



“...Like A Mat Being Woven”

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The ancient Polynesian belief is that the artist is a vehicle through whom the gods create. (Erenora Puketapu-Hetet 1989:2)

There is a Tongan proverb that says, “society is like a mat being woven.” The proverb uses the interlacing of pandanus fibers to reflect on the mingling of blood and gender, rank and status, family histories and individual deeds that, over time, produce Tongan society. Like most Polynesian metaphors, there are multiple readings that may be made of ‘*Oku hange ‘a e tangata, ha fala ‘oku lālānga*. In this paper, I draw on the proverb’s implicit endorsement of hybridity (Young Leslie and Addo, this volume) to weave a single theme from separate ‘wefts’ – the strands in a plaited textile – of everyday life and Tongan cultural ideals: commoner women’s textile-work is a key medium in the ongoing process of hybridizing Tongan culture for the contemporary ‘modernity plus tradition’ present.

One set of wefts for this paper are ethnographic. Commoner women’s knowledge and practices have been overshadowed by academics’ and Tongan elites’ emphasis on esoteric knowledge and chiefly uses. This is ironic: for decades Tongan chiefs have been only peripherally involved in textile creation, either as clients or recipients of ceremonial gifts, not producers and deployers. To redress this I document aspects of technical, sociological and cultural knowledge associated with pandanus textiles, as taught to me by Tongan commoner women. The other set of wefts are more philosophical. Women’s textile-related knowledge includes more than the techniques for processing foliage into culturally symbolic cloths. Their skills with harvesting, processing, plaiting and deploying textiles is essential cultural know-how which is recorded in emotional and bodily – rather than didactic – ways. Women ‘feel’ how to make and deploy their textiles. This embodied form of knowledge underwrites essential aspects of Tongan culture, but is devalued as merely labor of the uneducated. Thus, I seek to celebrate a particular form of cultural knowing, one which depends on practice and tangible experience rather than oral instruction. This direction is inspired in part by

the work of Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk (1992, 1997), whose interest in the contemporary and commoner-based adaptations of codified traditions privileged a non-elite perspective. I am also motivated by the significance of plaited textiles in the lives of families I know in rural communities of Tonga, particularly Ha‘apai.

It is my privilege to have a long-term *tauhi vaha‘a – fetu‘ukaki* (caring-and-conferring: see Young Leslie 2005a) relationship with the people of Ha‘ano. This relationship informs what I write here. Ha‘ano is a small atoll in the Ha‘apai region of Tonga, an area frequently described by other Tongans as that part of the nation where “the old ways persist.” The lifestyle tends to be conservative, traditionalist, marked by self-sufficiency but not isolation from factors of globalization (Young Leslie 2004). Commoner families’ lives are enmeshed with textiles: as economic products upon which households depend, as the main form of female labor, and as icons of *angafakatonga* – Tongan tradition.

Tongans refer to the textiles that women make as *koloa* (wealth/valuable). Foreigners see two main types: one is beaten and layered from bark (see papers by Addo, Hermkens and Sharrad, this volume). When painted, it’s called *ngatu*. The other type is plaited (but often mis-termed ‘woven’) from a variety of leaf fibers or bark basts. The process by which thin pandanus (and/or bark) strips are interlaced into textiles is called *lālānga*. While generally referred to as ‘weaving’, *lālānga* is actually plaiting, a process whereby elements, called ‘wefts’ (see Buck 1930) are worked at right angles to each other, but in a diagonal to the artisan and the edges of the product. In plaiting, what is ‘warp’ in one section may be the ‘weft’ in another (Arbeit 1990:5). Because no loom or other stabilizing mechanism is used, the fiber elements themselves must have enough structure to hold the position in which they are placed. Plaiting allows for the use of fiber types that could not otherwise be worked into ‘cloth’.

Tongans do not have a label for this second category. Many English language texts refer to the range of plaited textiles by the rubric ‘mats’ or ‘fine mats’, terms which disguise the varieties and uses of these textiles. Kaepler (1999) coins the term “*me‘a lālān-*



ga” – literally ‘plaited/woven things’ – to distinguish commoners’ various ‘fine mats’ from the elites’ historic ‘named mats’. But “*me’a lālanga*” is not an idiomatic term. Throughout Tonga, when referring to the general category of traditional Tongan textiles, people say ‘*koloa*’ and then refer to plaited textiles by their varied and specific names – *fala*, *fihi*, *ta’ovala*, etc. I use the terms ‘plaited textiles’ or ‘woven *koloa*’ to reflect, respectively, the specific technique used to make the textiles (plaiting), the idiomatic term (*koloa*) plus the usual English gloss of the Tongan verb for the technique (*lālanga* / weaving and plaiting).

Indigenous, Gendered Knowledge and a Lost History

The epistemology of women’s textile knowledge is indigenously Polynesian (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001): much of the requisite knowledge is experiential, tacit and embodied, connected to local seasonal, climactic and familial priorities. It is taught, learned and honed through example, observation and practice rather than verbal instruction. Hands know better than words can say: when teaching me to plait, Ha’ano women would say “Here, Heta, do this.”

This dependence on embodied, tacit rather than oral, knowledge makes the Tongan textile-maker’s know-how different from other examples of ‘traditional’ gendered knowledge, both in Tonga and elsewhere. Tongan child rearing, for example, has linguistically marked stages (see Morton 1996), which appear in social prescriptions for creating healthy children (Young Leslie 1999). In other societies, women’s textile-making techniques are preserved in mnemonic chants, stories, or symbolic allusions (see Keller 1988, March 1984, Messick 1987, Tedlock 1985). For Kanaka Maoli of Hawai’i and for Maori of Aotearoa, stories about plaiting invoke ancestral goddesses. However while woven *koloa* is a potent theme in Tongan poetry and symbolism, and the invention of the first *ta’ovala* (waist garment) is recorded in a story about a sail used as a garment in a moment of embarrassment, Tongans no longer tell stories of deities giving the trick of pandanus processing. How plaiting knowledge became part of Tongan culture – or so important to women – is a history lost in the three thousand and more years that Tongans have lived on their islands.

What has not been lost is the knowledge for cultivating, harvesting, processing and working with the various pandanus vari-

eties, and what type of pandanus is best for what type of textile and occasion. This is gendered, *commoners’* knowledge. Few elites have the embodied skills or practical knowledge required, and while many men may know about these things, that knowledge is, nevertheless, considered women’s: men who actually have the skills to weave are described as *fakaleiti* – feminine gendered.

Categorizing and Making Woven Koloa

Ha’ano women have taught me to identify twenty-five types of woven *koloa*, only two of which are not made with pandanus. Tongans identify plaited textiles according to the variety of pandanus leaf used, weft width, size, whether it is double or single-layered, and type of cultural use. Plaited textiles fall into three general classes which I categorize as ‘garments’, ‘furnishings’ and ‘mantles’. Garments, such as *ta’ovala* or *kie fau*, are worn over clothing, to indicate mourning, celebration, or respect for others. Furnishings, such as *fala*, *lotaha*, and *papa*, are designed for sitting and sleeping. Mantles, such as *fihi fatufa* or *kie tonga*, are sheet-like textiles designed for draping, wrapping or bundling of space or person. Despite my categorizing, it is vital to note that woven



Figure 1: Manu Ngalu prepares *fe’unu* (Ha’ano, Tonga, 2003; all photos by the author).



koloa are fundamentally re-applicable. What was designed to be a single-layered floor cover (a *lotaha*), may be converted into a funeral garment (*ta'ovala putu*); a large mantle may be used to dress a bride, cover a corpse, decorate a church nave, or carpet the king's dais.

There are aesthetic principles common for all woven koloa: surfaces should be smooth and even, with flat, straight edges, square corners, and weft elements that run straight, parallel and at a roughly 45 degree angle to the edges of the piece. Weft lengths depend on the length of the original leaf (or bark), but are generally the length of a woman's outstretched arms (see Fig. 1). While women do not use tools to measure the width of the strips as they slice them from the leaf, width – referred to as “*au*” – generally conforms to a standard gauge: *au lahi* is usually 2-3 cm, *au lalahi* is 1 cm, *au iiki* is 3-4 mm and *au iiki 'aupito* is about 1 mm. Weft width is specific to textile type: *ta'ovala* are *au iiki*, never *au lahi*; *papa* are *au lahi*, never *au iiki* or *au iiki 'aupito* (see Fig. 10 for type details).

Decorative accents (*teuteu*) added to some garments may include colored feathers or yarn, beads, shells, or sequins, and tabs of pandanus leaf. Pandanus tabs may be scissored with zigzag edges, or sliced and knotted into lacy eyelets. While combinations of bright colors are favored (see Fig. 2), color combinations are often determined by availability, or by personal preferences, rather than any prescriptive color aesthetics. There are two exceptions: red feathers are the classic trim for *ngafingafi* and *tu'oua tonga* mantles, and if the double-layered furnishing called *fala fakatou paongo* is fringed, it should be red and black only. Most other *fala* and *lotaha* (both furnishings) are augmented with colored yarn fringes on two or four edges, and *kie tonga* are striking for the profusion of colors and *teuteu*. *Teuteu* are glued, plaited in by hand, machine sewn or embroidered, using darning needles or crochet hooks.

While bark basts from hibiscus (*fau*) and *fanakio* (trees endemic to islands of Niuaotupapu and Niua Fo'ou) are occasionally used, most plaited textiles are made from variants of *pandanus tectoris*. The wild plant is endemic on the littoral of many Pacific atolls, but Polynesians have long produced cultivars; some may be as old as the first voyagers. They traded them, too, as indexed in the



Figure 2: *Ta'ovala with Feathers, Beads and Glitter Yarn* (Ha'ano, Tonga, 2003).

names of some varieties: *tofua*, *tutu'ila* and *lotuma* reference, respectively, Tofua island in Ha'apai, Tutuila in American Samoa, and Rotuma, near Fiji. The pandanus varieties which produce the best leaves for textiles are propagated through cuttings, rather than fruit. Pandanus is grown in men's gardens, and is the only agricultural product in Tonga identified as belonging specifically and solely to women.

Pandanus is harvested, processed and plaited by hand, using simple tools such as blades, soup pots, open fires, sunshine and seawater. Harvesting pandanus is tough work: many types have thorns, and the leaves are long – up to 6 feet in length. It is important to harvest leaves without killing the plant. When processing, women are sometimes, but not necessarily, assisted by husbands, brothers, sons or male neighbors. Women generally control the harvesting and timing according to their own production needs and the age of the pandanus itself. Once harvested, pandanus leaves must be processed into a form ready to be split into strips for plaiting. The basic steps for processing various types of pandanus are outlined in Figure 10.

Of the many varieties, *kie* produces the most prized fibers. It is also the most onerous to harvest and process: each leaf has three edges of claw-shaped barbs that must be removed. The complicated processing, the pearly shades which result and the experience and dexterity required to plait the slippery wefts, explain why *kie* products are the most costly. *paongo*, on the other hand, is equal-

Name	Category	Material	Color	Layers	Weft width	Size (ft)	Decoration
Ngafingafi	Mantle / Garment	Kie	Beige; tan; taupe.	Double	Au iiki'auipito	12 x 12 Over time originals were often divided.	None, or red feathers; kie tabs; along bottom edge.
Tu'oua Tonga	Garment	Kie	Beige; tan.	Double	Au iiki'auipito	6 x 8 or to fit Over time originals were often divided.	None, or red feathers; kie tabs; along bottom edge.
Fala Fakatou-Paongo	Furnishing	Paongo	Dark olive brown	Double	Au lalahi	12 x 12	Yarn fringe unacceptable.
Fihu Fatufa & Fala Fihu	Mantle	Kie	Pearly white / blond	Single or Double*	Au lalahi	10 x 40 up to 100' long	Optional; edges are usually fringed, scissored or knotted from same color kie. Colored yarn is unusual, but possible.
Fala Fakatou Paongo Fakakulasi	Furnishing	Paongo	Dark olive brown	Double	Au lalahi	12 x 12	Red & black yarn fringes.
Kie Tonga	Garment	Kie	Pearly white	Single layered	Au lalahi au iik	6 x 6	Highly adorned: red & other colored feathers; yarns; beads; sequins; on bottom edge only.
Fala Paongo	Furnishing	Paongo	Dark olive brown	Double layered	Au lalahi	12 x 12 8 x 10	Multi-colored yarn fringe on all four edges
Fala Tekumi	Furnishing	Any	Brown & tan	Double	Au lalahi	10 x 10	Multi-colored yarn fringe, four edges; may have contrast colored pandanus woven into the surface pattern; designs include plaid, crown, diamonds, flowers, text.
Fala Paongo or Fakatoututuila or Fakatoulotuma	Furnishing	Any	Brown & tan	Double layered	Au lalahi	Optional usually 'room-sized'	Multi-colored yarn fringe, all four edges; May have contrast colored pandanus woven or sewn into the surface. Designs include flowers, plaid, crown, diamonds, text.
Fala Tofua, Fala Tutuila, Fala Lotuma	Furnishing	Tofua, Lotuma Tutu'ila any non-Kie pandanus	Brown & tan	Double	Au lalahi	Optional usually 'room-sized'	Multi-colored yarn fringe, all four edges; May have contrast colored pandanus woven or sewn into the surface. Designs include flowers, plaid, crown, diamonds, text.
Fala Vala	Garment	Tofua	Blond to white	Double	Au iiki	4 x 6 or to fit	No border or surface decoration; edges should be very straight and flat-finished.
Efu	Garment / Mantle	Kie	Blond	Single	Au iiki	4 x 6 or to fit up to any size	Main pattern is achieved by alternating shiny (upper) and chalky (lower) surfaces of each weft.
Kie Fau	Garment	Fau (bark bast) + Kie	Blond	Double	Au iiki	4 x 6 or to fit	Variable: may have eyelets or knottings with beads.
Fanakio	Garment	Fanakio (bark bast)	Golden tan	Double	Au iiki	To fit	Variable: may have eyelets or knottings with beads.
Ta'ovala Putu; Faka'aho, Fakanonu, Liponi	Garment	Ribbons, plastic lacing, any blackend pandanus.	Brown black, rust, green, purple, rose	Single	Au iiki or Au lalahi	3-4 x 6	Edges may be bound with black cloth; stenciled patterns may be smoked onto surface; contrast elements may be plaited; kie may be dyed post-plaiting; dyes include roots, koka (Bischofia javanica), nonu (morinda citrifolia) and commercial dyes.
Ta'ovala Lokeha	Garment	Tofua	White; ecru; beige; yellow beige; white	Single	Au iiki	3-4 x 6 or to fit	Highly variable: edges may be fringed, knotted or zig-zagged. Finished piece is bleached with coral ash and seawater or chlorine bleach (but bleach damages the weft surface and is considered to produce 'too white' a color and a 'dusty surface texture').
Lotaha	Garment	Tofua, Lotuma or Tutu'ila, never kie.	Tan; yellow beige; white	Single	Au lalahi	Optional usually room-sized	None or multi colored yarn fringes.
Papa	Furnishing	Paongo	Khaki brown	Single	Au lahi	To fit: 4 x 4, 6 x 6, 8 x 8	None.

Figure 10: Types & Rank Order of Woven Koloa (as known on Ha'ano).



ly important as the base material for a highly ranked form of furnishing, a *fala fakatoupāōngo* (double layered *pāōngo*). This type of mat is described as “suitable for the king.” *Pāōngo* dries to mel-low shades of brown, and has a firm, leathery texture. It requires less processing but women say that unlike other varieties, *pāōngo* must be kept in the shade and is best worked in the rainy season: the moister air keeps the stiff fibers flexible. There is a correlate to this in the Maori story for how humans learned flax weaving: the goddess Hinerehia wove only on misty days and at night, because the sun would undo her work.

While women differ as to whether *kie* or *pāōngo* is the most difficult to work, they agree that the other key varieties – *tofua*, *lotuma*, *tutu’ila*, *kukuvalu* and *tapahina* – are easier in terms of processing techniques, and to plait. *Tofua* is most popular because it grows long leaves, is durable, has few barbs, and dries naturally to a blonde shade that is easily bleached (with coral ash and sea water). *Tofua*’s most common use is for the ubiquitous *ta’ovala lokeha*, a garment that denotes respect. *Tutu’ila* tends to produce shorter leaves than the others mentioned, making it slightly less convenient to work with, but when dried it looks quite similar to *pāōngo* and having no barbs, is easier to harvest than *kie*.

Pandanus wefts, called ‘*unu*, are created by slicing longitudinal strips from a processed and dried section of leaf. This process is called *fe’unu* (see Fig. 1). The two outside edges of this processed leaf are tough, and are usually discarded, like the rind of a piece of fruit. Then each ‘*unu* is sliced away with a thin blade, working always from the outside edge, toward the centre. The gauge of the strips, as described above, should be consistent and meet an accepted standard. However, women do not measure this with any sort of device: by experience they know and feel the ideal width of each gauge – *au lahi* to *au iiki ‘aupito*. They match that ideal to the grain in each specific leaf as they slice the wefts. Skill in slicing the leaf strips makes a difference in the quality of the finished product: the grain of a leaf is gently curved, and this curve can lead a blade astray, or cause a rough edge. Women’s fingers find the curve of the leaf even as they are running it over their blade. They compensate for subtle curves and avoid ragged edges with knowledge gathered through and directed with both gross-motor and fine fingertip senses. Their bodies know how to make the product, more explicitly than their tongues can describe, faster than their eyes can focus. The same is true of the actual plaiting process. Even the simplest ‘checkerboard’ pattern

of one over and one under depends upon embodied knowledge: like surgery, creating *koloa* depends upon being able to feel the right point at which to join or separate the elements, and the fingers must be able to grip the sometimes stiff, sometimes slippery single or double elements, and create the correct tension, in order to lay down a *hala* [road] which is straight and even. This process is repetitive, but because each strip is slightly different (in width, thickness, length, flexibility), the process requires constant tacit concentration. The fingers pluck, gather, lift, hold, pull, and flatten, over and over again. A woman sits on the finished sections and works the loose ends of the ‘*unu* ahead of her. Her body weight helps to press that part of the *hala* already woven, and when she has been working for days on end, her back, thighs and ankles scream with the tension of leaning forward, cross-legged, for hours at a time.

Women on Ha’ano generally work on their textiles in one of three ways: individually, with a group on an ad hoc basis, and as a regular member of a cooperating team, called a *toulālanga*. A *toulālanga* operates with a usual maximum of five women and generally no less than three. *Toulālanga* are best for working on large projects or when women are involved in intensive textile production, such as when they are participating in group exchanges of commissioned textiles and other valuables called a *katoanga*. In a *toulālanga*, the women sit together on the same



Figure 3: *Toulālanga*: Ana Seini Taufu, Loutoa Fifita, ‘Uini Hese, Eva Feimo’efiafi (Ha’ano, Tonga, 1992).

piece, each weaving a portion or *hala*, which is connected to those of the women beside them as they progress (see Fig. 3). Ideally, women are matched in expertise, tension and speed so



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that when finished, their *hala* have merged seamlessly. A smooth, flat-lying, well-squared textile is described as “*matamatalelei*.” Unmatched or unskilled weavers may produce a textile with curved or puckered wefts, which may not lay flat or have squared edges – definitely not *matamatalelei*.

Each day is designated for one woman’s item. On her day, that woman’s household is responsible for providing the other women with the main meal of the day, served at mid-morning. The *toulālanga* system gives women company during what otherwise would be long, lonely hours of weaving. It also provides an incentive against procrastination (*fakapikopiko*). Five women are the usual maximum to work together at any one time for two reasons: five fits neatly into the days of the working week, and five women fit comfortably in an 8 or 10-foot wide room.

Depending on their level of expertise, the type of pandanus being worked, the number of hours they devote to the project, and assuming their pandanus is already processed and ready for the *fe’unu* stage, a *toulālanga* of five women can complete five 8’ x 10’ sized *fala* (one for each woman) in four to six weeks. When the piece is completed to the desired size, edges are closed (*puni*). Then, if desired, fringes are added (see Fig. 4). This task is usually done by the owner or someone (a sister or neighbor) with special



Figure 4: *Fala: Pāongo and Tofua, Siipi pattern, by Toa’ila Maea (Ha’ano, Tonga, 2002).*

expertise. In 2002, I saw men completing the final decorative *teu-teu* stage: they were embarrassed to be seen working like women, and reported doing so only because their wives had so many other *fala* to produce, and because a drought had left the family with debts, but no agricultural duties.

Small (1987) outlines the history of the development of rotat-

ing cooperative work parties like *toulālanga* from the earlier organizations called *kautaha* (alliance/cooperative). *Kautaha* were promoted by the late Queen Salote as wealth-generating schemes. As in pre-contact production systems, *kautaha* operated under the auspices of a chiefly woman, except that in a *kautaha* each woman received an equal share of the group’s earnings. *Kautaha* worked together on other projects as well. The *toulālanga* are more democratic and grassroots: they need no elite personage to organize their work. On Ha’ano some *toulālanga* form episodically, others operated together for several years before members decided to return to solo work. Their decisions were affected by their fertility cycles, children’s ages, family incomes and their own preferences. Aside from skill, the predictor for membership in a specific *toulālanga* was variable, but pragmatic: women who lived near each other, or were related to each other (often this category overlapped) and who had similar economic goals, tended to work together.

While economic factors are significant to *toulālanga* participation, textile production is particularly determined by women’s fecundity cycles: women with young babies worked alone, if at all. Of the roughly 25 Ha’ano women who participated in ongoing *toulālanga* between 1991 and 1993, and again in 1999-2000, the youngest child was three, an age at which children are free to roam their neighborhood, play with other children, and be monitored by elder siblings. I have observed this pattern since then, up to and including in 2004. Not only do women delay participation in a *toulālanga* until their youngest child is mobile, the children are encouraged not to play near the weaving houses, and especially discouraged from being in the weaving house. I have never heard this described in terms of sacred or *tapu* spaces (as would be the case in the analogous Maori setting), yet the space of woven *koloa* production is one for adult women, into which others might visit, temporarily, but not stay. Nevertheless, textile production often coincides with motherhood: while children are a distraction or inconvenience where textiles are being plaited, they are also part of the incentive for its production. As I discuss below, in addition to the technical and embodied aspects of woven *koloa* production, to fully appreciate its relationship to gender roles and cultural production, we must acknowledge the symbolic aspects of plaited textile production and use, and how they reinforce Tongan notions of female generativity.

The symbolism and material uses of all textiles is codified in



Tongan tradition, yet open to hybridization. As Teilhet-Fisk (1992) and Weiner (1989) have noted, and as argued elsewhere in this volume (Young Leslie and Addo), textiles' mutability is part of their value: textiles are inherently 'open' in cognitive terms, making them enduring icons for cultural loading, innovation, and pragmatic creativity. At the same time, knowing how to make the varieties of textiles, what to wear, for how long, what to gift to whom and when, implies knowledge associated with good traditional Tongan culture (*'ulunganga fakatonga*). Part of this important cultural knowledge associated with plaited textiles is how they are ranked in importance. Rank is determined by historical traditions of use and appropriate destinations for gifting. Some, identified as *aōnga 'a e Tu'i*, are considered appropriate for momentous occasions or gifting to royals. Others are more utilitarian in use. Rank and economic value are close, but not necessarily equal. Economic value depends on rank, but also the original purchase/gifting agreement, kinship relationships, specific circumstances (such as need for cash, or the gift history of a specific item), as well as width of weft, overall size, workmanship, base material processing and difficulty in plaiting.

Gifts Woven Koloa

In general, commoner women have three main uses for their woven koloa: as a wearable icon, as a form of economic capital, and as gifts in traditional rituals and other ceremonies. Every life passage event – from birth to death, and including marriage, graduation, 21st birthday, overseas travel, title investitures, plus any occasion of strong emotions – are events at which it is important to gift with textiles. Gifting demonstrates love; it invokes positive emotions. Generally, Tongans expect to give to higher ranked persons, including father's sister and her children, and to receive from lower ranked persons, such as mother's brother and his children. At the same time, commoners expect to occasionally gift to nobles and royals, while nobles gift to royals; royals expect to receive from commoners and lesser ranked chiefs on ritual occasions. This marks a compact in which lower ranked persons provide *faka'apa'apa* (respect), and in return receive *'ofa* (beneficence). These exchanges do not necessarily represent balanced reciprocity.

There are other types of gifting occasions as well: brothers and sisters traditionally exchange gifts on the New Year, a sister sending her brother a textile (*fala* or *ngatu*), while he sends her a

cooked pig. *Katoanga* partners often add extra gifts to their commissioned exchanges, as expressions of appreciation. Emotions are strongly associated with textiles: in one particularly dramatic example, one woman gave another a very fine, old, *tu'oua tonga* as a gift of thanks (*me'a 'ofa fakamālo*) when her son, lost at sea and presumed dead, was rescued by the other's husband.

On those occasions when a family receives large presentations of textiles – such as a first or 21st birthday, a funeral or a marriage – it is expected that those gifts will be redistributed, both according to the principles of rank, but also as 'answers' for gifts received. At a funeral, for example, the family of the deceased will receive gifts of textiles from the numerous people who feel a connection or *'hala* (route) between themselves and the deceased. Traditionally, those gifts range from *fala* or *fihu* to (most commonly) lengths of bark cloth and pieces of purchased fabric. The quality and size of gifts marks the relationship and status of givers and recipients. Most family members bring a section of *ngatu* ranging from 6 to 4 *langanga* (a *ngatu* measure, roughly fingertips to elbow), while non-kin such as fellow parishioners, workmates, or neighbors might bring cotton or polyester fabric. All the textiles brought to a funeral should be redistributed, a way of balancing all prior gifts, debts and responsibilities of the deceased. The redistribution is usually determined by the deceased's sisters and father's sisters. In rural communities such as Ha'ano, adults plan for their parents' eventual death by stockpiling several *fala*, *fihu*, *lotaha*, *kie tonga* and even the rarer *efu* (see Fig. 10), to be used for the funeral bier and adornment for the deceased. One of these textiles may be used to wrap the body for burial; others will be given to the ministers who perform the funeral services.

Wearing Woven Koloa

While gifting is a key aspect of plaited textiles' deployment, wearing them is equally important. The purpose and symbolism when wearing plaited textiles is rich, and varies according to specific individual and situation, but generally, when textiles are worn, a person is in a ritualized state. Sometimes this ritual state is a joyous one – as when women celebrate May Day by confirming their membership in the church, or when a bride and groom are adorned with heirloom textiles for their first church attendance as husband and wife (see Fig. 5). In fact, gifting and wearing can be combined: one part of the formal wedding ceremony



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Figure 5: Bride and Groom: Maikolo and Matelita Malakai (Pangai, Tonga, 1992).

consists of wrapping a bride with various mantles of *fihu*, perhaps even garments such as *ngafingafi*, *tu'oua tonga* and/or *kie tonga*. She is then instructed to wear these into the new husband's home, and to sit by his side (see Fig. 6). She may do this several times, each time being told by the kin who have brought her to her new husband's house, to "take off that thing and leave it for your husband's sisters." These textiles ritually seal the bride's special (*tapu*) status, while demonstrating the social standing and love of the bride's family for their kinswoman. The bride's kin also hope that the gifts of beautiful *koloa* from their brother's new



Figure 6: Bride wrapped in a fihufatufa: Matelita Malakai and Heu'ifangalupe Vake (Pangai, Tonga, 1992).

wife will ensure the groom's sisters will not be jealous, and will treat the new bride with kindness as she moves into their home and takes the affection of their brother (Young Leslie 1999:286-289).

Ta'ovala: Modern Metonyms, Traditional Hybrids

Of the three general categories of plaited textiles, garments – known as *ta'ovala* – are in many ways the most interesting. Generally, a *ta'ovala* is special textile worn about the waist and hips. They are usually plaited from pandanus or bark fiber but I have also seen plastic lacing, gift-wrapping ribbon (see Fig. 7), and burlap sacking used for *ta'ovala*. Waist wraps are quite old in terms of Tongan traditional practice, and were also found among other Polynesians, as samples collected from Cook's expeditions



Figure 7: Mele Fifita's *ta'ovala liponi* (Ha'ano, Tonga, 2003).

demonstrate (e.g., Kaepler 1978). In Tonga they have also been subject to overt codification as modern metonyms for Tongan identity. Both the nation state and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga are implicated in the modern indexing of Tongan identity through Queen Salote's 20th century codification of *ta'ovala* wearing (Teilhet-Fisk 1992a, 1992b). In the 21st century, Queen Salote's innovation pertains across the Tongan international ethnoscape. When the Tongan Olympics team attended the opening ceremonies in 2002, they wore *ta'ovala*. Today, a Sunday drive down Beretania Street in Honolulu, through Mangere in Auckland, or in any of the other overseas Tongan communities, will provide many examples of women and men wearing *ta'ovala* as they enter church.



With all *ta'ovala*, what type is worn and how, depends on the circumstances, and one's social status in that situation. In all cases the act of wrapping in a *ta'ovala* embodies one as offering *faka'apa'apa* (respect) to others, including the *fonua* (land/people). Anyone approaching a noble or a royal family member must be wearing a *ta'ovala*. Chiefs' ceremonial attendants, called *mātāpule*, tie their *kafa* (the rope that holds a *ta'ovala* in place) low on the waist, with the *ta'ovala* itself rising high in the chest. This gives the *mātāpule* a space to carry kava for his chief, while visibly demonstrating their special role as a *mātāpule*. At a funeral, the size and type of *ta'ovala* indicate one's kinship rank in relation to the deceased (Kaeppler 1978, Young Leslie 1999). Wesleyans wear *ta'ovala* to church to demonstrate respect for God and His representative, the minister. Wesleyan Ministers and their family members often wear them whenever they are out in public (some even when working in their gardens), to demonstrate their perpetual service to God and *faka'apa'apa* to the *fonua*. Likewise, nobles, government officers and visitors or newcomers to villages may wear a *ta'ovala* to demonstrate respect for the *fonua*.

In the Chiefly Church (a Methodist denomination), women who have matured to the status of *akonaki* (instructor) wear the hat adopted from the early missionary wives, plus a *ta'ovala* or *kiekie* (a belt with dangling elements made from a variety of materials; see Teilhet-Fisk 1992). Ministers and lay preachers wear suit coats and their *ta'ovala*. Yet women and men of the Independent Church (an older Methodist congregation) wear hats and suits respectively when they reach *akonaki* or *mālānga* (lay preacher) status; but youthful members wear *ta'ovala* or *kiekie*. The Independent Church's stance indexes both the historically recent re-vitalization (by Queen Salote) of the wearing of the *ta'ovala* and their claim to be the oldest church in the nation. In the Independent Church, the neo-traditional deployment of *ta'ovala* as public markers of Tongan tradition that was encouraged by Queen Salote was rejected in favor of adopted codes of dress more closely linked with God and the (pre-Salote) emancipation of Tongan commoners from the hegemony of the chiefs: missionaries' dark suits for men, and broad-brimmed hats for women. This apparel is now recognized as equally old-fashioned and modern, while the hybrid modernity of the contemporary *ta'ovala* is, ironically, elided.

This is not to say that innovations in the use of *ta'ovala* and

other textiles are historically or culturally inauthentic. There are, for example, clear resonances between contemporary weddings (e.g., Collocott 1923 and Young Leslie 1999) and funeral wearing of textiles with pre-Christian times when *koloa*, wrapped around objects as mundane as blocks of wood or as esoteric as shark's teeth, sanctified them and transformed them into gods. In his proselytizing drive through the Tongan islands, the chief who became the first Christian monarch (Taufa'ahau Tupou I) burned many of these gods, gods' houses and *koloa* (Latakefu 1974), but he did not destroy the sanctity that textile mantles, garments and furnishings create: in death, the time when a person moves from the world of the living to that of the spirit and to the elevated rank of deceased/ancestor, a corpse is displayed draped in a *ta'ovala efu*, *fihu* or some other luminous, pearly cloth. Today, white commercial fabrics may replicate this principle when *fihu* or *efu* are not available, but the traditional textiles are preferable. Burial includes wrapping in a *fihu*, *efu*, *fala*, *lotaha*, or any other class of textile that the family selects.

Wesleyan women wear their most beautiful *ta'ovala lokeha* or *kie fau* to the annual church roll call. During the drought of 1992, Ha'ano's Town Officer wore a *ta'ovala lokeha* the day he harvested his new crop of corn: historically, Tongans participated in first fruits ceremonies, called *polopolo*. It was clear at the time that, as our Town Officer gifted corn to ministers in the village, his harvesting had sacred as well as secular connotations. Likewise, Hiko, the Ha'ano chief's ritual brother, recounts wearing a *ta'ovala fau* when he took gifts of kava to put on the water during the ceremonially significant run of fish which is associated with the origin of the chiefly titleholder (Young Leslie 2005b). There are numerous other examples, but the point is the same: the sanctifying nature of wrapping in textiles which existed before Taufa'ahau I began his proselytizing attacks on the pre-Christian gods' houses persists today, if in a form hybridized by contemporary ideologies and practices.

Despite the strong ritual connections, contemporary deployment of plaited textiles is not just ceremonial. As Schevill (1996:5) says, "Through textiles we see ourselves in mirrors that reflect the history of changing civilizations." Tongan women's plaited *koloa* has real, fiscal value, with applications to contemporary situations (James 1997, Young Leslie 1999, Horan 2002). In one instance I observed, a family suffering extreme public censure offered their *tu'oua tonga* for sale, so as to pay their children's



school fees and certain court debts. Over the past decade, women have been using their woven *koloa* as collateral for bank loans. This began, probably, with a scheme promoted by the Tongan Development Bank in the early 1990s, when rural village men were able to borrow money to purchase fishing nets or expand their farm fences, with their wife's or sister's *fala* or *fihi* as collateral. Now, pawnbrokers in both Nuku'alofa and Auckland accept *koloa* (plaited textiles and bark cloth) for short-term loans (Addo 2004, Addo and Besnier forthcoming).

Normally, over the course of their lifetime, women like those living on Ha'ano, expect to make woven *koloa* of various types, as well as to collect enough to be able to distribute as required at the various life passage events, especially weddings, funerals, baptisms, first and twenty-first birthdays, or as traveler's gifts. Commoner women also expect to make extras, which they can use to give to other women, in exchange for return gifts of bark cloth, cash, or other goods, offer as collateral for a bank loan, or to sell at market. The woven *koloa* is usually stacked under mattresses, awaiting the need. Whether hoarded, displayed or sold, woven *koloa* are a comfort to women, whether in Tonga or overseas: "when I have many *fala* I feel wealthy," I was told by a woman living in Auckland. The multiple ways in which plaited textiles are deployed reinforce Tonga's hybridized neo-traditional culture, and demonstrate the ways in which Tongan women are adapting their *koloa* to lives affected by neo-liberal economies and globalization (see also James 1997, Horan 2002).

Reading & Re-reading: Allusions in Woven Koloa

The proverb which inspired this paper is a metaphor well grounded in the pragmatics of everyday life. Its implications of organized potential and openness makes it a compelling metaphor for hybridity, but the textile production upon which it is based is itself a compelling medium for marking social and cultural continuity and change. In this final section I want to return to the proverb, and explore its multiple potentialities with respect to the symbolism which helps make the historical and the contemporary feel connected, at least for textile producers such as those of Ha'ano.

Women working cooperatively (*i.e.*, in a *toulālanga*) on a single textile describe themselves as creating a series of 'roads' – *hala* – that interconnect with each other's *hala*. In one possible reading

of the proverb, each *hala* is comparable to the generations of a particular kindred, called a *kāinga*. The *kāinga* is the basis for Tongan identity, and most social activity. *Kāinga* are bilateral kindreds which persist through time, connected by each individual person's knowledge of genealogies, locations and ideas of relatedness. The latter is often identified today in terms of who cooked at a funeral, who sat at the head of the deceased, who wore what type of funeral attire, who brought what type of textile offering to a wedding, who lived where, and/or who one's parents forbade as a romantic interest. Members of these bilateral kindreds are held together by stories and shared kin-based responsibilities, including obligatory exchanges of foods and textiles.

Over time, textiles typically move through one's *kāinga* in a standard pattern: from the lower-ranked mother's brothers and their children, to oneself (or one's children), and from there, to the higher ranked father's sisters and their children (see Fig. 9). Thus, in a further reading of the allusion, the directional routes pandanus fibers make as they are laid, and their extension through and across the *toulālanga* co-weavers' *hala*, mimic the crossing of the *koloa* from the maternal side of one's *kāinga* to the paternal side, a gifting process that carries on through time, to tie generations of kin together. Like any piece of cloth, a pandanus mat is potentially un-ending: it can be as long and as wide as desired, limited only by the maker's skill. The proverb thus confirms that, like a mat which is strong because individual elements are combined and intertwined into a single unit, society is strongest when persons' actions and destinies are entwined and overlaid upon others', making families, communities, potentially all humanity, from the disparate wefts of individual lives, time after time.

There are other, less philosophical, readings that may be made of the proverb – for example, as the fibers are plaited, one set is lifted, so that another fiber may be laid between them. For English-speaking weavers, the process in which strands of the warp are separated to allow the weft to pass through is called creating 'the shed'. But Tongan women identify one set of wefts as the *fokotu'u* (upright) and the others as the *fakatokoto* (reclined). When, in humor, the wefts are assigned sexes, the similes drawn from the adage and the mat-making process become more ribald: the upright *fokotu'u* may be thought of as male while the reclining *fakatokoto* may be female. One may also flip the allusion: when the *fokotu'u* are pulled up, they create a tunnel-like open-



Figure 8: Wefts and the 'shed': 'Uini Hese (Ha'ano, Tonga, 1992).

ing (the 'shed') into which the *fakatokoto* are inserted (see Fig. 8). On the day I received this particular lesson (and in case I did not understand the full extent of their innuendos), the women reminded me that one of the most traditional uses of woven *koloa* is as a *mohenga* or marriage bed (at this point in the lesson my interlocutors dissolved into hoots and giggles). These readings underscore one of the key symbolisms associated with *koloa*, that of female generativity.

As I watch women plaiting, their bodily posture resonates with that of the ideal Tongan beauty: the demure yet potentially generative bride. At one part of the wedding ceremony, bride and groom are seated upon a dais of textiles. The textiles are gifts from their maternal *kāinga* and the homology between textiles and maternal kin is demonstrated in the ritual of *fa'ehuki*, wherein bride and groom are seated in the laps of their matrilineal kin. In this way, the importance of maternal kin in "pushing their children up" with genealogy, wealth and love, is ritually signified (Young Leslie 1999:286-289). But sitting on the mound of textiles also indexes the two forms of wealth that pertain specifically to women in Tongan traditional perceptions: that of mother, and textile/wealth producer. Likewise, seated on her *koloa*, looking down at her work, the woman plaiting is a woman who is creating wealth for the present and the future. Thus, as women plait, day by day, they embody incipient generativity, just as a new bride embodies the immanence of that other form of perpetuating wealth, children.

Pushing this allusion further, seated together in a *toulālanga*, a group of women brings to mind another image of traditional Tonga, the *ma'ulu'ulu*. The *ma'ulu'ulu* is a seated dance, in which groups of hands moving in unison tell mythopoeic stories, like the first discovery of kava, itself a myth of generativity

(Biersack 1991). But Ha'ano women are not simply telling stories, or representing idealized images – they are busily working, showing themselves to be industrious, anything but lazy or careless; through their production, they see themselves publicly demonstrating that they have the requisite skills required of good Tongan mothers: respect for family, love for their children, knowledge of *angafakatonga* (the Tongan way) and *ulungaanga fakatonga* (Tongan traditional culture). Through lives of plaiting they show that they are hard working Christians, devoting hours, days, years, to create the textiles of both ceremonial and economic import, while demonstrating implicitly the creative potential in all aspects of life. These are key variables in Tongan culture, variables embodied and reproduced by commoner women as they produce their textiles.

These readings – of proverbs and the culture-work of textiles – offer very different symbolic potentialities than those ascribed by elites who talk of enshrining dynastic power and family position over hundreds of generations (*i.e.*, Kaepler 1999, Weiner 1989). My point, however, is not that one reading is more correct than another, but that these cultural objects and mundane actions are already hybrid, ready sources for pragmatic creativity, open to richly multiple readings. At the same time, the very practice of weaving, the cognitive and tacit knowledge involved in making as well as deploying textiles, are processes in which both women's roles and Tongan culture itself are created, interwoven and recreated, in ways equally pragmatic, tacit and symbolic. This is the point of my second theme or wefts in this paper: the philosophical value of commoner women's textile production. Theirs is essential cultural knowledge which is embodied, codified in practice; ritualized, but accessed neither orally nor through written texts. It is traditional knowledge which depends on mothers, sisters and daughters being able to perpetuate traditional lifestyles, and traditional forms of pragmatic creativity. Their knowledge and epistemological way of knowing are core to the ongoing production of Tongan culture.

In both its production and deployment, women's *koloa* weaves together the social, cultural and spiritual Tongan worlds. Used to mark social rank, personal status, to bind those in ritually sacred states and protect others from sites and states of ritual danger, *koloa* ties and re-ties individuals in relations of mutual obligation (*fatongia*) and nurturance (*tauhi va*). It serves as the metonym for identity as Tongans (see Teilhet-Fisk 1992a, 1992b). At the level



of the individual, making, hoarding, gifting and selling their *koloa* is motivated, Ha'ano women say, by *'ofa* (love/generosity/empathy/beneficence) for their children, extended family, parents and husbands. It is through their physical labor making *koloa* that women demonstrate personal industry, as opposed to the *laissez-faire* laziness called *fakapikopiko* and *noa'ia*. Lack of industry is a characteristic derided by church and state. In their textile production, women fulfill moral expectations as well as familial and other social obligations. As a utilitarian object for sleeping or sitting, as a ceremonial wrapping of the body, as poly-semantic garments and re-circulating gifts, woven *koloa* integrates a woman, her family and an extended social network of kin, neighbors, and Tongans anywhere. With their plaited textiles, women nurture their social relations. Woven *koloa* produces a woven world: ideally, woven *koloa* should be tightly plaited, with neat straight

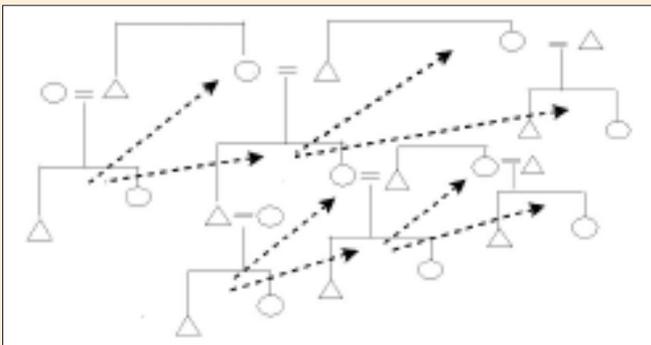


Figure 9: Traditional Gifting Flows over Multiple Generations: Father's Sisters, Mother's Brothers and their children are shown as recipients and sources of *koloa*, respectively. Generations are shown skewed to represent ranking of sisters (circles) and their descendants relative to brothers (triangles) and their descendants.

edges and a smooth, unmarred surface. Its base materials, colors and designs are open to invention, as Mele Fifita's *ta'ovala liponi*, and the incorporation of yarn, sequins, beads, commercial dyes as decorative elements, demonstrate. The interlaced beauty of well-plaited textiles resonates with the way society operates (at least ideally). But that same beauty also reflects in a moral sense, on the skills, creative capabilities and cultural knowledge of the woman who produced it. Textiles, the material through which women such as those from Ha'ano cast themselves as ideal, traditional, culturally sanctioned role models, are the key material medium for regenerating Tongan culture at the level of the individual.

Tongan commoner women take the thorny, inedible screwpine

leaf, and transform it into 'cloth' (Weiner 1989). That process, the work that women do to create woven *koloa* from pandanus, is a form of embodied knowledge, significant to the construction of feminine and maternal identity. The homologies between plaiting, the resultant *koloa*, female gender and motherhood is equally metonymic and metaphoric: women make plaited textiles, the resultant *koloa* is women's wealth, making *koloa* is women's work; women make children, children are women's most precious wealth, making children is women's work. Children become social beings through *koloa* exchanges that are themselves valued as the medium essential for perpetuation and definition of society. Woven *koloa* demonstrate the qualities of good mothering, and the extended support a child has – they show that a single child is actually part of a much larger social whole, perpetuated across time and space. As such, woven *koloa*, society, children, and female generativity are mutually constituting valuables. At the same time, plaited textiles are available for international scenarios, such as export overseas, as bank collateral, and as national symbols of identity.

Plaited textiles are objects which in use, application, production and signification, are implicitly conjoined, multiple, imbricated; especially so when understood to be totally traditional. Tongan modernity, with its blending of pre- and post-colonial values retains the very hybridity which was first inscribed, who knows when, in the proverb "*Oku hangē 'a e tangata, ha fala 'oku lālānga.*" These values, these symbols, this embodied knowledge – and the cultural logic prescribing hybridity – continue to pertain in the fact that society is like a mat being woven. **PA**

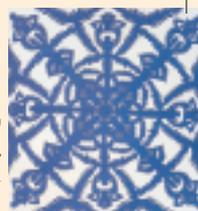
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