ART | RESEARCH international
A Transdisciplinary Journal

ENGAGING WITH TAPA AND NGATU: CREATING SPACE FOR STORYING ABOUT TONGAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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Fire Fonua is the son of Reverend Pitasoni Taelata He Vaha Ilolahia Fonua and Lavinia Talakihesina Ulakai Fonua. He was born in Fasi, Tongatapu and migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand in the late 1970s as a small child. He makes jewellery using ngatu, tapa and other woven koloa.

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Lavinia Talakihesina Ulakai Fonua is the daughter of Ulakai Poteta and Kalisi. She was born in Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu, and migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand in the late 1970s. She is engaged in the creative practice of jewellery making using ngatu, tapa, and other woven koloa as a cultural advisor and muse.

Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows MNZM is the daughter of Sione Topeni Taulangafalea of Vakataumai, Falevai Vava'u and 'Ema Lu'isa Paluvai from Muitoa Ha'ano and Holopeka in Ha'apai. Sulieti was born in Falevai Vava'u Tonga and migrated to New Zealand in 1978. As a child in Tonga, she was five when she started picking the shoots off the hiapo plants. At eight, she joined her mother and the women of the village to koka'anga every month where she evolved into a weaver and ngatu tapa artist.

Tui Emma Gillies was born in New Zealand in 1980 to Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows from Falevai Vava'u, Tonga and Barry Milton Burrows. Tui grew up in a tapa womb: her bedroom walls were covered in her grandmother's ngatu and fine mats covered the ceiling. Tui began making and selling tapa art at six years old; Sulieti would sell Tui's small tapa works at the Otara fleamarket. Tui preserves her family's ancestral DNA through the sacred ritual of tapa making.

Abstract: The making and gifting of koloa faka-Tonga (women's valuables, also known as koloa) has been an integral part of Tongan identity and culture for as long as anyone can remember. Working collaboratively on tapa and ngatu provides space for discussions and understanding, and reflections of Tongan identity and culture. The practice of gifting koloa has continued outside of the Kingdom of Tonga as Tongans migrate for new opportunities, including Aotearoa New Zealand (henceforth Aotearoa NZ). Using two different examples, this article will explore, through talatalanoa, how Tongan family partnerships working with tapa/ngatu in contemporary ways are sites of intergenerational knowledge sharing through art practices in Aotearoa NZ. Sulieti Burrows and Tui Emma Gillies are a mother-daughter partnership of tapa artists who work and reside in Aotearoa NZ and use their time together to share stories and make tapa works depicting what concerns them in contemporary society. Also residing in Aotearoa NZ, Lavinia and Fire Fonua are a mother-son partnership who turn koloa into contemporary personal adornment, alongside Fire's wife, Sonia. In this article, the four Tongan authors' reflections on inter-generational knowledge sharing and practices related to koloa making and gifting are described and illustrated using examples of their work. Their diverse stories also reflect on Tongan material culture, and Tongan identity, and demonstrate how working on practices that centre koloa provides opportunities to consider what it means to be Tongan in Aotearoa NZ, and how Tongan ways of being, knowing, and doing are valued as tu'atonga.

Keywords: Tonga; koloa fakatonga; tapa; ngatu; Tongan identity

Koloa faka-Tonga refers to a variety of items including ngatu (painted barkcloth), kiekie (worn by women around their waist), ta'ovala (mats worn around the waist), fine mats, baskets, and other mats. The making and gifting of koloa has been an integral part of Tongan identity and culture for as long as anyone can remember. Many aspects of koloa faka-Tonga (koloa) are well understood and described, such as how different koloa are made, and their meaning and role in the gifting that occurs at Tongan kavenga. This reinforces Tonga's structured and stratified society, and the roles that are played in the production of koloa, both male and female. Authors and academics such as Fanny Wonu Veys, Ping-Ann Addo, and Billie Lythberg, among others, have explored the complexity and changing nature of Tongan cultural identities in Aotearoa NZ with respect to ngatu, tapa, and other material culture. Their work has highlighted the imaging of Tongan identity through art (Lythberg, 2013) and changing material culture (Addo, 2013; Lythberg, 2017), but also the ways in which people are maintaining familiar cultural activities (Addo, 2013) in the Aotearoa NZ diaspora.

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how koloa is a site for inter-generational knowledge sharing by exploring the perspectives and lived experiences of Tongan community-based art practitioners who are currently creating with Tongan materials; in this case, two different families in Aotearoa NZ. We discuss our thinking with respect to koloa, Tongan material culture, and cultural identity. To do so, we illustrate our considerations of our Tongan cultural identity through our engagement with specific koloa faka-Tonga, ngatu and tapa (unpainted barkcloth), and ta'ovala, weaving our art practice and stories together. The authors are positioned as follows:

- Fire Fonua is the son of Reverend Pitasoni Taelata He Vaha Ilolahia Fonua and Lavinia Talakihesina Ulakai Fonua. He was born in Fasi, Tongatapu and migrated to Aotearoa NZ in the late 1970s as a small child.
- Sonia M. Fonua is married to Fire Fonua and is Pāpālangi (of European ancestry), born and raised in Aotearoa NZ.
- Lavinia Talakihesina Ulakai Fonua is the daughter of Ulakai Poteta and Kalisi. She was born in Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu, and migrated to Aotearoa NZ in the late 1970s.
- Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows MNZM is the daughter of Sione Topeni Taulangafalea of Vakataumai, Falevai Vava'u and 'Ema Lu'isa Paluvai from Muitoa Ha'ano and Holopeka in Ha'apai. Sulieti was born in Falevai Vava'u Tonga and migrated to Aotearoa NZ in the 1970s.
- Tui Emma Gillies was born in New Zealand in 1980 to Sulieti and Barry Milton Burrows. She began making and selling tapa art as a child.

Each Tongan author has contributed to this article by sharing their stories and knowledge about working together with and around tapa and ngatu to demonstrate the

importance of koloa and the gifting of koloa in Tongan culture as a means to consider Tongan cultural identity in Aotearoa NZ.

Situating Tongans in Aotearoa NZ

Aotearoa NZ is home to people from many different Pacific Island countries who make up a significant, and heterogenous, population. The fourth largest ethnic population in the country, Pacific peoples range from recent migrants to third- or fourth-generation citizens with Pacific heritage (Sorensen & Jensen, 2017), and may have one or more connection(s) to nations with political and legislative linkages to Aotearoa NZ. Many people have been attracted to the opportunities in Aotearoa NZ and migrated for a variety of reasons, including access to education, employment, and, in some instances, health care.

Like other Pacific peoples, Tongans have been arriving in Aotearoa NZ in increasing numbers since the 1940s (Statistics New Zealand & Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010; Statistics New Zealand, 2019a). Initially welcomed to fill labour shortages, policy shifts in the mid-1970s restricted arrival numbers for Pacific peoples. The Pacific population has continued to proliferate, however, making up 8.1% of the total population at the time of the 2018 Census.

According to the 2018 New Zealand Census, Tongans were the second-largest Pacific ethnic group: 21.6% or 82,389 people identified as Tongan (Statistics New Zealand, 2019b). Age-wise, 42% of Tongans were aged under 15, and the median age was 20.5 years old. Despite Samoan being the largest Pacific ethnicity (47.8% or 182,721), Tongans are the fastest growing Pacific population, primarily because of natural population growth: Tongans experienced 19.5% growth in the years 2006 to 2013, compared with 9.9% for Samoans (Statistics New Zealand, 2019c).

The 2018 census data also provides other useful information about Aotearoa NZ's Tongan population. Almost 83,000 people identified as having Tongan ethnicity, a significant increase from 50,478 in 2006. Tongans predominantly (over 75%) reside in Auckland; 13.4% arrived between five and nine years ago, while close to 45% have lived in Aotearoa NZ for 20 years or more. Almost two-thirds of Tongans were born in Aotearoa NZ, particularly those under 30 years of age. Around 63.9% of the Tongan population identify with one ethnic group, with almost 22% identifying with two different ethnic groups. Ninety percent speak English, 39% speak two languages, and just under 80% identify as Christian. This information helps to illustrate how diverse the Tongans who reside in Aotearoa NZ are, and how the population is changing over time with respect to their place of birth and ancestry.

Tongans in Aotearoa NZ: Culture and Identity

Tongans have spread from the Kingdom of Tonga to many parts of the globe, particularly Aotearoa NZ, Australia, and parts of the United States of America. When any population migrates, this change in circumstances and location influences their identity and culture. For many Tongans, they are navigating what it means to be traditional, but also how to adapt and experience modernity in their new contexts (Addo, 2009). Like many other commonly used words, *culture* can mean different things to different people. In this article, we consider a definition of culture given by renowned Tongan academic Konai Helu Thaman (1998):

> I define culture as the way of life of a discrete group, which includes a language, a body of accumulated knowledge, skills, beliefs and values. I see culture as central to the understanding of human relationships and acknowledge that members of different cultural groups have unique systems of perceiving and organising the world around them. I also believe that the ways in which we have been socialised largely influence our behaviour and way of thinking as our world view. (p. 120; as cited in Coxon et al., 2002, p. 6)

This exploration of culture from a Tongan perspective is important here because the art/research in action described in this article is focused on Tongans in Aotearoa NZ. Like Edmond Fehoko's work around faikava in Aotearoa NZ, this piece explores how different Tongans are engaging with koloa as a way to be "nurturing, reinforcing and maintaining of the Tongan identity, culture, language and traditional values and beliefs" (2015, p. 132).

Although Thaman's definition emphasises cultural continuity rather than change, as Sahlins (1976) pointed out, "change begins with culture, not culture with change" (p. 22). In anthropology, culture is a very important concept. Though many early anthropologists claimed culture was "rigidly bounded, separated, unchanging, coherent, uniform, totalized and systematic" (Sahlins, 1999, p. 404), Sahlins' questioned how cultures can be uniform when individuals who consider themselves to be of the same culture can be completely conflicted and contradictory in their beliefs. We agree with Sahlins (1999), that culture is not "bounded, reified, essentialized and timeless" (p. 403), and that culture does change. To avoid any misunderstanding, in this article the definition of culture builds off Thaman's viewpoint outlined above but also refers to a dynamic, ever-changing body of knowledge, ways, and practices that connect a group of people.

We also recognise that the Tongan culture we have experienced is diverse due to our gender, socio-economic status, the level of assimilation, integration or isolation from Western culture. These 'subpatterns' are further complicated by different geographical location and identity as Tongans from either the Kingdom of Tonga or Aotearoa NZ. Using Thaman's definition, however, although the ways we have been socialised—and therefore behave—may be different, we share knowledge, skills, beliefs, and values that make us identify culturally as Tongan.

Art and Identity

Art has long been a form of expression, signalling the artist's conceptualisations of themselves, their contexts, their opinion, and their experiences. Vilsoni Hereniko (1999) described art as a visioning of the creator, "who they were, are, or could be" (p. 137) with respect to their culture, ethnicity, politics, gender, and context. For us, this is important because it creates the platform from which the stories below can be shared, as Tongan New Zealanders contributing to an understanding of identity in Aotearoa NZ. Expressions of identity are a means to share self. Yet, tensions exist between what is shared and how it is received, especially if there are conflicting views on what something is, or is not. To assist this, Hereniko offered that "our cultural identities are therefore always in a state of becoming, a journey in which we never arrive; who we are is not a rock that is passed on from generation to generation, fixed and unchanging" (p. 138). The contextualising and unpacking of identity is important for this art/research piece because the art works that are drawn on to illustrate the stories shared below consider cultural identities—those of four Tongans residing in Aotearoa NZ: one born in Aotearoa NZ, three who were not; three women, one man; two tapa artists, two who have a passion for working with ngatu; and so on. We offer these insights into who we are, and how we think and behave, which may counter those that are published or considered elsewhere, to add to the understanding of what it is to be Tongan. This aligns with Hall's (1996) conceptualisation that identities are "increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (p. 4) rather than assuming a culturally essentialist approach.

Koloa

Koloa is the collective term for treasures or valuables. It encompasses all aspects of our culture and what we consider to be our wealth, including our language, cultural values and beliefs, skills, and arts. Koloa can also specifically refer to ngatu, large cloths made from the beaten inner bark of the mulberry tree, and woven goods such as fine mats and baskets. The practices behind these Tongan treasures are

centuries, if not thousands of years old. In Tongan culture, the making of koloa faka-Tonga is considered women's work, a space of gendered wealth production (both economic and social) and knowledge sharing (Addo, 2004; Addo, 2009). A central part of Tongan culture and identity is the gifting of this traditional form of wealth, primarily ngatu (painted mulberry cloth) and other handmade goods such as fala and kie (woven mats from pandanus), at special kavenga (large celebratory ceremonies). This wealth includes contributions from women's work, koloa fakatonga (identified above), alongside the outputs of men's work, ngaue, that can consist of agricultural items such as pigs and yams. Both forms of gendered wealth are given at kavenga; however, the women's version of what is gifted has been maintained in a more traditional format as ngatu and mats, unlike the men's work which is nowadays more likely to be replaced with money (Addo, 2004). The gendered aspects of this gifting process are distinct but intertwined, and explains why the gifting of koloa is of interest to most family members, regardless of gender.

The gifting of koloa at birthdays, weddings, funerals, and so forth, recognises the value of different family ties, status, and relationships, particularly privileging the matrilineal line in the families present at the event. The status of each kainga (extended family) is determined by their relationship to another kainga; whether they are 'eiki (superior) or tu'a (inferior) to another kainga depends on who each family is. The gifting also reflects the core Tongan principles of 'ofa (love and generosity), fatongia (duty and obligation), fetokoni'aki (reciprocity), and faka'apa'apa (respect). This practice is pre-Christian and recognises the privilege and importance of women in Tongan society that can be traced back in Tongan mythology, and was noted by early European explorers (Filihia, 2001; Herda, 1999). Meredith Filihia (2001) explains the genealogical link between koloa and Pulotu (the Tongan spirit world), illustrating the importance and longevity of koloa in Tongan culture: "When women fabricate koloa, the mana of Pulotu is woven into their mats and hammered into their barkcloth, thus making these goods valuable items to be treasured" (p. 387).

Tongan women make ngatu communally, usually in village-based groups called koka'anga. Each woman contributes a smaller piece of feta'aki; many people are required to contribute to the making of a large piece because the beating is incredibly time-consuming. Once the smaller pieces are connected, it is then usually decorated with kupesi (symbols) that represent particular meanings such as lineages, locations, or events. The decorating is traditionally done with plant-based dyes and paints, but these paints, as well as the materials used in the making of koloa, are increasingly influenced by foreign materials due to ease of access and cost.

The gifting of koloa has continued with the diasporic Tongan populations in their new home countries as a means to express and maintain their identity and tauhi vā

(nurture relational spaces) kin relationships (Evans, 2001; Herda, 1999; Ka'ili, 2005). The importance of this gifting for maintaining transnational connections has been discussed by Ka'ili (2005) as being a means to nurture sociospatial relations, while recognising that different goods are more accessible in Tonga compared with diasporic contexts. Hence, many people are now reliant on purchasing koloa in Tonga for their events rather than making it themselves. There are, however, some groups engaging and re-engaging in ngatu making or working with ngatu in different places including Aotearoa NZ. These sites of collaboration are important places for talatalatanoa around culture and identity, and are an example of how what happens in the Tongan diaspora results from "many individual decisions taken within a cultural frame rooted and reproduced in particularly Tongan sensibilities" (Evans, 2001, p. 2). Two different family partnerships making such individual decisions are the focus of this article, Lavinia Fonua and her son Fire Fonua, and Sulieti Burrows and her daughter, Tui Emma Gilles.

Lavinia and Fire engage in the reinterpretation of ngatu and other Tongan crafts into personal adornment, alongside Fire's wife. Sonia. This results in constant storytelling and sharing of knowledge, perspective, and opinion on what koloa means today, how their family has engaged with ngatu and the gifting of koloa in the past, what happens in Tonga now, and what it means to express Tongan culture in Aotearoa NZ.

Sulieti and Tui are world-renowned tapa artists. They work together to create ngatu using traditional methods, but also explore contemporary techniques in some of their pieces. Sulieti and Tui explore current issues in their art practice, particularly climate change and gender equality.

In this article, we share stories about how important intergenerational partnerships are for creating opportunities and spaces to reflect on and share our stories and thinking about Tongan culture and identity in Aotearoa NZ.

Talatalanoa

This research is autoethnographic in nature; autoethnography allows us to tell our stories and legitimise our own experiences and knowledge (Fa'avae, 2019). To tell these stories, we engaged in talatalanoa between various combinations of the authors over a six-month period, to gain insight into our intergenerational relationships and knowledge sharing. Talatalanoa is the practice of engaging in an ongoing conversation about a specific topic (Fa'avae & Fonua, 2020), and, in this instance, recognised the relationships that were in place before this research was conducted. For example, Lavinia and Sulieti have known each other since they grew up in Tonga, and then re-connected in Auckland during the 1970s, as part of the early Tongan movement to

Auckland. The focus of these autoethnographic talatalanoa were around the ongoing conversations these family partnerships engage in while speaking about or working with ngatu over the last few years, and how these rich storying opportunities inform understanding of Tongan culture and identity.

Lalanga means to weave, an apt approach when considering the importance of weaving in Tongan art and the nexus of art/practice and intergenerational knowledge in this manner. Lalanga has been presented as a methodology previously, particularly regarding the ways in which different stories, knowledges, perspectives, positions, identities, and values can be purposefully woven together to construct something new and useful (Fa'aea & Fonua, 2021; Fonua, 2020). In this article, we have considered our families' ongoing engagement with ngatu and koloa. Our stories have been lalanga, with illustrations of our art forms to connect our *stories* of Tongan culture and identity with how we *see and represent* our Tongan culture and identity, and the world.

Storying

Lavinia, Fire, Sulieti, and Tui were all asked the same broad question: "What does it mean to you to work on ngatu together?" These stories, thoughts and opinions are shared below alongside examples of the various artworks and koloa that have been created to illustrate what is being discussed. Overall, there were three main themes:

1. Working together and intergenerational knowledge sharing.
2. Changing ideas around Tongan material culture.
3. Discussions of Tongan cultural identity, including gender.

These themes are interwoven and connected, not falling easily into a linear explanation of how and why working with koloa in Aotearoa NZ creates space for musings on Tongan identity and culture. The stories of both families are lalanga (woven together) to strengthen the perspectives and understandings shared.

1. Working Together/Intergenerational Sharing over Koloa

For Lavinia and Fire, working together with and around ngatu provides an opportunity to learn from each other. In particular, learning about how the value of koloa has changed over time as a way of understanding cultural shifts and identity:

> *For me, [working together] I understand how she values ngatu, my interest in ngatu is purely about value. . . value meaning how to keep it, how we value it in each generation. . . so I want to see how she's valued it, and her generation, what it meant value-wise for their community, for the culture, and how they value it now. . .* (Fire)

Fire makes jewellery out of old koloa, allowing the stories and connections of these precious items to continue when their new holders wear them in their transformed state; in a way, he is actively changing tradition by shifting who wears these pieces and how the material culture is engaged with. He discusses his work with his mother Lavinia constantly, so these koloa are a topic of everyday conversation between them:

> *Between me and [Lavinia], it's just normal for us [to talk about it constantly]. [Even as a male], we would still be talking about ngatu, because there is a wedding that's about to come, my son's birthday. . . I will have a grandchild one day, these are things that. . . there is always conversations about ngatu, that's why it's still alive to this day. . . [male] I'm a male, and yes, there's roles in the culture, the women kept it because they put the work in, they valued and appreciated [but] because she talks about… then her value comes to me. . .* (Fire)

Fire's story shows that this intergenerational connection with his mother is what enhances his understanding. His constant conversations with Lavinia have taught him about the value of ngatu, and how it has changed since she was a child. Throughout Lavinia's story, below, is woven the importance of learning, sharing, and reflecting, and the ways culture shifts and changes over generations:

> *[My] perspective on the value of ngatu was transferred from my parents. I realise now, as we are talking about it, how when we were growing up as kids, how much we had no understanding about koloa because we played with it like it was nothing. But our parents, my mum Kalisi, would put the ngatu away, press it, then bring it out occasionally, put oil on it and paint it so it kept its value for her here [gesturing to her heart] and how she saw it. Kalisi always understood that this is making us 'wealthy' because we can give that to somebody when we have a kavenga, when something comes up. So, she looked after it. . . it was precious to her.* (Lavinia)

These stories show how integral koloa is for their whole family; talanoa about it is not just reserved for kavenga or events but happens in their home daily. As Fire and Lavinia discuss and reflect on the stories of their family, koloa will often come up, particularly the ways different people engage and value it, and how koloa was used to demonstrate relationships and respect at different Tongan occasions they have attended. In this instance, Fire tells a story about how his dad would fulfil his fatongia to acknowledge hierarchical kinship relationships and faka'apa'apa for who was attending the event, not necessarily who the event was for or focused on. Figure 1 shows jewellery made by Fire from a ta'ovala (waist mat) often worn by his father to such events:

> *We talk about ngatu every day. . . about the stuff that my dad gave away. . . like, 'Did you see them come and give it to him, and [my dad] gave it to her?' You*

know, and that's a big part, 'cos my dad, that was his value for ngatu, he'd get koloa this large [hand gesture], and give it to that person over there. . . and [my mum] used to get frustrated and go 'Oh, leave it with us'. But dad would follow certain ways where he thought 'OK, that's the dad's sister's children, so there's a value for them [to receive it]. He wanted to show the female side and how he valued it, so he would say, 'You take this and give it to them', and [the recipients] would go WHOA, because for Tongans it's about the day, and making sure you are valued on the day. It's somebody's birthday or wedding, and you are giving it to someone else, it's not their birthday or wedding. We are about valuing or understanding stature and who is who, who are you supposed to value on the day (for some). . . (Fire)

Figure 1
Earrings

Note: Earrings made by Fire Fonua from a ta'ovala (waist mat) worn by his father, Reverend Pitasoni Fonua to many significant events.

Aside from actively working with ngatu, daily engagement and continuing traditional practices around koloa, such as placing ngatu under a newborn baby, have helped Fire to connect and understand more when he had his own children:

> *For example, our son's just been born, [Lavinia] says, 'Can you put a ngatu down, a mat down', and I'm like what for? So, that was already a conversation. I know that when I have a grandchild, that will stick in my mind, even if she has passed away, because then the value comes to me, and it says, that that is what she was willing to do for our son, I need to do that for my grandson. . .*

Sulieti and Tui also work together frequently around koloa, however, they make their own ngatu. They paint about a variety of topics with a range of styles informed by traditional and contemporary practices. The focus of their works is informed by their inter-generational sharing as they paint together:

> *This sharing when we sit together, and we koka'anga together. . . we are passing on mum's, all those stories that she knows and her experiences. Then I have that knowledge and I'm able to pass that down. . . and it is seen throughout our tapa, you can really see stories that have come through.* (Tui)

Sulieti and Tui maintain connection to Sulieti's home through the kupesi and tapa they use. Their tapa is sourced from Sulieti's village alongside the umea (a type of natural paint) they use in their works. These ways of connecting reflect an ongoing connection and learning across time and space:

> *To me, that's the way we learn from each other. . . making us closer. . . this is the way the ancestors did things in the old days, they pass it on for generation and generation. . . that's the way I feel, this work I do with Tui, my daughter, is to do those type of things.* (Sulieti)

For Sulieti and Tui, creating together has many benefits, and establishes different opportunities, particularly for sharing stories and strengthening their relationship, and allows them to use traditional ways of sharing knowledge:

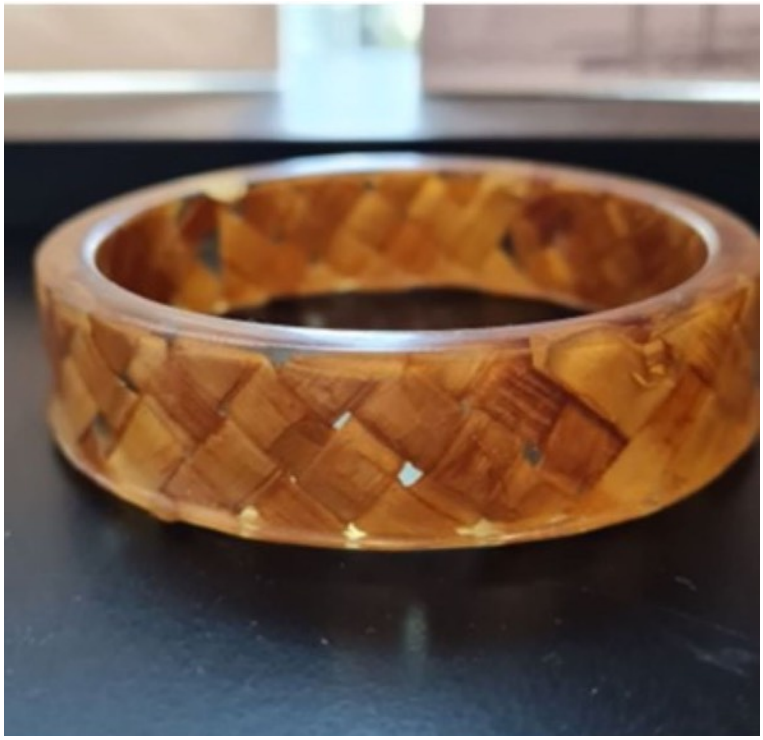
> *I think that's really important, [the time together] there's all this storytelling happening not just on the tapa, there's all this storytelling that we are generating on the tapa together, it's like spiritually we come together, mother daughter, and we are able to express all this knowledge, and our past and our DNA everything just comes together. . . it's a very special time and a really good way of connecting.* (Tui)

2. Demonstrating Changing Ideas and Attitudes Towards Material Culture Through Koloa

Each family can approach koloa and the gifting of ngatu and mats in different ways. For Lavinia, Fire, and their family, they are active participants in the gifting of koloa rather than keeping it, this is illustrated through Figure 2, jewellery made from a ta'ovala that Kalisi made for her husband that had become too damaged to wear:

> *Families can value koloa [differently], and I know how my family values koloa. We have had so much come through the house and we just give it away. . . a lot of families cherish it like gold, we just give it away. . . because Tongans now ask for money for funerals, back then it wasn't money, it was koloa, to be able to clothe their funeral. So, Kalisi, my grandmother, would always have people coming to the house, because she had so much koloa, if there was a death, a wedding, so over time her stuff got depleted, but that's what it's made for, it's made to be given away.* (Lavinia)

Figure 2
Bracelet



Note: A bracelet made by Fire from a ta'ovala (waist mat) that his grandmother Kalisi made for her husband.

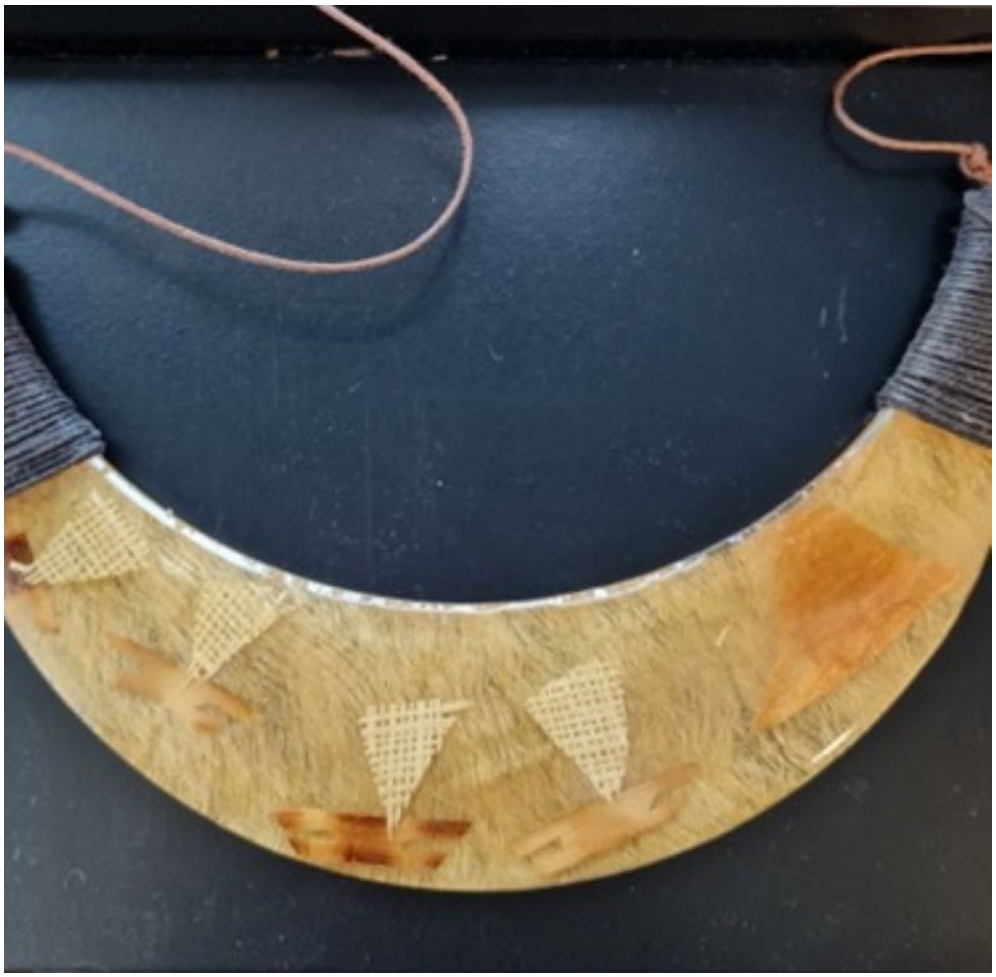
This story and those shared by Fire demonstrate the importance of intergenerational knowledge and wisdom sharing for maintaining practices, but also show how knowledge and wisdom change so quickly between generations. Lavinia continues:

> *When we were growing up, we didn't care, and it was only over a period of time, when we got older and had our own kids, and then we understood 'Oh, we have to give something' [at events]. Then we remembered remnants of what our mum did, but we never did exactly what our mum did. I mean, we kept koloa/ngatu, our generation put it away somewhere and then just forgot about it and didn't go back to it until we needed to give it.*

It's interesting to hear Fire's perspective about how these generational shifts have occurred so quickly, and what that means for him and his identity as Tongan, illustrated through work he created depicting kalia (ocean voyaging canoes) in Figure 3:

> *What mum and I have learnt about it, is the value of koloa and how it flows in different generations, and from that generation, I see a 360 back to that type of valuing that her mother, my grandmother had. I understand the journey that its going to take, because the value of ngatu still underpins our being, cos I'm Tongan, it's never going to decrease, because I am still holding on to it because I don't want to release the value of it. And in whatever generation it goes to, it will find the growth again, the 'economic' value. . .* (Fire)

Figure 3
A Kahoa, or Necklace.



Note: A kahoa, or necklace, made by Fire Fonua from tapa, depicting kalia using ngatu and woven materials.

As makers, Tui and Sulieti prefer to employ traditional making practices, such as the two layers of feta'aki (unpainted tapa cloth), rather than the ngatu pepa (made with one layer of bark and one layer of vylene) increasingly used in modern ngatu pieces (Lythberg, 2017). They refer to themselves as tapa artists because they paint onto tapa:

> *We create a lot together using the traditional. . . traditional materials but we also use we create contemporary tapa as well. . . we create together and we paint contemporary things, however we do also use obviously the traditional kupesi as well. We use 100-year-old kupesi from Vava'u, Mum's island.* (Tui)

Fire and Lavinia spend lots of time discussing how things have changed with respect to koloa, including how people's attitudes have changed towards what is gifted. Fire suggests this shows how people understand that this form of traditional wealth still has a significant economic value, even in contemporary times:

> *Mum, and probably the majority of Tongans, see it as the gift. . . and koloa or ngatu was made to be given, just given, like giving a really good piece and all the good pieces were given, the best piece! But now, today, people keep their good pieces, and they give their 'bad' pieces (laugh), so what I am saying about the value right? It's that people understand the value of it, so they keep the ones that are valuable moneywise and the give the cheap stuff, they don't think is valuable. . . but for me, the gathering and gifting of koloa, that's what makes you, if you understand what is, it's about perspective. . . not just material culture but we've built, poetry, arts, that's koloa as well. . . the essence of what makes you, you—we deliver koloa in different ways, gifting, what the culture is. . . so what you gives signals that.* (Fire)

Fire explains how he understands the value of koloa to Tongan culture using the story of Kava, whose body was gifted to the King as a sign of her parents' utmost fatongia, or respect:

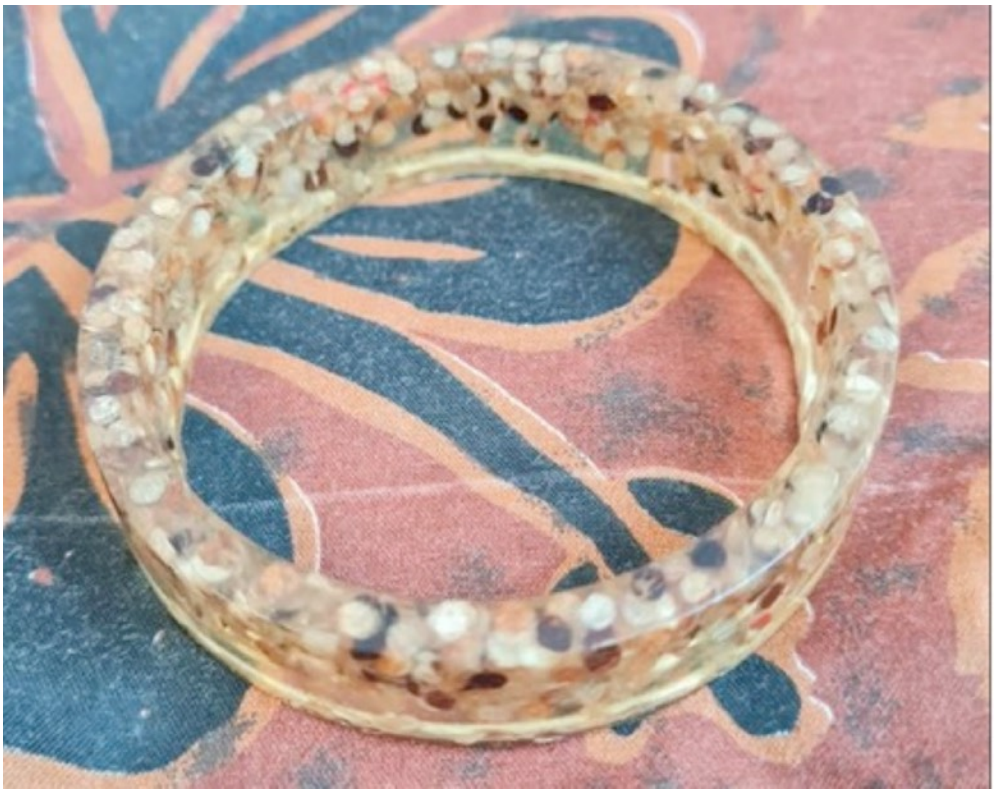
> *Kava was gifted to demonstrate their utmost fatongia (respect); from where her head was buried, kava grew. I believe kava is what we respect the most in our culture; it signals our respect on all occasions. For us, koloa represents everything we do, everything we make, our mafana, how we give of ourselves — the material culture we create represents this, and a way we also show our respect. Sacrifice was their obligation, not to be embarrassed by being unable to offer anything—their most valuable thing was their daughter, that was what was worth giving to the King—the essence of what the gift was. . . it was about what they believed.* (Fire).

Lavinia reflects further on how differently the generations before her valued ngatu and koloa, illustrated through a piece of jewellery that holds many small pieces of ngatu which the family call koloa confetti (see Figure 4). Her words echo those of Meredith Filihia's (2001) around the weaving of mana into these koloa fakatonga and the importance of valuing this work, as a treasure:

> *Now we are talking, I am remembering how people used to, the generation before me, my mum and grandmother, how they looked and value it. The special thing about working with my son, is that this is what it means to us to talk about ngatu, we are not makers, but we are involved in the ngatu community through our business as well. For me, ngatu is going in a different area, I see the little pieces that are cut and thrown away, my grandmothers and great aunties would've grabbed those little pieces, my grandmother valued it so much because*

she heard them beating at night-time, she understood how long it took, and how much value it was for the women for them to get their little pieces together and for them to come together as a koka'anga and put those pieces together. She saw the sweat that dropped on that, what they did, how they talked about what this would mean for their son's wedding, what this would mean for their funerals, because they looked at all of these things and this is why they put the hard work into it. They are putting their work and their sweat into that because that's what was valuable for Tonga culture, to be able to have that to give, at functions that mean something to our culture. . . (Lavinia)

Figure 4
Bracelet



Note: A bracelet made by Fire Fonua using the clippings of the jewellery making process, so as to not waste anything—this has been named koloa confetti

3. Koloa as a Means to Consider Tongan Cultural Identity in Aotearoa NZ

For Fire, engaging with koloa is an important way for him to consider his Tongan identity and connection as a Tongan in Aotearoa NZ. His talanoa with Lavinia are an opportunity to engage in inter-generational knowledge sharing, but also highlight how

cultures change over time and are exposed to new influences, all impacting on understanding of identity. This negotiation of modernity (Addo, 2009), is a usual challenge for a diasporic population:

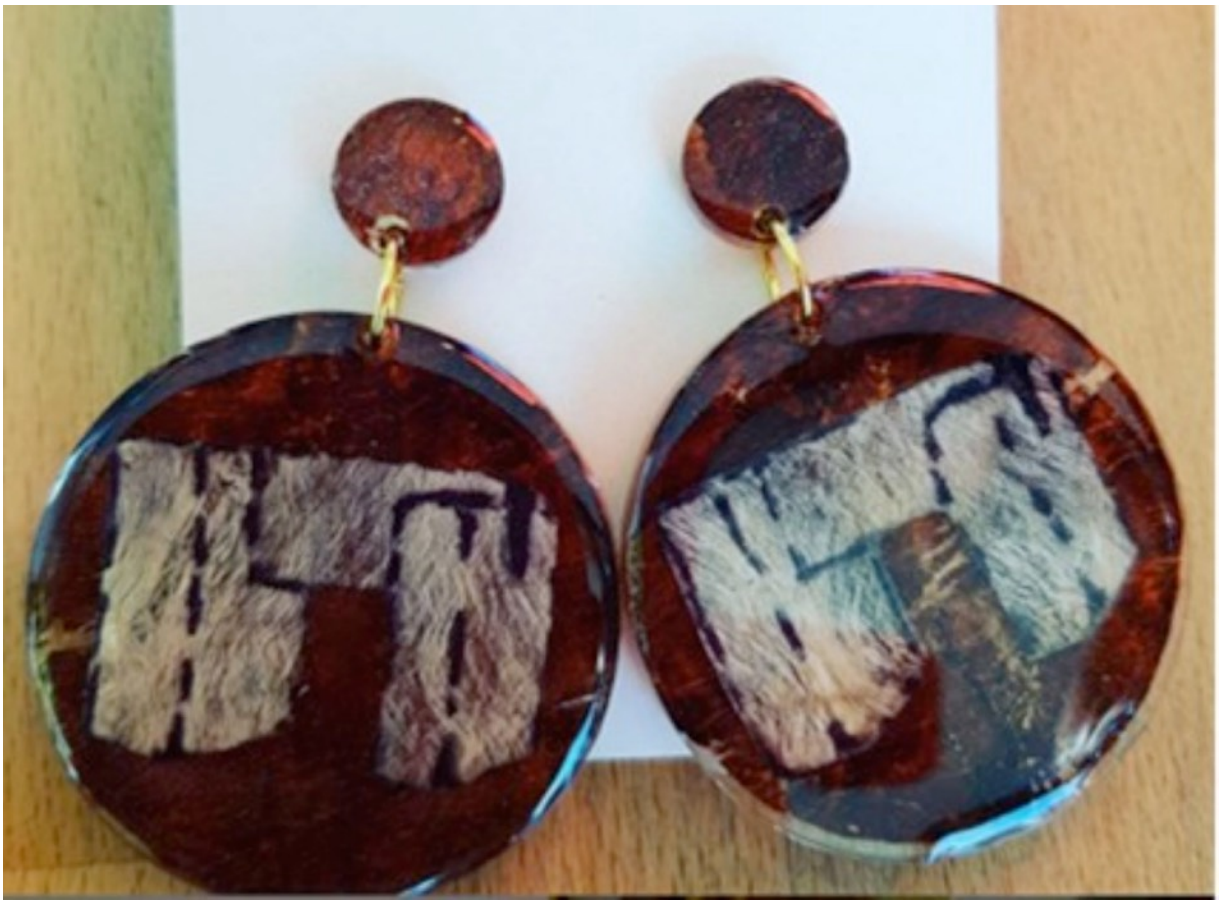
> *There are certain things I learn a lot about when she talks about them. . . for me, when I listen to her value and people of her generation and generations before, it's the same with how I look at culture, it's a mismatch of certain things you know? You look to the generation beforehand, I'm looking at the generation beforehand to know what [our culture] is. . . but with the information that they give to me, what I hear from the generation beforehand, they are just as confused about [our culture] as I am, right? And then the reality comes to me that they were born in an era where it had been drastically changed.* (Fire)

Fire considers koloa a good way to illustrate and understand how things have changed from the "old culture" or the "old Tonga":

> *I have the realisation that I am as I'm confused about [culture] or, wanting to learn about koloa today, it's the same for them, right? Because koloa is drastically different for them too, cos we are Christian Tongans right? Tongans before Christianity totally looked at koloa differently, their value for it was totally different. . . So, what we've gathered from that generation because it's not a Christian thing, aye? it's not a Christian thing this is part of old Tonga, that we've kept on, we've kept hold of. . . it's part of the culture, the old culture. . . which is why it's so interesting that we still have it* (Fire)

Fire's thinking reflects Hall's (1996) suggestion, that identity is constituted within representation, and "relate[s] to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself" (p. 4). Fire's connections to "old Tonga" can be seen in his work, such the earrings in Figure 5, that depict the Ha'amonga a Maui.

Figure 5
Earrings



Note: Earrings made by Fire Fonua, depicting the Ha'amonga a Maui in tapa on a ngatu background.

Fire is referring to the impacts of Christianity on how different cultural practices were maintained or altered in response to the introduction of this new way of thinking. As described earlier, the making and gifting of koloa is an ancient practice, connecting Tongans to their Pulotu (spirit world). That the practice continued after the arrival of Christianity in Tonga, while many other aspects of the "old culture" disappeared or were hidden, speaks to the importance of koloa faka-Tonga, or perhaps its dismissal by the missionaries as in the realm of women's crafts when they introduced a patrilineal society. The reasoning for the persistence of koloa is beyond the scope of this article (see Evans, 2009), but does also potentially align to the value, cultural and economic, described by Fire, which shifted to more church focused kavenga for the focus of the tribute shown through koloa gifting:

> *Only from looking at it from a valued position does it keep it alive further on, because that's why it's still alive today—it was valued. And if we don't value*

anything in life, we throw it away, just discard it, it isn't valuable anymore. So much of Tongan culture has been discarded along the way, right? So much of Tongan culture was discarded, the change of becoming Christian. . . A lot of the stuff we had before we looked at as not very Christian, so we can't keep that, can't keep that, can't keep that, cos I'm a Christian now, right? And there's a certain way now that I have to look at things, because I am looking at the person who brought me Christianity, he looks so different, he looks at things so differently, and his value system is so different from mine, so my system changes, I want a shirt. . . cos he values a shirt, right? I must value a shirt too. . . everything he's wearing he's valuing so I take that on because I value that too right, but he doesn't have koloa, I have koloa, so I keep that because there must be engrained value in it, and that value benefits that's connected to it that has made it that valuable, birthdays, weddings funerals, everything that comes with it and the gifting for that occasion makes it so valuable.

While Fire and Lavinia talanoa over old koloa, painting new ngatu together creates opportunities for Tui to learn about her culture and identity while her mum shares stories:

For me it's like an opportunity to get to know my culture more as we, mum and I, are working together in the same room. We talk about things you know? We're painting and we discuss the family line, things that go way back to our ancestors, the way of the Tongan life, the island life, the food. I get so educated. . . it's like being educated by a person who's lived and breathed us and the islands you know and that's really wonderful for me. It helps me to connect to a place where I'm from, that I have been as a visitor. . . I've learned so much from mum with what she tells me and what she shares with me. . . it's a great opportunity for mum to be able to talk to me. To tell me all about her life and where she's from and that's a really important part of the past that I'm stoked to know about. Because I'm able to pass down and tell other people about it. So, working with each other is. . . a real storytelling opportunity, so much storytelling. (Tui)

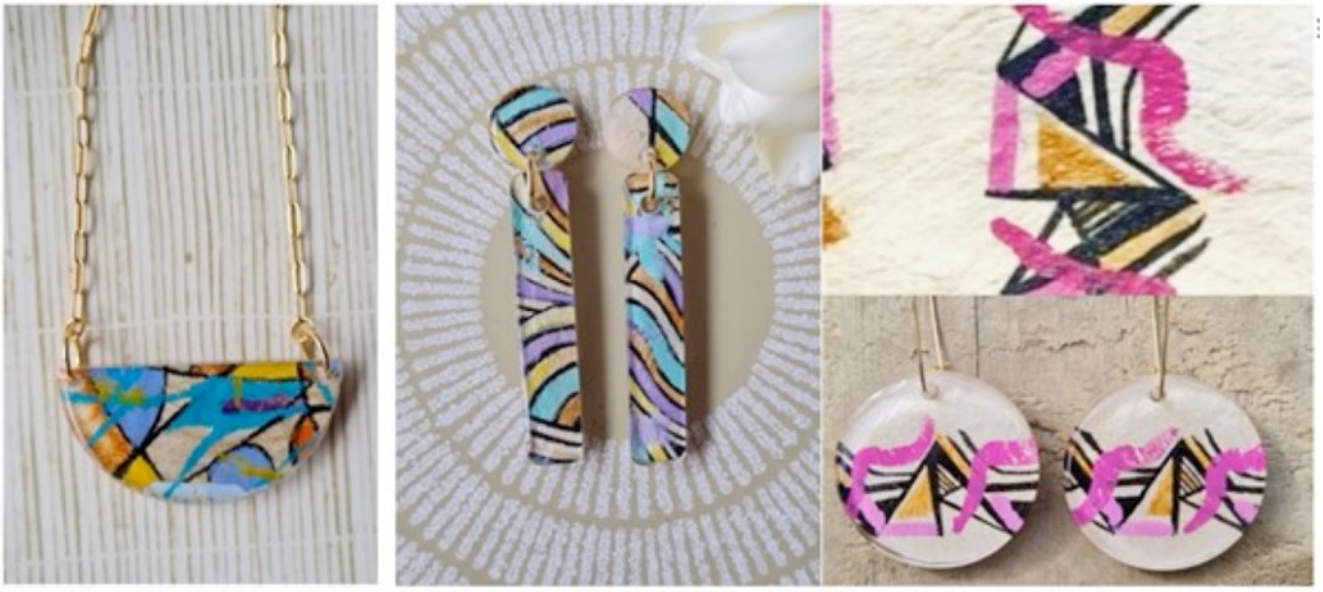
Her painting also allows Tui to explore her own thinking about who she is, and how she wants to portray traditional and contemporary ideas in her work:

My work with tapa helps me to connect with a playful side of my creativity. The Polynesian and Pacific Island cultures glory in the wearing and use of bright colours whereas tapa art often consists of a couple of traditional colours such as brown and black. In my tapa practice I have chosen to expand from that tradition to incorporate a broader palette of colours.

Her recent collaborations with Fire and Sonia have also resulted in Tui exploring and expressing identity more broadly (see Figure 6):

> *The painting I do with Fire and Sonia, contributes to the creation of jewellery that gives Pasifika people in New Zealand a way of wearing their culture on their person and expressing their colourful Pacific Island nature. It's like waving a colourful mini flag. And I love being part of providing that service to Tongans and other Pasifika people to think about, and represent who they are. But it's not just for Pasifika people. We all deserve to have a splash of Pasifika colour to brighten up our day and show where we live and the cultural environment we are part of.* (Tui)

Figure 6
Jewellery

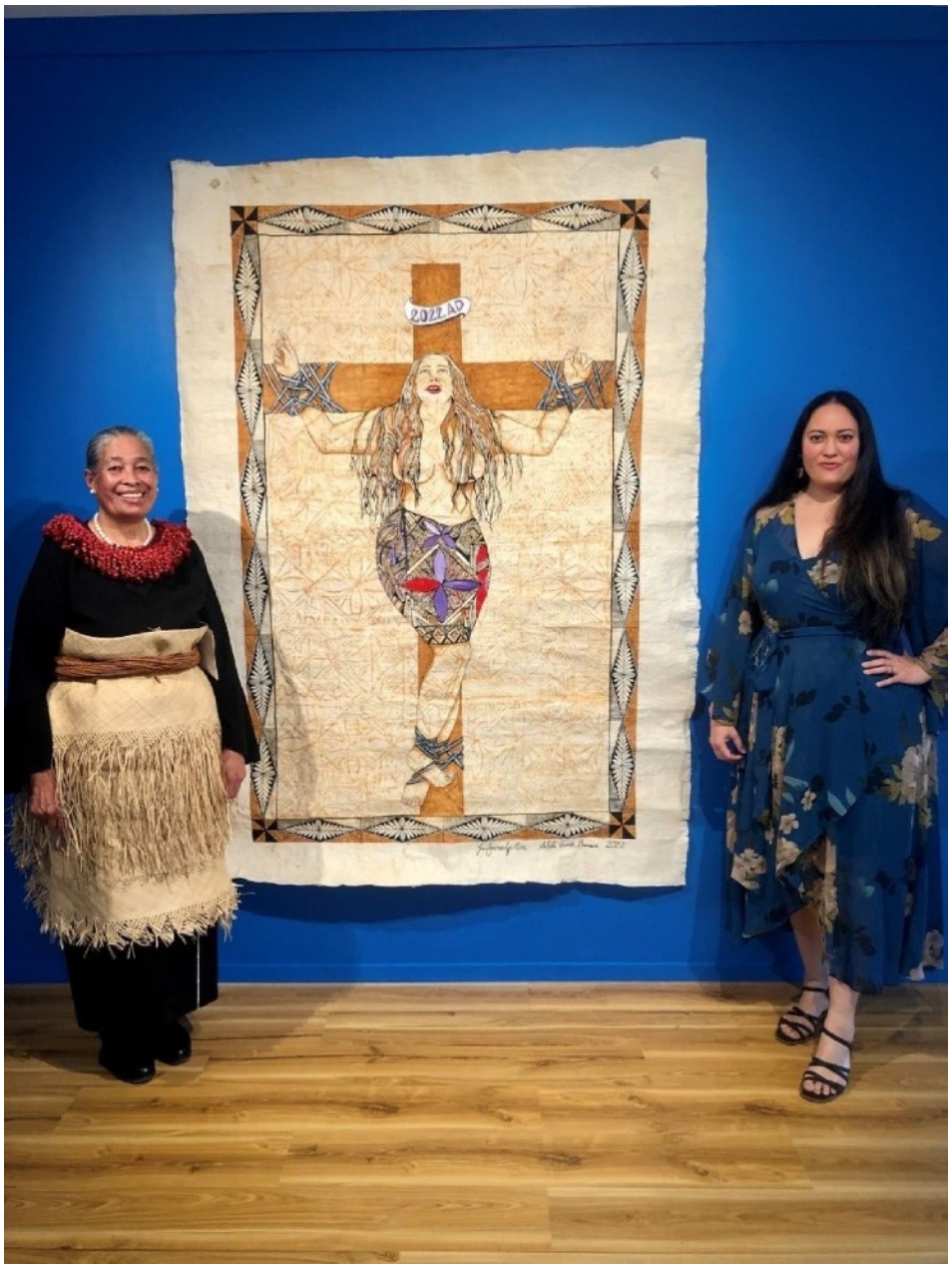


Note: Examples of jewellery created by the collaboration between Tui Emma Gillies and Fire Fonua. The tapa is painted by Tui Emma Gillies and turned into jewellery by Fire Fonua.

Of particular importance to Sulieti and Tui are gender issues. Often, their works are directly commenting on the valuing and importance of women; for example, Figure 7, a recent work inviting reflection on the place of women in society:

> *We paint about issues and things happening in the world at the moment. Something very strong [we focus on] and is part of why we do this together is we bring out the issues of women, like equality. . . [women] are still not treated equally with men in some cultures. We like to bring out those issues and to remind people that women should be revered, and their stories should be heard and that's extremely important.* (Tui)

Figure 7
Woman on The Cross 2022 AD



Note: Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows and Tui Emma Gillies standing beside their work, *Woman on The Cross 2022 AD*.

These depictions of women are often in biblical contexts which creates opportunities for the viewer to consider the role of Christianity in their identity; the complexity of considering the role and valuing of women in different contexts, such as

the old Tongan ways of revering the fahu (the highest-ranking woman in the family); or the impact of Christianity and Eurocentric views on women in Tongan, Pacific, and general society, and how that is expressed in identity nowadays. Sulieti explains that tapa and ngatu have always been a way to express what is important for the women who make them and an important place for intergenerational sharing and learning:

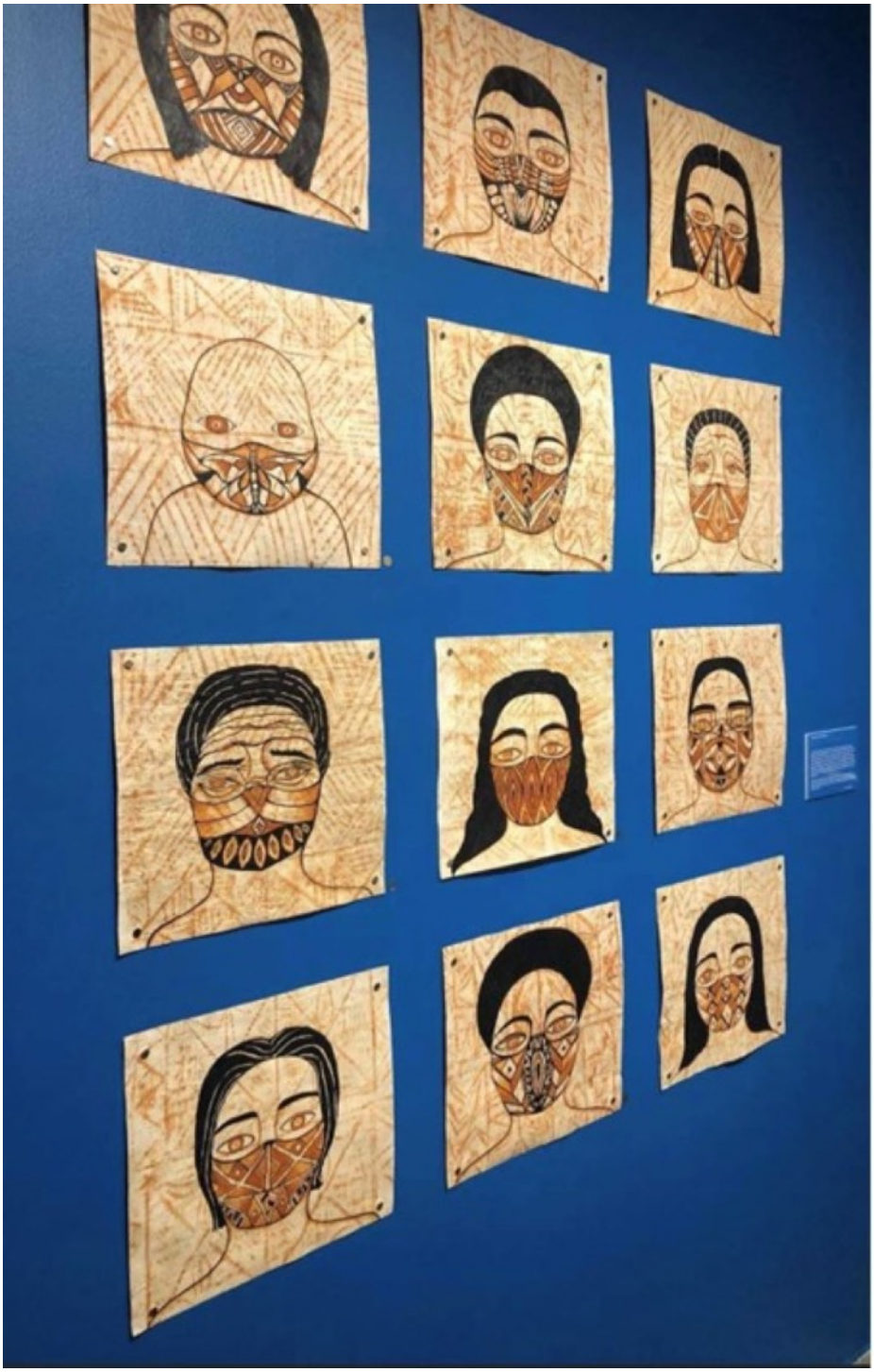
> *Back in Tonga we don't have any money for museums or anything like that to keep our work. What happened in Tonga is that our ancestors passed on to us, to another generation by generation. That's the way, that for me, that's our museum, our Tongan museum, [the makers] they keep it on their mind and their heart, that's their way. . . our museum, is Tongan women, their tapa keeps what's on their mind and on their heart"* (Sulieti)

Tui echoes this role for women and tapa as a way of expressing what is important and topical, offering a way for people to engage in issues and challenges; for example, Figure 8, which reflects the impact of COVID-19 on behaviour and identity:

> *It's issues really and the stories that need to be told, things that are happening now, like climate change. Tapa is a natural, beautiful product. It's really important. . . every time we share [our work] we are reminding people that this is natural material that takes two to three years to harvest. We're reminding people that nature is super important, we must tell stories about what's going on now, the issues.* (Tui)

Figure 8

Faces of the Pandemic



Note: Faces of the Pandemic—a series of works by Tui Emma Gillies and Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows, painted in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ways in which Sulieti and Tui use the medium of tapa to portray the importance of women, echoes Meredith Filiha's (2001) point regarding the ancient, privileged status of Tongan women. They are continuing a tradition of expression about what is important and topical to them, as the makers of this cloth, and an inter-generational sharing of stories both within and around ngatu as it is painted, and subsequently displayed.

As koloa is made by groups of women, many consider it to be a space for women, both as makers, holders, and recipients. As mentioned previously, however, koloa gifting is supported by men's ngaue, including the work done to grow and harvest the materials to make ngatu and woven goods. As a mother and son, koloa plays a significant role in Lavinia and Fire's everyday life:

> *We talk about ngatu every day. Even if I wasn't working with ngatu, we would be talking about. . . between me and her, it's just normal for us, the reality for us is that's it good for us to talk about it and understand. . . I always understood her value for koloa, and I understood my value.* (Fire)

Fire also explains how koloa shows love; dressing your child in ngatu demonstrates the love a mother has, and how entwined koloa is in identity, regardless of gender:

> *Making sure that their son had ngatu, they would be embarrassed if he didn't have ngatu, it means that they didn't love their son. . . that's poor for a Tongan, to not have a piece of mat, that's poor, if you don't have ngatu, you are poor. . . because they didn't put any effort into making him shine on the day, we shine, we glitter, and without that. . . it means everything, ngatu, mats, it all comes out, so that conversation is always going to be in the Tongan community with mother and son, mother and daughter.*

Discussion/Conclusion

In this article, we shared our stories about how important intergenerational partnerships are for creating opportunities and spaces to reflect on and share stories about Tongan culture and identity in Aotearoa NZ as a diasporic context. We believe this is the first time such discussions have been documented; contributing current experiences of how koloa is engaged with, and valued, in parts of Aotearoa NZ's Tongan community currently, particularly from individuals who are working with Tongan material culture in their creative practices. We would argue that, by focusing on an integral aspect of Tongan culture and identity (i.e., the making and gifting of koloa), we have shown how engaging with our material culture creates opportunities for reflections on the past, present, and future, the dynamism of culture—including the importance and

place of material culture— and the multiplicities of identity. Our stories show that there is no one way to engage with koloa; different families engage and value in Tonga material culture in diverse ways. At the same time, both family partnerships emphasised the importance of spending their time together, as an opportunity to share, reflect, and contemplate, in the words of Vilsoni Hereniko (1999), “who they were, are, or could be” (p. 137), signalling a key context for knowledge sharing with generations.

For our two families, working with koloa has supported storytelling and intergenerational knowledge exchange. It has also encouraged considerations of how Tongan culture and identity has changed over time with respect to the valuing of koloa, how koloa gifting occurs, and how koloa influences our everyday lives, regardless of gender. The stories we shared emphasise how central koloa still is to our Tongan cultural identity in Aotearoa NZ; the gifting practice still reflects many core principles of Tongan culture, fatongia, faka’apa’apa, ‘ofa, fetokoni’aki, and tauhi vā. Ultimately, our diverse stories contribute to the current understanding of the complexity and changing nature of our Tongan cultural identities in Aotearoa NZ.

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