloth apron supporting rows of carved coconut discs sewn over finely woven pandanus matting, a barkcloth sash and belt, a feather cloak, a head cape and head cap, coils and a crown of feathers; then at the front, a breastplate and apron of tiny mother-of-pearl shells, and a mask and crown of large polished mother-of-pearl shells topped with a semicircle of long tropicbird feathers. All these elements cover every inch of the chief mourner except perhaps for the hands and feet.

As well as the absence of the tapa elements, the Perth regalia is also missing the mother-of-pearl shell apron and the feather cloak. By adding the missing tapa, it was envisaged that the existing original pieces would be better represented and placed in context. For this project I decided to use only aute (paper mulberry; *Broussonetia papyrifera*), the plant used to make the original tapa. Paper mulberry trees are cultivated to grow straight with as little branch growth as possible, so that long lengths without knots might be obtained. When the trees are tall enough they are cut, and the bark is pulled away from the inner bast. At the beginning of the project, I was living in rural Australia (where aute is considered a weed), from where I made two large orders of aute from my supplier on the island of Vatulele in Fiji. The aute arrived in strips of dried bast, which I reconstituted by soaking in salt water and then pounded into sheets.



Figure 1. Headdress, mask and breast-crescent components, Perth, Scotland, 2022. All images in this article have been photographed by the author.

Even in segments,
Dazzling your crest of polished
mother-of-pearl shells,
towering mask,
turtles on coconut discs,
and spray of tropicbird tail feathers.
All in fragments,
even in fragments,
your mana is whole

To begin with, I created a tīputa from three large sheets glued with a paste I made from arrowroot powder and water. The tīputa measured 300 × 165 cm and was made with layered barkcloth, and the size created several problems: that of finding the space to lay it out flat, and then how to transport it to Perth. In addition, the original was decorated with stripes of red ochre—I decided it was not worth the risk of colour transferring or smudging during shipping, so I decided to leave it undyed.

I was also asked to create a plain backing for the coconut disc apron as well as a cape and a belt. I decided to gift a set of head coils. A great deal of thought and experimentation goes into working out how pieces were made 250 years ago, and some are easier than others. For example, I loved the challenge of making the twisted belt from dyed and undyed barkcloth (see Fig. 2). Dyeing with natural dyes is a challenge but a joy, particularly if it involves foraging!



Figure 2. Replica belt made with aute and dyed with re'a or turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), 2023.



Figure 3. Dyeing aute with re’a in Tahiti, 2023.

It seems like a lifetime ago when I operated a small gallery from my front garden on Huahine where I sold printed and dyed pareu (sarongs) and ’ahufara (shawls) made from silks and cottons. In those days I used roots of nono (*Morinda citrifolia*) dug from the sandy soils near the lagoon, or otherwise re’a or turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), which from my experience is a richer orange in Tahiti than dried commercial turmeric (see Fig. 3). After washing, peeling and grating the root I would add water and alum as a mordant when dyeing Western fabrics, but with barkcloth I use less water and massage the colour through the denser fibres, leaving my fingers stained yellow.

The two most complex pieces to complete were the head coils and the cape. The original elements were dyed yellow, black and red. In Tahiti, a true deep black was obtained by burning the oily nuts of the tutui (candlenut tree; *Aleurites moluccanus*). After burning the nuts and capturing the resulting fine black soot, a paint can be made by mixing the soot with coconut oil. Red tapa from the regalia’s cape and the head coils was tested by Diego Tamburini, a scientist from the British Museum, and both samples were found to be rubbed with red ochre. Here I was faced with a dilemma—should I obtain these traditional colourants or use synthetic dyes? Living on Norfolk Island, I did not have access to enough candlenuts (some trees grow, but not enough for the purposes of making enough paint). There was another problem to think through: would these colorants transfer during the long transport to Perth and ruin the work? Could I run that risk?

I eventually erred on the side of caution and bought a deep red and black commercial dye. Living on an island means that access to things such as dyes can be sporadic, so I bought the last available packets and started testing the tapa to ensure the colours would take (see Figs 4 and 5).





Figures 4 and 5. Dye testing, 2023.

Figure 6 shows how I worked from a printed a photo of the British Museum cape to understand how it was put together. The British Museum head cape is composed of several different elements. A woven cap was designed to support and secure the cape which hung down to cover the shoulders. Moreover, the cape itself was made up of separate strips of red, yellow and black coloured tapa of different sizes that were pasted together. I was unsure what effect the transport might have on the cape: for example, would rows pasted together come unstuck? I decided the safest practice would be to cut strips to the same width as the original cape, then the triangles as can be seen in Figure 7, but to adhere them to a thick base of barkcloth.

Using the same colours, and offcuts of the stripes, I worked on the head coils. The original coils are visually stunning, despite the faded colours. I was surprised, for the effect they had, how straightforward they were to replicate by rolling small amounts of tapa and twisting and wrapping tiny, blackened strips of pandanus around the tapa to create coils (see Fig. 8).

All the elements, except for the head coils, were sent to Scotland via my father, who accompanied the suitcase to Sydney and from there sent it via



Figure 6. Constructing the cape, 2023.



Figure 7. The completed cape, 2023.



Figure 8. Head coils, 2024.

courier. A few days later, the suitcase arrived safe and sound, with no damage or loss. The challenge then, for the curator, conservator and their teams, was to put it all together on a mannequin that I had not had access to. Figure 9 is a photograph I took when I arrived in Perth for the opening in March 2024. I was stunned at the work achieved by the Museum's team. So much careful planning and thought had been put into this reconstruction, and I was honoured to place the coils (just visible in Fig. 10), which I finished the night before the long trip, on top of the mannequin. Seeing the completed project and the realisation of our combined visions has left me grateful for the way many museums are now opening themselves to the opportunities created by working with Indigenous knowledge holders.

This was a project that defied the confines of time and space—the materials came via Australia from Vatulele and Tahiti and transformed into cloth on Norfolk Island, while in Perth, Scotland, the original and replica components were assembled and brought together to embody the 'ahu heva tūpāpa'u.

NOTES

1. The 'Ahu Sistas is a collective of Pitcairn and Norfolk Island women—Meralda Warren, Jean Clarkson, Sue Pearson and Pauline Reynolds—who work both separately and in collaboration to highlight their foremothers' culture and history (see Reynolds and Clarkson 2020).



Figure 9. Perth's regalia on display, 2024.



Figure 10. Perth's regalia on display, 2024.

2. “My Grandmother is a Tīputa” was exhibited as part of the *Hina Sings…* exhibition with Sue Pearson at Brookfields Gallery at the Whakatāne Museum and Arts, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2022; it will also be exhibited at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery in Wellington, Aotearoa, from 4 October 2024.

GLOSSARY

The terms in this glossary are Tahitian.

’ahu	barkcloth
’ahufara	shawl
’ahu heva tūpāpa’u	chief mourner’s regalia
aute	paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*)
heva tūpāpa’u	mourning ceremony
mana	prestige, authority
pareu	sarong
re’a	turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)
tao’a	treasures, objects
tapa	barkcloth
tīputa	poncho
tupuna vahine	woman ancestor
tutui	candlenut tree (*Aleurites moluccanus*)

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