

# ***Lolotonga 'Etau Tatali – While We Wait***

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**Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis  
Master of Visual Arts  
Auckland University of Technology**

## Abstract

This research project entails an embodied practice of unfolding my family koloa<sup>1</sup> through print design, contemporary ngatu<sup>2</sup> and garment making. As a daughter of Tongan women, I acknowledge my responsibility to koloa by utilising motifs and repetition in my designs. My research is centred on the methodology of fakafetongi<sup>3</sup> which brings forward connections to my tohihokohoko<sup>4</sup>. This project seeks to develop, protect, and preserve traditional Tongan textile making processes by amalgamating traditional and new methods of making. I explore the preparation of what I will contribute to our family koloa, which is ultimately for my nieces to unravel when they are ready.

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural wealth and knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Traditional clothe made from tutu (bark cloth) from the mulberry tree.

<sup>3</sup> Exchange.

<sup>4</sup> Genealogy.



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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

29 July 2022

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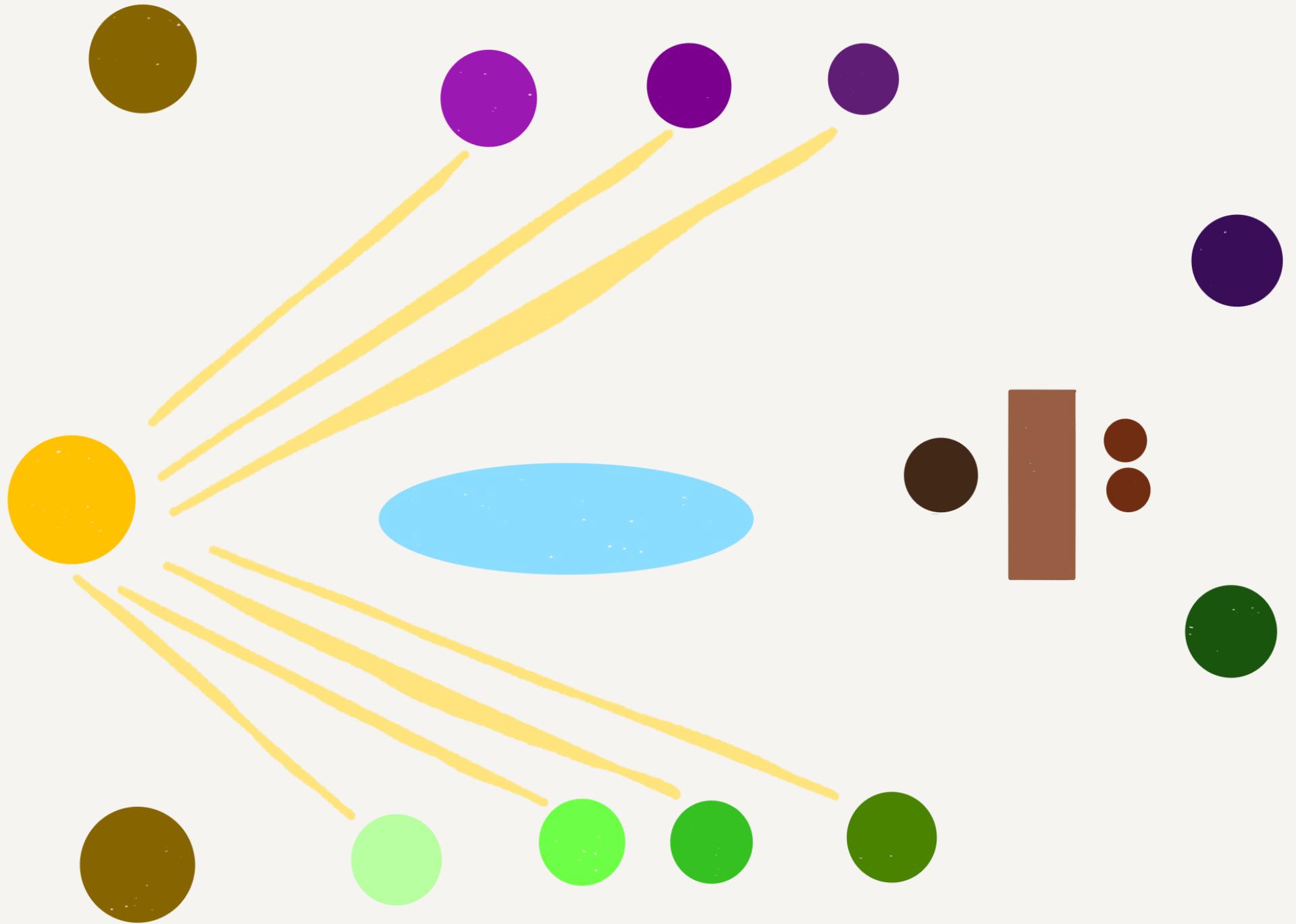
I owe a very warm thank you to my supervisors, Fiona Amundsen, and Jyoti Kalyanji for welcoming and creating a safe space for me and my research project to grow. The wisdom and guidance I have received from you both is simply unmatched.

I want to thank my Aunties Manu Mahe, Talavao Ta'e'iloa and Ana Hough; my Uncles Tevita Halafihi, Olioni Ngata and Loseti Mahe for helping my mum raise me, and then helping me raise my research project through your unconditional love and patience.

I want to thank Kaydeen Manukia for raising and bringing kind and courageous children—my nieces Amelia, Helen, Sarai and nephew MJ—into this world and allowing me a front row seat to their lives. I am proud to be their Aunty.

Finally, this research project is dedicated to my late grandmother, Leata Meliana Ngata. Like every woman that came before you in our matrilineal line, you sacrificed your geography and independence to welcome a better life for your descendants in muli.





## Tala Mu'aki<sup>5</sup>

Koloa is cultural wealth and cultural knowledge. Even if one does not realise it, as people of Tonga, koloa is a constant in our lives: when we are born and when we leave this Earth, we are literally and figuratively wrapped in koloa. Koloa is in the names that we carry; koloa is with us on birthdays, weddings, graduations, and funerals. To know koloa is to know that it is one's responsibility as a family member and as a Tongan woman. We must understand, we are never in ownership of koloa, it is never really ours. Our responsibility is to preserve koloa as best we can before we pass it on, and it reaches its next destination. The greatest lesson this research project has taught me is to be kind to koloa—koloa is just walking us home.

In this research, koloa is present in many forms, including ngatu<sup>6</sup>, music, readings, talanoa, as well as many other forms. Koloa within my making practice focuses on print design and garment making which sew together the people, places and stories that shape and

connect my research project. The physical koloa that comes from my practice and which I leave for my nieces and descendants, takes the form of two large scale works of contemporary ngatu etched with motifs, and a collection of garments. This exegesis is another form of koloa that I leave for my nieces and descendants. It is intended as talanoa, a conversation with my nieces, nephews and any student who may need some guidance in navigating spaces that historically do not welcome our cultural practices.

Talanoa is a Tongan practice which is undertaken by way of informal conversation. Tongan performance and moving image artist John Vea states that "*Talanoa* is a universal method which most Pacific cultures are built on; to Talanoa, you converse with another intimately"<sup>7</sup>. Talanoa happens in my childhood home as well as the one I live in now, there is an exchange of talanoa every time I am in my family's company. We catch up over a cup of tea and talanoa. I am told what to do by my parents through talanoa and we express our love for one another through talanoa. In this writing I talanoa

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<sup>5</sup> Prelude.

<sup>6</sup> Traditional clothe made from tutu (bark cloth) from the mulberry tree.

<sup>7</sup> John Vea, "THE EMIC AVENUE, ART THROUGH TALANOA," 2015, 96.

through anecdotes, sharing my thoughts as I come to understand and unfold my family koloa within my research and the role it plays in protecting cultural traditions within our textiles.

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues states that “Indigenous languages are not only methods of communication, but also extensive and complex systems of knowledge that have developed over millennia. They (indigenous languages) are central to the identity of our peoples, the preservation of our culture, worldviews and visions and an expression of self-determination”<sup>8</sup>. The utilisation of Tongan language in my research project has given an in-depth purpose to my methods and methodologies; I break

up our words to find the smaller components that make up our bigger words, concepts, and worldview. Breaking up our language has breathed indigenous practices and life my research practice.

While researching into my family koloa, I started to acquire and understand that so much of the information being passed onto me by my elders was knowledge that I would one day be happy to pass onto the rightful audience. Due to the sacredness that my relationships with my elders hold, I am choosing to hold onto Tongan world views and cultural knowledge systems that one earns through talanoa and genuine interest and connection to the Tongan culture.

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations, *Indigenous Languages*, April 19, 2018, Backgrounder, available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp->

[content/uploads/sites/19/2018/04/Indigenous-Languages.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/04/Indigenous-Languages.pdf) [accessed 29 June, 2022]

**This love is simple, nourishment for soul**

**- *Che Fu*<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> Che Fu, "Waka," 1998, track 2 on *2B.S.Pacific*. BMG, 1998, compact disc.



## INTRODUCTION

I received my first piece of koloa when I was born, which is also when I inherited the names Delia Aloisia Ngata. Each name communicates the people and villages I hail from in Lapaha, Ha'apai, Tonga and Bayamon, Puerto Rico. My parents say that it is important I know these things about myself, and I agree.

In Tongan culture, all special occasions are celebrated with koloa. The way that special occasions and koloa go hand in hand in Tonga is ceremonial; they always go together<sup>10</sup>. I was twenty-one years old when I received my first lesson on the importance of preparing your koloa for ceremony. I obtained this teaching from my maternal grandmother, who walked my cousin and I through the process of preparing and folding ngatu and fala<sup>11</sup> for an upcoming occasion. My

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<sup>10</sup> Jione Havea, "Crossing Cultures in Oceania," in *Whispers and Vanities - Samoan Indigenous Knowledge and Religion* (Polynesian Press, 1995).

grandmother barely asked for help so when the moment arrived, I understood that it was important to her. Of course, my participation in helping my grandmother came with every and any question an impatient descendant would ask of their elder—embarrassingly, it was much like an 'are we there yet moment?'

When we were done folding her koloa she smiled, thanked my cousin and me and said that now we needed to wait. I asked her what we were waiting for but did not receive a response. Learning to evenly fold koloa and place it underneath a mattress later transferred to the way that I fold my clothing and evenly place it into my wardrobe. When we got to what it was that my grandmother was waiting on, physically, we arrived without her. Weeks after helping my grandmother with her koloa, it was clear that what she had us help her prepare was the koloa she wanted used at her funeral service. My grandmothers' final gesture in koloa not only taught me the importance of our cultural processes, but also the amount of time and energy she saved my mother and her siblings from trying to

<sup>11</sup> Fine Tongan mat woven together with pandanus leaves. Fala Tonga is used for people to gather and sit on. Fala Tonga can and is gifted and received during special occasions: for example, weddings, birthdays, funerals.

figure out what pieces of koloa to use in certain situations during her funeral proceedings.

The title of this research project, *Lolotonga 'Etau Tatali – While We Wait*, is inherited from and pays homage to my grandmothers' final gesture concerning the practice of koloa. Like my name, this title communicates who and where the practice of my research hails from—my ancestors. Like my grandmother, I am now embarking on preparing my own koloa for descendants who seek to be closer to their lineage through the making of our traditional textiles.

My research is grounded within and extends my familial history in koloa. The practice component of this research involves contemporary ngatu as well as print and garment making. I look at how traditional forms of Tongan textiles and making processes such as hand painting and the use of motifs, can be amalgamated with new materials and methods of making. By leaving space for traditional methods my ancestors are given a voice within my practice. Introducing new methods of making—for example, laser

engraving and digital printing— allows me to modify our sacred processes to convey the period I am living in. This is also how I add to and extend my family koloa. My aim is that this project, and my practice within it, acts as a guide that offers my nieces, nephews, and descendants some comfort in contexts that they may have to introduce our cultural heritage to, like how I have within this university art school setting.

So, as I wait, through methodologies of fakafetongi<sup>12</sup> and tohihokohoko<sup>13</sup> my research project asks a series of reflexive questions: how can a practice of koloa preserve the taxonomy of Tongan textile making? How does the body hold generational knowledge? Who and what does my koloa involve? How will my descendants benefit from inheriting it?

As I put forward the methodology of fakafetongi within my practice, it is important I state that it is not the act of exchange itself that has driven my practice, rather what is learned through it. The figure below breaks down the word fakafetongi to describe its

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<sup>12</sup> Exchange.

<sup>13</sup> Genealogy.

representation and relationship to my research practice (see Figure 4).

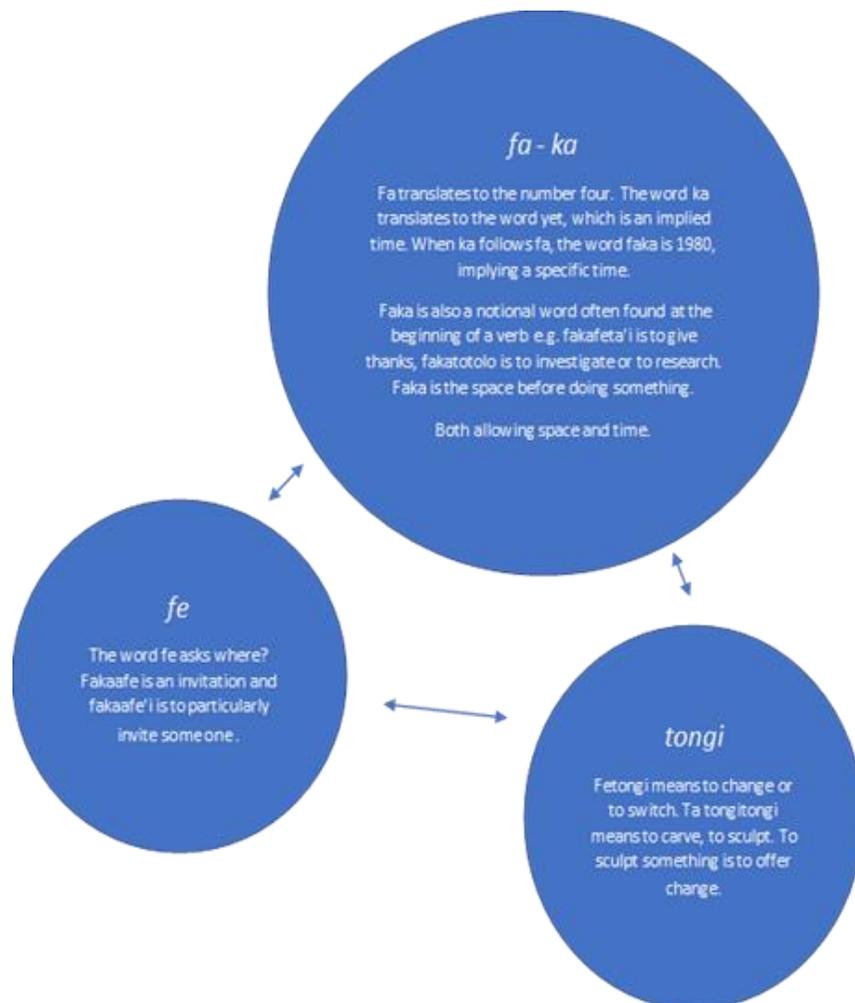


Figure 5: Mapping fakafetongi

The exchange that happened between my grandmother and I through her koloa feels intrinsic to me and who I am. This relationship is explained by The Kingdom of Tonga's foremost knowledge-holder in textile koloa, The Dowager Lady Tunakaimanu Fielakepa. She states that "they (koloa) have our family history woven into them. They (koloa) are heirlooms, each piece tells a story – the birth of our children and grandchildren, weddings, birthdays,

many achievements, and celebrations”<sup>14</sup>. My grandmother’s kindness and patience with me while folding her koloa made me realise the importance of preserving not only our Tongan traditions but also our textile making processes. For me, preserving the practice of koloa is the way I preserve my grandmothers’ memory so that the generations that will not physically meet her will know her through our family koloa.

The introduction of tohihokohoko as a methodology in my research project stems from the presence of my ancestors in both my writing and practice. Tohihokohoko translates to genealogy.

Like koloa and ceremony, this research and my tohihokohoko go hand in hand – in Tongan tradition, one does not exist without the other. Mele Ta’e’iloa is a Tongan dancer and educator who is part of Projekt Teams, a hip hop and street dance collective in Aotearoa. For one of the collective's live installation shows, ‘Ko Au’, she composed an interactive performance that explores her maternal genealogy.

Ta’e’iloa’s performance begins in present day as a pro pop and lock dancer. Through her performance she moves back in time to map out and re-visit the different styles of dance she has excelled in. Ta’e’iloa further explores her genealogy as she accompanies traditional Tongan tau’olunga with traditional Tongan song to pay homage to the people and places that her dance career has derived from. As a relative of Ta’e’iloa, her performance spoke to my research project as it allowed me to see the different forms of practice which our lineage is embodied within in. The beauty in which Ta’e’iloa moves forward, with her eyes fixed on the past, speaks to who is at the centre of her practice. Like Ta’e’iloa I use both contemporary and traditional materials and motifs to narrate and map out the places and people that my practice draws from.

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<sup>14</sup> “Koloa: Fafine, ‘Aati, Mo e Tekinolosia / Women, Art, and Technology,” *Artspace Aotearoa*, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://artspace-aotearoa.nz/exhibitions/koloa-fafine-aati-mo-e-tekinolosia>.



Figure 6: Mele Ta'e'iloa (2021)

In chapter one of this exegesis— ‘Unfolding my Koloa’—I discuss different forms of koloa and how their presentation within a university critique setting changed the way I share my practice. I reflect on how a gift from my dad changed the direction of my research. This chapter establishes the foundational methodologies, fakafetongi and tohihokohoko, that I build my research project on, and the events that lead my research in the directions it has travelled.

The second chapter— ‘Knowing my Koloa’—addresses how the body holds generational indigenous knowledge. This chapter reviews my experience with *Connect the Dots Charitable Trust* where I was able to connect with Tongan elders who are living with dementia. I discuss where knowledge is held within my own body, and how I use that knowledge to create textiles that add to my koloa.

The third chapter - ‘Forming my Koloa’ - addresses my making process and methods. I discuss the amalgamation of urban, contemporary technologies, and traditional methods of making within my practice and how keeping the traditional methods that

have been adopted from my ancestors gives voice to whose cloth it is I am made of.

The final chapter— ‘Kia ‘Amelia’—contains sub-sections which are titled in Tongan. My use of Tongan language aims to communicate who this research is for—my nieces and every other brown child that needs it. This chapter, based on my experience, discusses the challenges a student may face—within a western framed education context—when their creativity takes heavy inspiration from cultural practices and offers some guidance on navigating that space.

As a Tongan woman that is navigating my way through spaces that are foreign to my cultural and familial background, it is important that I look for and at other indigenous artists who have traversed similar academic paths. I look to women who, like me, use craft and textile making to actively preserve and celebrate their cultural traditions. Artists and practitioners that I position my koloa practice with include, aute artist, Nikau Hindin<sup>15</sup> who is reviving the practice

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<sup>15</sup> “How Nikau Hindin Is Reviving an Art That Hasn’t Been Practiced in a Century,” Your Home and Garden, February 25, 2020, <https://www.yourhomeandgarden.co.nz/inspiration/people-and-places/nikau-hindin-reviving-art-aute>.

of aute making—the almost lost Māori practice of making bark cloth; artist and writer, Quishile Charan<sup>16</sup> who is healing generational trauma through craft making and embodied knowledge. Kupesi artist and knowledge holder, ‘Uhila Nai; and Tongan Māori artist and curator, Tanya Edwards. I align my research project with these women because like them, I see and feel the importance of keeping our ancestor's memories and processes alive by actively practicing, researching, and speaking while also protecting their traditions in spaces that are foreign to our culture.

When I was growing up, and met challenging times, my grandmother would remind me of the Tongan saying *kataki ke lahi*, which translates to *hold onto your grace and to be patient*. To me this saying also speaks of resistance. In the 1970s in Auckland, the New Zealand Police were instructed by the government to enter homes and/or to stop people in the street to ask for documents to prove a person's right to be in the country. This request was applied

<sup>16</sup> “At Home and in the Studio: Quishile Charan — Objectspace,” accessed May 31, 2022, <https://www.objectspace.org.nz/journal/at-home-and-in-the-studio-quishile-charan/>.

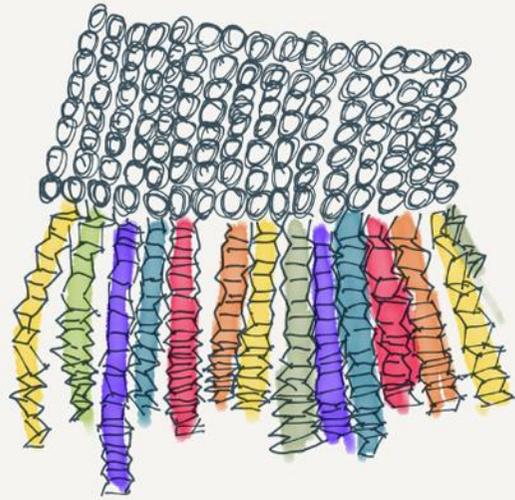
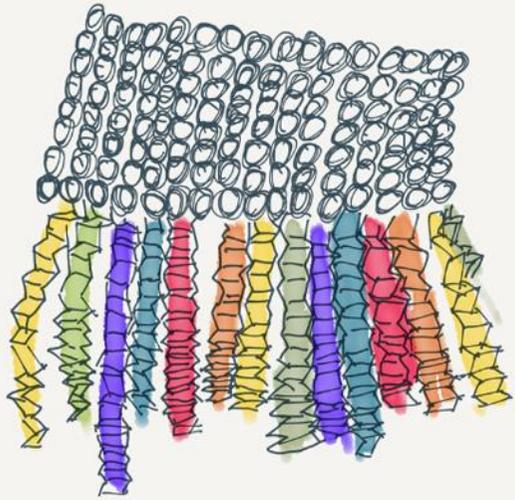
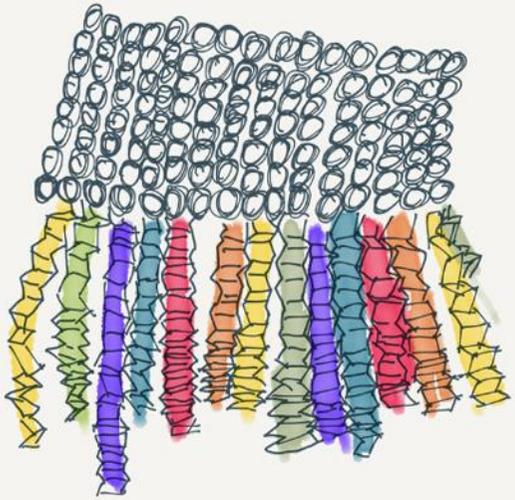
exclusively to Pacific Islanders, even though during the 1970s and 1980s the bulk of overstayers were from Europe or North America. This event came to be known as the Dawn Raids and equated to an invasion of Pacific Islanders.

I think about resistance in relation to introducing my cultural practice into the university space, originally a white space, and navigating the process of examination where my practice is left for others to

dissect, digest, and then place a grade on. My audacity to demand space for my ancestors who resisted against and through the Dawn Raids and dreamt for their descendants to gain an academic qualification, knowing how much further it will take our bloodline, is sewn through my contemporary ngatu, print design and garment making. Throughout my research I recognise that this work is the fabric of my ancestor's kataki<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Kataki translates to resistance.



# 1. UNFOLDING MY KOLOA

## 1.1 Talk Week Koloa

August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021, was day two of Talk Week in Visual Arts at Auckland University of Technology. During this event, artists, and writers from outside the university are invited to critically review students' art practices and offer feedback and/or support. Talk week enables students to gain experience in languaging their practice as well as the opportunity to see what their peers across all levels in the art school are doing.

I was gleefully ecstatic about being placed in a group with craft-based Aotearoa Cook Island artist Ani O'Neill. Without considering my ancestors, nor realising the amount of people that would attend my presentation or the context in which I was sharing it, I decided to perform a very small part of the making process for the kiekie fakaha'apai. The fakaha'apai is a festive garb from the Ha'apai Islands made with vibrant colours from pandanus leaves. It is a

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<sup>18</sup> Jione Havea, "Crossing Cultures in Oceania," in *Whispers and Vanities - Samoan Indigenous Knowledge and Religion* (Polynesian Press, 1995).

traditional Tongan textile, worn around the hip by both men and women during a dance performance.

"Fakafeta'i e ma'u koloa is a Tongan expression of deep gratitude for the gifting of words. The expression is entrenched with meanings because the one who is being thanked is appreciated for both having and giving (ma'u) koloa (wealth). In this expression, koloa refers to both oral and material wealth. The saying suggests that koloa should not be selfishly withheld, but rather shared"<sup>18</sup>.

While I understand Havea's explanation around the sharing of koloa I had not yet understood who this should be shared with. This chapter discusses how my mistake of oversharing the kiekie fakaha'apais making process and the exchange of koloa during talk week re-directed the positioning of my research.

My great-great-great grandmother, Mele<sup>19</sup>, settled in Uiha, Ha'apai in the late eighteen hundreds and we have since called Ha'apai

<sup>19</sup> After the examination process, before this exegesis is published via Scholarly Commons, personal names will be removed so as to protect the identity of my ancestors.

home. I chose to focus on the kiekie fakaha'apai<sup>20</sup> for Talk Week as an ode to my matrilineal geographic lineage. This context also gives a place for my tohihokohoko to physically sit within my practice. I then chose to perform a small part of the making process of the kiekie fakaha'apai as a form of respect for its purpose of being a traditional garment worn for dance performances. When I had finished my performance, I was met with plenty of feedback from lecturers, peers as well as our guest Ani who asked two questions that to this day have helped how I understand and view my practice. She asked me what my elders thought about my practice, and I admitted I was having a hard time getting information out of them. Ani responded with a small giggle and said that sometimes our elders want to know how much you really want it<sup>21</sup>. In retrospect I understand that my struggle in obtaining information about our traditional making methods as well as knowledge is not something that can be taught verbally. My elders were not holding out information because they were annoyed at how I begged for them to tell me. My elders simply could not put into words the cultural,

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<sup>20</sup> Traditional Tongan garb worn around the waist during dance performances, particularly the lakalaka.

tacit, knowledge that lived in their bodies. Our methods are ceremonial and this type of koloa needs to be actively practiced. My relationship with koloa could not be spoken into existence by me or my elders, I had to create my own process. By continuing to explore different methods of making, while keeping the ceremonial practices in mind, I am working on creating my own process. This allows me to make my koloa authentic to me and my experiences as well as knowledge I have acquired along the way.

During my Talk Week preparation, one thing I did not think about before my presentation was the cultural knowledge that I was giving away so freely. It was not until after I had presented that I realised how the knowledge I had worked so hard to obtain from my elders, had just been given away, without thought, to people who had no business in having it. Although the feedback I received was helpful and very positive, the feeling I had running through my body was not. By my own doing, I felt exposed, untrustworthy; I had failed my tohihokohoko. The feeling of evisceration in my gut is still one I

<sup>21</sup> 'It', referring to obtaining cultural knowledge and understanding of traditional textile making methods.

cannot fully describe to this day. My peers in my cohort celebrated one another. There were words of encouragement as well as hugs shared throughout the studio, but I still could not shake the guilty feeling running through me. I went home later that night and cried to both my parents about it over the phone and was met with a few giggles and was encouraged by both to simply just learn from this mistake.



Through the exchanges of conversation between Ani, lecturers and my peers, my project was clothed in what it needed in that moment, love. That said, the biggest lesson from my Talk Week experience was that I did not once stop to consider my ancestors and our tohihokohoko while I was preparing my presentation. I had let others dissect and digest a tradition that is sacred to my people and me. Nobody else in that room could hold space in my tohihokohoko and I decided that they would not gain access to it again. The gut wrenching feeling I had felt after presenting created a protectiveness in me that I had not possessed within my practice before. Moving forward, I knew that if I was going to continue to make in a way that relates to and is inspired by my ancestors, I had to do whatever it took to protect my ancestors and their knowledge. Preserving their processes means that those processes and traditions belong to my ancestors. Therefore, my ancestors are credited for the methods they have spent time perfecting and that lived within their bodies

Following Talk Week was an online crit where only my cohort and lecturers were in attendance. Because of the relationships I had established with everyone in attendance and how safe I felt in their

presence, I decided that this was the perfect time to announce the decision I had made to reel in my methods of presenting. The title of my presentation was *This is The Last Thing I Want to Do, Lol*. During my presentation I shared my struggle of not knowing how much information to share and how much to keep so that I was protecting what is sacred to my ancestors but also receiving a good grade. I spoke about my shame and how I felt like a sell-out after my Talk Week presentation. It was important that I stated my struggles and what I was going to do about it moving forward because it was the first time that I had set a boundary on behalf of my research project (and my ancestors) in the university setting. It felt good. Before I presented *This is The Last Thing I Want to Do, Lol*, my supervisors and I spoke of the languaging around my research project, and they encouraged me to declare what it is that my research needed. Respectfully, my research needs: indigenous citations, indigenous methodologies, indigenous examiners, and indigenous proof-readers. My research is for individuals who may find themselves in a situation where their cultural and familial background is the inspiration for their practice; sharing it in a foreign context requires a protective framing.

Through the love and interest that was exchanged between my cohort, lecturers, and parents, I was able to realise in my own timing, where I had gone wrong and even better, I was nurtured by all parties through the decision to never exploit my ancestors again. It was from this point in my research project that I began to understand that the function of fakafetongi within my practice aided its continuum.

I was gifted readings and art practices to study by lecturers, family members and fellow cohort peers. Receiving koloa from loved ones on how to preserve our culture, was doing just that within my practice. The findings of my research project have been gifted and exchanged into my orbit through family, friends, and educators. The fakafetongi that resides within my practice is the epitome of the saying that 'it takes a village to raise a child' because this research has not come to be on its own or by me alone but instead was raised by a village of people who have supported me and my research through the act of giving, receiving, and sharing talanoa, readings and artwork.

The following images consist of the title page for my online crit as well as a statement I made during my presentation. Prior to this crit, I always presented works that I had made e.g., textiles and/or prints. At this point in my research rather than using my craft to express what was happening in my project, I felt I needed to use my words to reveal and honour my frustration for my lack of protection for my culture and ancestors.

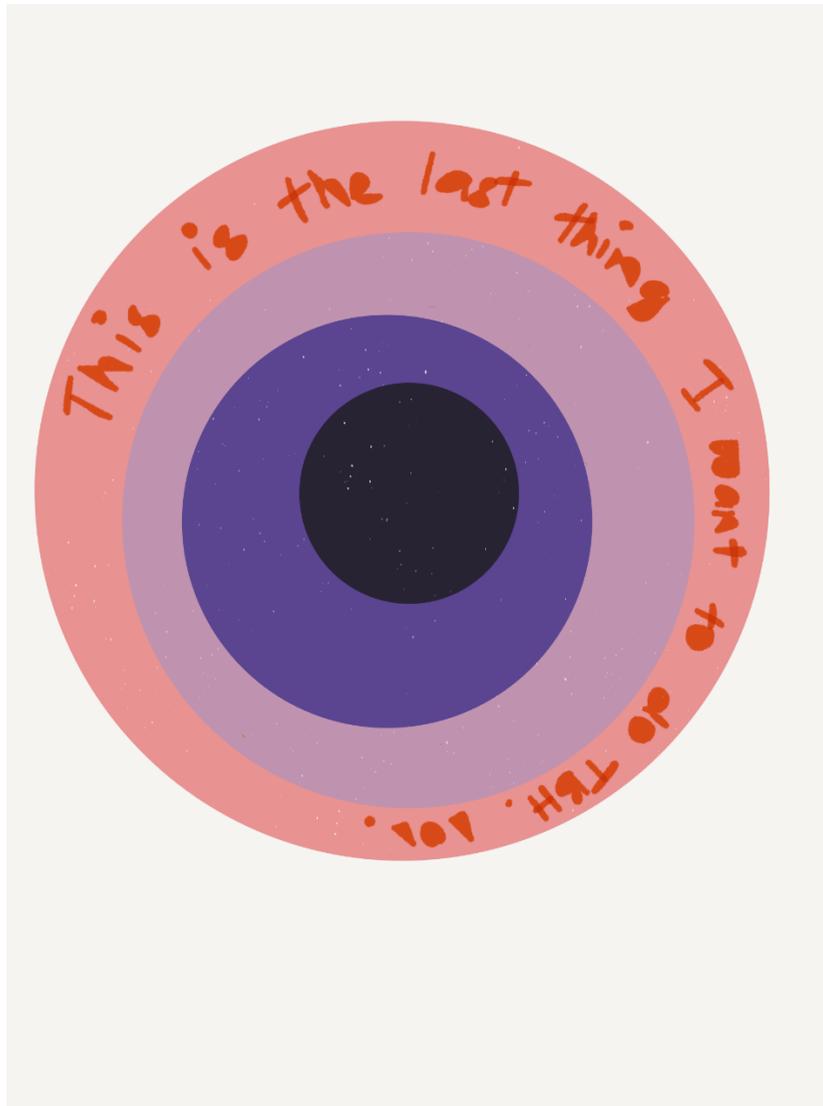


Figure 10: The last thing, (2021)

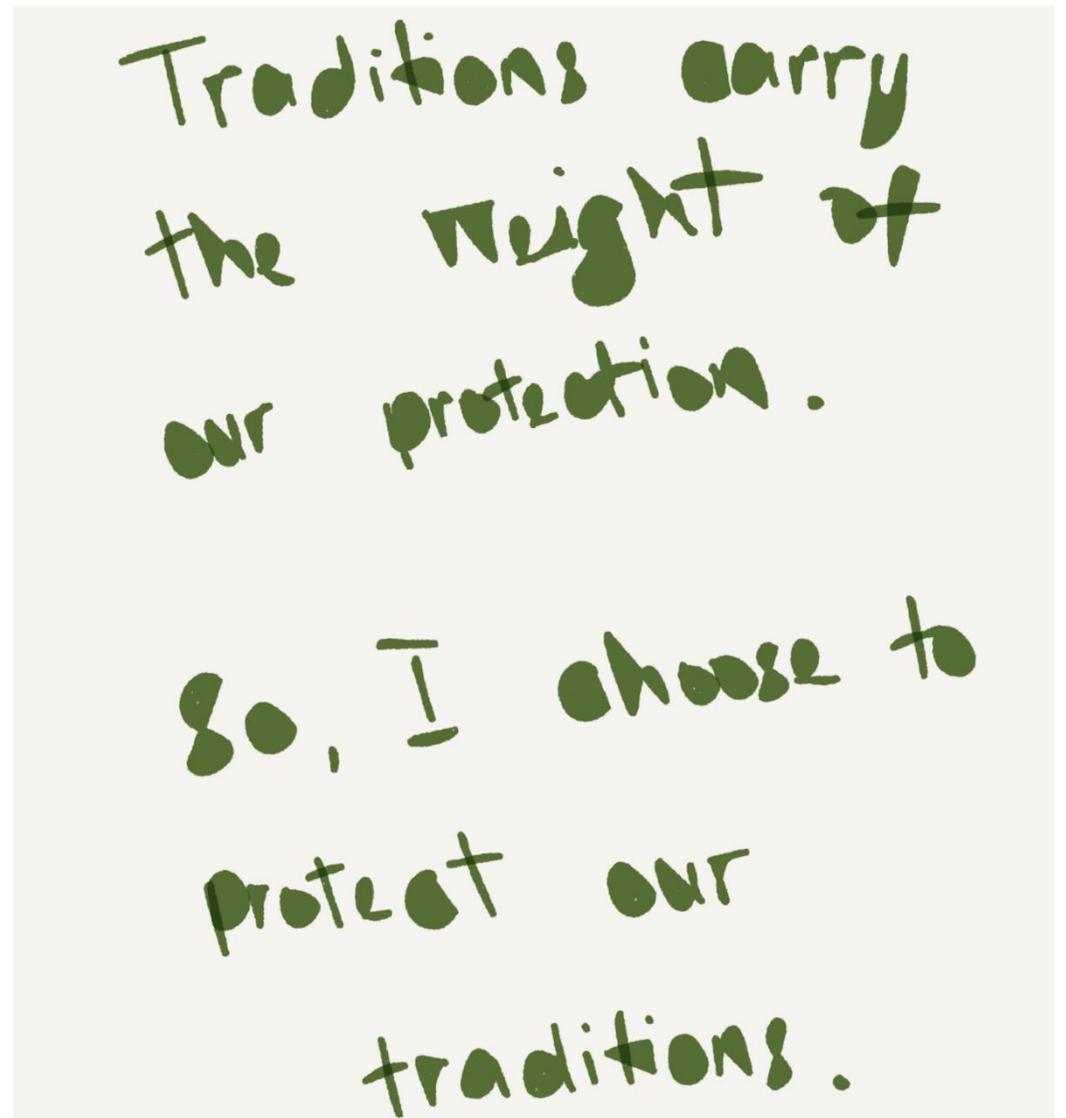


Figure 9: Protect our traditions

## 1.2. A gift from my Dad

Almost a week after my Talk Week presentation I celebrated my birthday as the country went into a level four lockdown<sup>22</sup>. I woke up on the first day of this lockdown to an email from my dad. Dad sent a gift in the form of my favourite type of koloa, a song and video. In the message he said that the song and video may help with how I had been feeling about Talk Week and that he sometimes feels the same way in his line of work—I no longer felt alone. The song and video shared was *Moonlight* by African American music artist, record executive and media proprietor, Jay-Z. The lyrics in the song go “we stuck in la la land” – “even when we win we gon’ lose”<sup>23</sup>. According to Jay-Z these lyrics are a subtle nod to *La La Land* winning best picture at the 2017 Oscars Awards, and then having to give it to *Moonlight*: “it’s really a commentary on the culture and where we are going”<sup>24</sup>. Through his lyricism, I am drawn to the way that Jay-Z can evoke conversations around the way African American artists are

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<sup>22</sup> Alert Level 4 Lockdown is a response by the government to how New Zealand would deal with the spread of Corona Virus. At Alert Level 4, schools and universities were closed.

<sup>23</sup> Shawn Jay Z Carter, *Moonlight*, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Nicole Mastrogiannis, “JAY-Z Explains ‘4:44’ Song Meanings | IHeartRadio Album World Premiere,” iHeart, accessed May 9,

being treated within the music industry as well as the way they are treating each other and their artistry.

Directed by screenwriter, producer, director and actor, Alan Yang, the video for the song *Moonlight*<sup>25</sup>, begins on the set of a show that is a remake of successful television sitcom *Friends*. This remake is an African American version. The episode being remade is ‘The One Where No One’s Ready’ and all cast members are wearing the exact outfits the original cast were wearing in the original episode. The set takes a break from filming and American stand-up comedian and actor Jerrod Carmichael who plays Ross, walks off set to greet his friend and ask his thoughts on the project. To Jerrod’s surprise, his friend admits that the idea of recreating *Friends* but making it black was a dry idea and questioned, who asked for that. Carmichael returns to the set and continues filming. As they continue, the camera starts to focus on Ross (Jerrod’s character), blurring the rest

2022, <https://www.iheart.com/content/2017-06-30-jay-z-explains-444-song-meanings-iheartradio-album-world-premiere/>.

<sup>25</sup> JAY-Z, *JAY-Z - Moonlight*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCSH48OlvMo>.

of the cast out visually and verbally. It is obvious that he was still processing his friends' comments and he begins to look around the set and out to the audience. Rachel, played by actress, writer, producer, comedian, and creator of television series *Insecure*, Issa Rae, then appears from her room, looks at Ross and signals for him to hush. Issa takes his hand and leads him to a door that leads to the back of set. As Jerrod walks, the song begins to play – “we stuck in la la land” – “even when we win, we gon’ lose”. When Jerrod gets to the second door, he opens it and is met with a park bench. Jerrod walks off set and takes a seat on the park bench. As Jerrod sits, he is doused in light from a full moon.

I relate this video to my relationship with koloa and how I choose to navigate bringing it into foreign spaces. At the beginning of this research project, I felt very much like Jerrod who did not have a clear focus on how he was going to tell his story. I then relate being gifted the *Moonlight* song and video from my dad to Issa leading Jerrod in a direction that was different to his counterparts but in the end was

doused in light. Koloa, no matter what form, has a way of teaching the person receiving it, lessons, and knowledge that one can and will hold onto and when the time is right will pass onto loved ones like I am here in these pages. Receiving koloa from my dad helped me understand that my mistake of oversharing was not the end of my practice, just a turning point. My dad sharing with me the song and video for *Moonlight* gave comfort to my Talk Week mistake. By way of my culturally guided research project, my hope is for all indigenous practitioners to not have to repeat themselves in a white context; our cultural practices are deserving of respect.

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Figure 11: Doused in moonlight

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<sup>26</sup> Jay-Z, “Moonlight” August 11, 2017, music video, 6:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCSh48OlVMo&t=1s>

## 2. KNOWING MY KOLOA

### 2.1 The thinking body

This chapter analyses why the idea of the thinking body<sup>27</sup> is an important component in my research. The thinking body refers to how cultural knowledge is held within one's body through the experience of doing and making. This idea connects to my experience of witnessing my Tongan elders who are living with dementia. By assisting kupesi<sup>28</sup> artist and knowledge holder Uhila Nai in teaching a Tongan speaking art class for Connect the Dots Charitable Trust<sup>29</sup>, I had the privilege of observing our Tongan elders emit their koloa making knowledge with their hands while mentally forgetting the conversations we were having. The concept of the thinking body functions in my research as a testament to our cultural knowledge not only living within our physical koloa but more importantly, it comes from within us. This concept is discussed by

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<sup>27</sup> Dr. Manulani Meyer, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Embroidered stencil.

<sup>29</sup> "CTD - Connect The Dots Connect The Dots," Connect The Dots, accessed June 30, 2022, <http://www.connectthedots.org.nz>.

Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer in 'Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning'(2008). She states that the "body is the *central* space in which knowing is embedded... Our body holds truth, our body invigorates knowing, our body helps us become who we are"<sup>30</sup>. This quote made me think about how involved Tongan women's bodies are in our making process. The backs of my ancestors now curve from being hunched over their lalanga<sup>31</sup> every day, the same way my fingers cramp while spending hours on a laptop designing the perfect print. This is relevant to our bodies holding knowledge through our experiences and processes of making koloa and encountering cultural knowledge through this making and through our ancestral stories of navigation and resistance.

Early in 2021 I was offered the opportunity to assist Nai in running Tongan speaking art workshops for Tongan elders living with

<sup>30</sup> Manulani Aluli Meyer, "Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, 2015, [file:///C:/Users/64274/Downloads/AluliMeyer\\_Triangulation%20of%20Meaning%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/64274/Downloads/AluliMeyer_Triangulation%20of%20Meaning%20(3).pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Weaving.

dementia. The Tongan speaking workshops took place every fortnight at different home care locations around Auckland and ran for two hours at a time. Nai's goal for each workshop was to reintroduce our elders to both Tongan art and kupesi making. After outlining to me how our workshop would run, Nai turned to me and said that even though we have a lesson plan what is most important is that we connect with our elders. I shyly responded okay, let's do this, but inside I was fretting over whether my Tongan speaking skills were good enough for our elders to understand. My first language was Tongan because I had been taken care of by my maternal grandparents who moved from Tonga to Aotearoa to help my parents raise me, but once I started school, my fluency in speaking English took over. Ten minutes into our first Tongan speaking workshop at BUPA David Lange Home Care, I quickly realised that through conversation, my ancestors had entered the room. As Nai explained to our elders what her lesson plan was, they responded by

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<sup>32</sup> What is your name?

<sup>33</sup> Where are you from?

<sup>34</sup> Commitment to nurture socio-spatial ties.

<sup>35</sup> Veitapui is relational, derivative of va and it is rule and law that you nurture this relation with another in the form of respect and honour. Usually, these relations are treated as if two were siblings or parent and child.

asking 'ko hai ho hingoa<sup>32</sup>?' 'Ko ho'o ha'u mei fe<sup>33</sup>? In retrospect, I now understand that this is what it meant to 'tauhi va'<sup>34</sup> and veitapui<sup>35</sup>, something my mum encourages each time I am introduced to other Tongan youth or distant family members. As our conversations with our elders started to flow, I realised that speaking my native tongue still came to me naturally, it still lived inside of me, like language attrition pundit Monica Schmid says: "it's still there, just buried and dormant"<sup>36</sup>. Since this day, I view the speaking of my native tongue as a form of my mind and body honouring my ancestors.

Noticing how organically the Tongan language arrived at my tongue when I needed it, I wondered what else about my culture lived inside of my body and was waiting to be worn. This realising created a sort of discomfort that felt like shame within me, knowing there were

<sup>36</sup> Aamna Mohdin, "Even If You've Forgotten the Language You Spoke as a Child, It Still Stays with You," Quartz, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://qz.com/1155289/even-if-youve-forgotten-the-language-you-spoke-as-a-child-it-still-stays-with-you/>.

parts of me that were repressed and unknowing how to release these prime factors into my being.

Through conversations with our elders, Nai and I established that both our mothers were from the same village but because she was raised by her paternal grandmother it made sense that we had not discussed where else in Tonga her lineage existed. Other things we established during these conversations was how the both of us were connected to each elder in the workshop. Each elder knew of someone from our lineage, was a neighbour of a relative in Tonga or had simply run the same social circles as our parents and grandparents when they first arrived in Aotearoa. The best part about these conversations were our elders figuring out that Nai and I are closely related—they were showing me how to tauhi va.

As the making segment of the workshop commenced, I noticed that the conversations were starting back up: ko hai ho hingoa? Ko ho'o ha'u mei fe? I expected repetition coming into this role and I leaned

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<sup>37</sup> To connect.

into it. As we were repeating our conversations there was a new question as elders asked what they should be drawing. Nai encouraged our elders that we were drawing but more importantly we were there to fakafehokotaki<sup>37</sup> with them all. Nai's words created a sense of calm throughout the room. Our elders continued to draw, and we continued to repeat our conversations across the group. I noticed one of our elders comprehending that this was something they once knew but could not remember how to navigate in the mind. As this elder got more comfortable in our repeated conversations I witnessed her hands doing what her mind had forgotten to do: create. Like our ancestors, the knowledge of creating still exists and although the mind may forget, our cultural experiences and who we are still breathes within our flesh and bones.

These ideas connect to Samoan theorist, Albert Refiti's<sup>38</sup> 'Woven Flesh' (2005) where he discusses how the body belongs to our ancestors. I believe in this sentiment, as it is my ancestor's teachings

<sup>38</sup> "Dr Albert Refiti – School of Art and Design - AUT," accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.aut.ac.nz/about/pacific/our-staff/albert-refiti>.

that carry me as I journey through life. When I look in the mirror, each feature of mine, from the shape of my nose to the melanin in my skin and texture of my hair is DNA I have inherited from my ancestors. Like my DNA, the knowledge that embodies my research reflects my ancestors. Refiti also asserts that “this knowing/placing who you are involves the understanding that your body, your being is woven flesh, a gene-archaeological matter made of ancestors/land/community/family. Therefore, your body does not necessarily belong to you as an individual. Because you weave from the flesh of the dead, your body belongs to the ancestors, to your *fanua*, the place of birth, and the community that shaped and cared for you”<sup>39</sup>. This relates to my practice as an entire community live on through my hands. My ancestors speak through my hands each time they draw and paint my motifs, communicating that they know who and where these skills and design methods derive from. This idea of knowing was evident as our elders were making; our ancestors were present through their hands as they moved freely over the paper to create their own kupesi. The verbal communication from our elders lessened and the generational knowledge of kupesi making that they

acquired over time became more dominant and their hands were now the point of communication. Our elders' hands were communicating their knowledge in our traditional kupesi design and making processes. The power of Nai's concept to re-introduce our elders to kupesi is how our traditional motifs triggered different memories for our elders that they chose to share with Nai and me.



Figure 12:CTD, (2021)

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<sup>39</sup> Albert Refiti, “Woven Flesh,” *INTERSTICES 06*, January 9, 2005, 53–60.

As we packed up our gear and drove away, I understood that we had gone to BUPA David Lange Home Care to teach a workshop, but Nai and I were instead the ones being taught. That day I learned two things. The first being that the desire to connect is how our Tongan people tauhi va and veitapui. When connecting with Tongan people for the first time, our connection is always first and foremost established by exchanging information about who and where the other comes from. The second lesson I took away with me is that the thinking body is made up of ancestral knowledge. Our ancestors are in everything we do because their processes live within us through the practice of koloa. Their knowledge speaks through our hands while we make koloa, using methods and processes they established. Our ancestors exist when we speak our native tongue. Our native language plays an essential role in establishing our identity as it is another method of preserving our culture. Having Tongan language recognised in my research project in the form of my methodologies is my way of honouring my ancestors and living family members who do not speak English, communicating that my practice is first and foremost for us.

## 2.2. Embodied knowing

DNA is the information molecule and according to The National Cancer Institute, “DNA is the molecule inside cells that contains the genetic information responsible for the development and function of an organism. DNA molecules allow this information to be passed from one generation to the next”<sup>40</sup>. Comparable to the way DNA functions within the human body, the information retained within my anatomy has been passed down through generations by way of the Tongan language and koloa. Print, textile, and garment making are methods I once thought arrived to me randomly but the manner in which each method arrived and abided by my practice taught me otherwise. Throughout my undergrad and post graduate studies I often found myself trying to take interest in topics that had no relation to myself and the things that mattered most to me. I tried to adopt methods of making that seemed *easier* and less time

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<sup>40</sup> “Definition of DNA - NCI Dictionary of Genetics Terms - NCI,” nciAppModulePage, July 20, 2012, nciglobal,ncienterprise, <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/genetics-dictionary/def/dna>.

consuming to execute in the attempt to avoid diving deeper into a project topic and the pieces of myself that I was required to put into it. I failed at each attempt to find something less meaningful to focus a project on and each time I was led back to my design and artistic origins of koloa, because it was just what felt right. My story relates to Cassandra Barnett when she said “knowing something is bound to how we develop a relationship with it”<sup>41</sup>. My relationship with print, textile, garment making, and koloa has been contrived into my orbit from ancestor to ancestor and then onto me. My knowing of each method grew not only by me nurturing each skill through doing but also from the stories and traditional textile pieces passed down.

The language spoken in each of my parents' homes consisted of garment construction, fabrication, and styling opinions. Garment making is the practice of my childhood and this is how I sewed together my own experiences into my koloa. While diving into my matrilineal family tree throughout this research project, I learnt, through my

<sup>41</sup> Cassandra Barnett, “Kei Roto i Te Whare / On Housing,” in *ST PAUL ST 2015 CURATORAIL SYMPOSIUM*, 2015, [file:///C:/Users/64274/Downloads/Kei Roto i Te Whare On Housing.pdf](file:///C:/Users/64274/Downloads/Kei%20Roto%20i%20Te%20Whare%20On%20Housing.pdf).

Uncle Olioni's fananga<sup>42</sup> that my great-great-great grandmother Elizabeth Lobley arrived in Nuku'alofa from England in 1860. Amongst her cargo was a sewing machine, known to be Tonga's first. While in talanoa with my mum and my Uncle Olioni, I learned that my great-grandmother Ana Fakalelu, was the seamstress of our maternal village 'Uiha, she could sew and stitch any pair of pants or dress without having to measure the bodies of her clients, my great-grandmother had a real eye for garment making. My grandmother Leata was the same and now my Aunty Talavao—it is as if all those ancestors live through her hands.

I asked my mum how Aunty Talavao came to be so well versed in sewing and I learned from my mum each generation in our family had a seamstress and she took one for team. Additionally, I learned my Aunty Talavao had always wanted to sew, she was naturally good at crafting a garment together, and she spent a lot of time learning from and watching my grandmother. I understood then and there that by tauhi va, veitapui, and through her generational relationship

to it, Aunty Talavao was bound to sewing like I am to garment making.

Garments house our bodies. Garments can behave as armour as well as communicate who we are before our mouths do. In my practice, the presence of my ancestors sits within my print designs. Transferring prints onto fabrics that are then wielded into garments is a mechanism for the way I communicate who I am, where and who I come from. Through garments my practice carries my ancestors, proving that “our body is the ultimate *va* – a porous boundary between the ancestor and the world”. When worn, garments are a representation of my ancestors holding me and my body that they filled with knowledge, therefore making our bodies the space between our ancestors (in this case, our ancestors will be found in the form of prints and garments) and the world (anyone who will come into the presence of these garments). The garments in my research practice behave as armour, doused in motifs that represent my ancestors and their contribution to our family koloa. When worn, I am cloaked in their knowledge.

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<sup>42</sup> Storytelling.

Tauhi va is to nurture and to care for and protect something or someone while they are growing. Nurturing the relational and physical spaces at home, in the university art studio and within the familial relationships that my research exists in, means that my ancestors' traditions and processes are taken care of and considered throughout every decision made. Through my matrilineal line, my practice speaks to my methodology of tohihokohoko as I have a generational connection to sewing and to be in relation to it, I must nurture that space and I do so by including and focusing on it within my practice.

The photograph below (see Figure 12) is a diagram that shows how I map out my matrilineal lines connection to sewing. Mapping out the geography and crafts of my tohihokohoko helps me connect the generations to one other. This map also informs me that garment making is not a hobby I have picked up out of just my interest for it but generationally lives within me through my maternal bloodline.

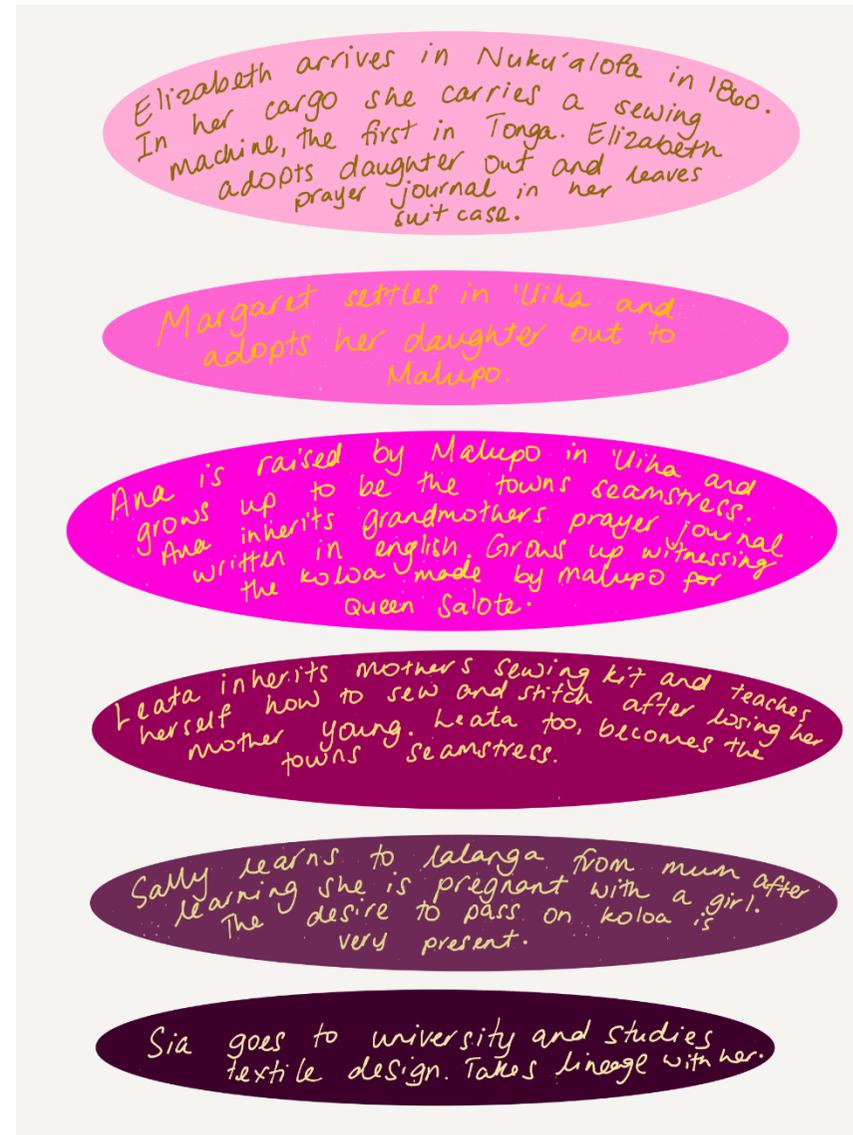


Figure 13: Mapping my matrilineal

### 2.3. The ritual in my hand

I do things with my hands because the act of imprinting my practice through my hands is the most successful technique for my brain to register the things I am learning and adopting within my textile research and making processes. I do not understand something until my body does. For example, key methods within my practice such as print design, handwriting and garment making all begin with my hands. I believe that this method has been passed down through my lineage as the textiles found in a koloa collection are all hand-made from natural materials that have been both hand-collected and grown on plantations by the men in my family. My family plantation in Foa, Ha'apai has been cared and nurtured for by my Uncle Halafihi since my grandfather left him in charge of providing for our family. On our plantation there are rows of mulberry trees that my grandfather started planting in the 1960s, as well as whatever fruit is in season. Mulberry trees are a form of income for both the men and women in my family. Uncle Halafihi will then strip the bark from

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<sup>43</sup> Stripping the outer bark of the stem of a tree.

<sup>44</sup> Stripped bark.

the stem of the mulberry tree. Once the bark is stripped from the stem, the outer bark is scraped off to receive the white inner bark, this process is known as fohi tutu<sup>43</sup>. A sharp knife or shell is used for the fohi tutu then my Uncle Halafihi will hand the tutu<sup>44</sup> to us women and this is where our making process begins.

The process of making my prints is inspired by the finished product that is ngatu. "Ngatu has been the treasure of our ancestors and today it is still one of our prestige, traditional and cultural wealth"<sup>45</sup>. I adopt the hand painting method that goes into designing motifs for ngatu to create my own contemporary motifs that represent places, spaces, and people in connection to my practice and lineage. The function of hand painting and drawing my motifs behaves as a handshake of sorts to welcome my ancestors to the fore of my design process. The print designs below are examples from earlier collections I created during my undergraduate studies when I first began experimenting with hand painted motifs that represent people and places that hold great value within my practice. I bring

<sup>45</sup> "Ngatu, Cultural Wealth of the Kingdom of Tonga," Google Arts & Culture, accessed May 18, 2022, [https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ngatu-cultural-wealth-of-the-kingdom-of-tonga/NQWh\\_qPipunBKA](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ngatu-cultural-wealth-of-the-kingdom-of-tonga/NQWh_qPipunBKA).

my ancestors to the fore of my making to pay homage to the knowledge and creativity that they have passed down. Below are examples of prints designed earlier in my practice (see Figures 13-15).

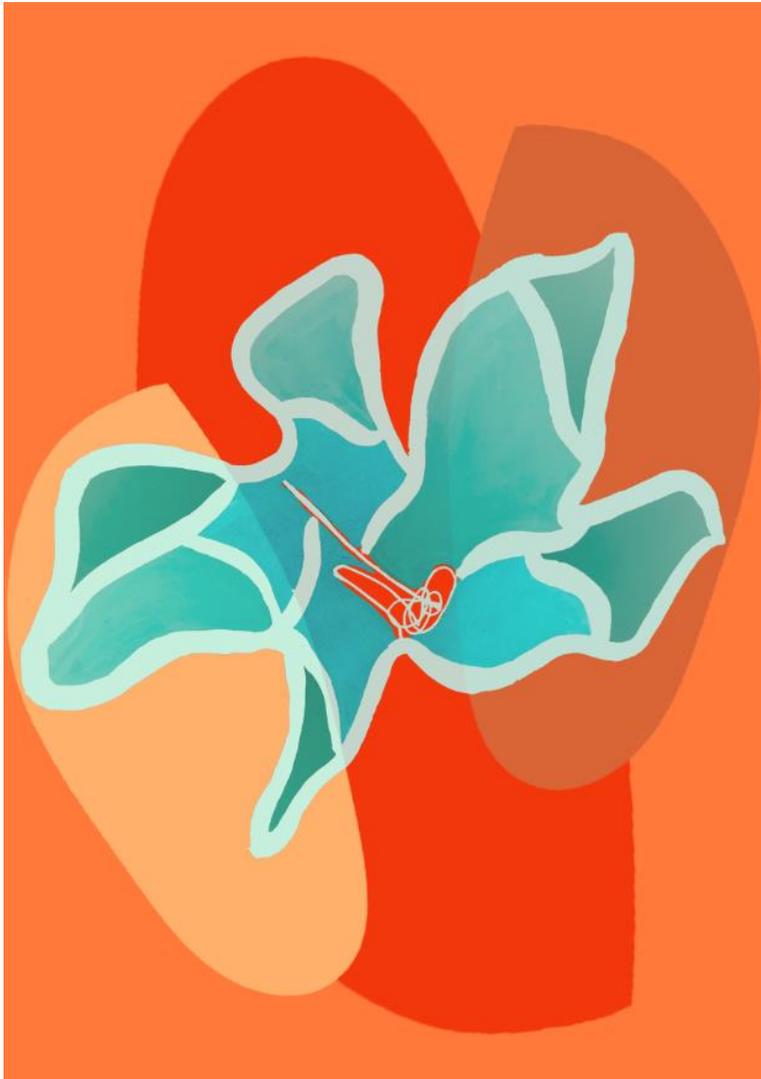


Figure 15: Bayamon print

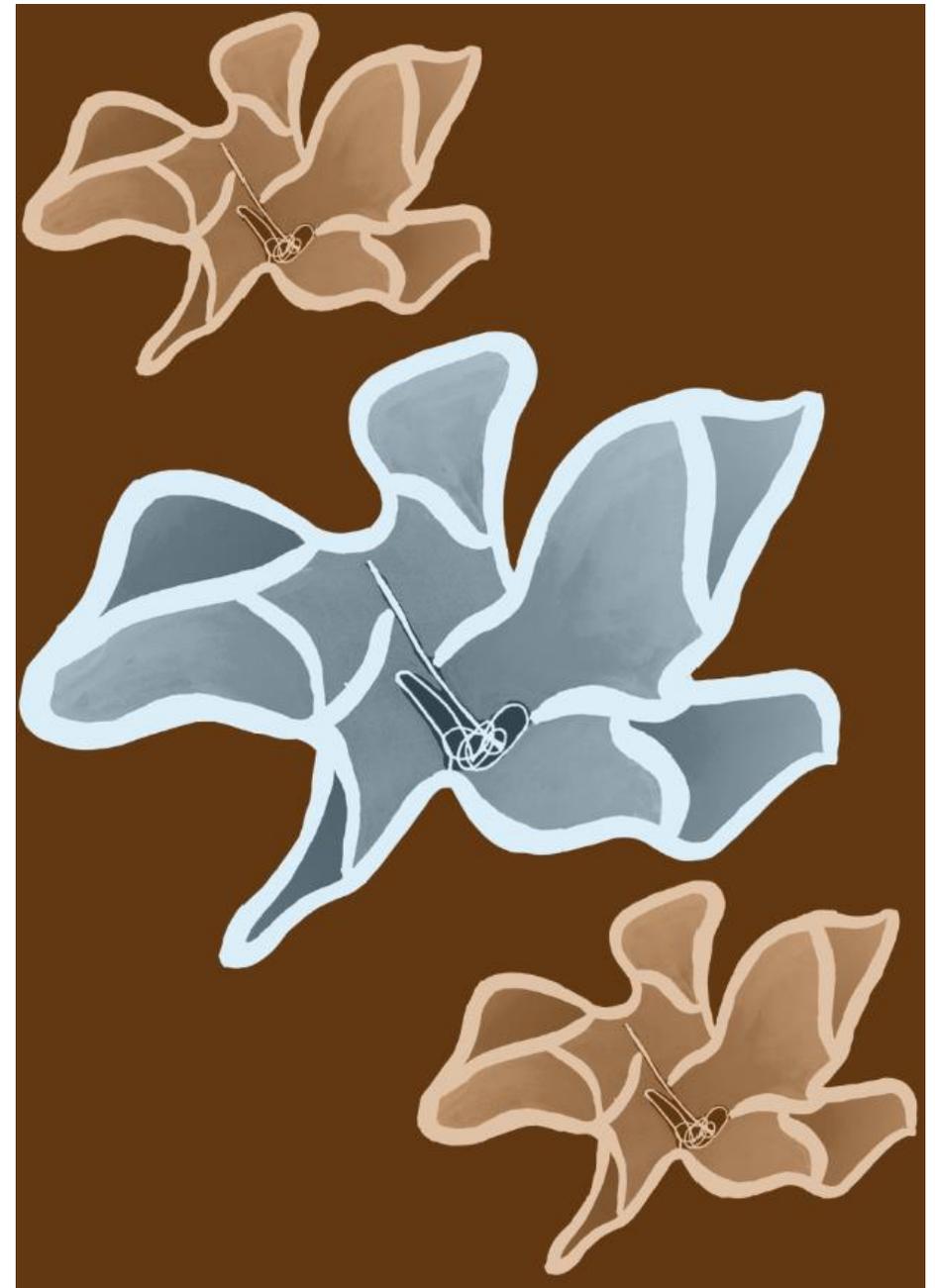


Figure 14: Metuisela print



Figure 16: Olioni print

As discussed earlier, garment making is generationally embedded within my practice. My garment making process begins with cutting into the cloth that holds my print design. Cutting out the pattern of the garment to prepare the cloth for sewing speaks to how my body carries knowledge. There is a ceremonial nature to this practice. Similarly, in my written practice I first handwrite my thesis, then read it back to myself before transferring it into digital form. I do not fully register information until my hands understand it – like ceremony and koloa, the two go hand in hand. Below are examples of garments made earlier in my practice (see Figures 19-21).



Figure 17: Bayamon details



Figure 18: Metuisela details



Figure 19: Olioni details

### 3. FORMING MY KOLOA

#### 3.1. Research is Koloa

I refer to my research as koloa because, the same way my mother and every woman in my matrilineal line have collected, gifted and fakafetongi koloa, my research is an amalgamation of information I have collected in different forms of fakafetongi. The methods of fakafetongi that has convened my findings have been through gifts of artwork from loved ones, links that have given me access to other researchers' dissertation or exegesis and stories about my lineal geography. According to Tongan artist Benjamin Work, “there is privilege in learning from a lineage of storytellers”<sup>46</sup>: these teachings cannot be found in a typical classroom. In my experience, the forms by which these lessons unravel, vary between verbal, acts of doing and ceremonial exchanges. Hong Kong based writer, Ysabelle Cheung writes, “throughout history, the Kingdom of Tonga has

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<sup>46</sup> “Benjamin Work - the Enriching Value of Tongan Visual Language — Thecoconet.Tv - The World’s Largest Hub of Pacific Island Content.,” accessed June 9, 2022, <https://www.thecoconet.tv/moana-arts/island-arts/benjamin-work-the-enriching-value-of-tongan/>.

adapted to unpredictable societal, economic, political, and environmental changes. Then and now, the work of women has been instrumental in the persistence of Tongan cultural narratives, in particular the practice of koloa, an umbrella term denoting tangible and intangible wealth and encompassing various forms of cultural exchange, such as textile-making”<sup>47</sup>. The film, *Unfolding my Koloa* (2020) by filmmaker and visual artist Veā Mafile’o, presents archival footage of the patterned grids of ngatu launima<sup>48</sup>. As a Tongan woman who grew up in the Tongan diaspora in Auckland, I relate to Mafile’o when she admits that “as a young Tongan woman, I am expected to have koloa faka-Tonga, to make them or gather them by buying them. Koloa faka-Tonga is something I don’t have the skills to make properly. I could learn but I have realised my strengths are in moving images. This is my digital koloa, my contribution to my family’s koloa”<sup>49</sup>. My resistance to unpredictable societal, economic, political, and environmental changes as a Tongan woman are worn in the form of hand painting motifs that preserve the memories of

<sup>47</sup> “Resistance through Koloa,” accessed June 8, 2022, <https://contemporaryhum.com/writing/resistance-through-koloa/>.

<sup>48</sup> Decorated bark cloth.

<sup>49</sup> “Fofola Koloa – Unfolding My Koloa // A Solo Exhibition by Veā Mafile’o,” July 20, 2020, <https://vunilagivou.com/2020/07/20/fofolakoloa/>

my ancestors. Print designs that hold my ancestor's memory and teachings with the addition of garment making means their memory and processes hold me together everywhere I go. Each method adopted and inherited from my ancestors and modified to dwell as my contribution to my family koloa.

Receiving the readings, songs, videos, and conversations that my village gifted and exchanged in relation to my research has generated tacit knowledge and understandings that cannot be explained but is instead felt and enjoyed through my garments. This koloa has instilled in me a knowing that I am never alone as my ancestors, through the embodied knowledge I have collected and inherited over time, are not only found in my koloa but also inside of me. This knowing is shaped by my geography and tohihokohoko. This idea connects to how we (my nieces, nephews, and descendants) know our motifs, not because we were told but because they surround us in our everyday lives through traditional koloa, our parents' tattoos and traditional artworks hung in our homes. Our eyes process things before our brains do and this idea was clear to me at our Easter Sunday family dinner. My nieces came to that

dinner, and so this next passage is addressed directly to them, the future readers of this exegesis:

*This year you girls came along with your chalk and within minutes, our driveway was filled with artworks made by you. One drawing caught my eye as it was a motif that was derived from a traditional motif Manulua which is one of the oldest Polynesian designs. Its origins are unknown but similar motifs have been found throughout Polynesian art. You can see a photograph of your drawing below, followed by a piece I made earlier in my research project. Through your own lived experiences, you girls are taking in our cultural practices and motifs, and it shows in the forms of which you choose to share your knowledge and love for your elders.*



Figure 20: Amelia Easter Sunday, (2022)



Figure 21: Fofola 'ae fala

My piece is called 'fofola 'ae fala' which translates to 'lay out the mat' which is a saying usually heard in a Tongan household when preparing to host guests and/or gatherings of sorts. The fala is a mat, traditionally woven together by pandanus leaves. My piece is a contemporary fala that was firsthand drawn and then embroidered over with cotton so that viewers did not have access to the original drawing. The purpose of my piece was to invite my peers into my studio space for a studio critique session.

### 3.2. Amalgamating old and new

In my making process I have adopted both old and new methods of making. Thanks to technology such as the Mutoh 1628TD valuejet roll to roll printer and a laser cutting machine, my methods have helped evolve making processes to convey the era that I live in. These machines not only speed up the making process but the laser cutting machine allows the aesthetic of my prints to appear as if it were painted ngatu due to the hues of brown achieved. By the time my prints are being transferred through laser cutting and digital print, the designs have been cleaned, cut, colour edited and have sat in several different placements in Adobe PhotoShop and/or Adobe Capture before being wielded into a print. These phases in the making process are created so that viewers do not have direct access to original ngatu forms. As I make in a space where I have no control over who encounters my work while installed, I have the responsibility of protecting who and where these prints come from. For my ancestors and tohihokohoko, I keep the original copies of each painted motif and the intimate stories each motif holds. For the university, I share a slightly abstracted and protected version of each

motif—giving just enough for my ancestors to be acknowledged within the work but not too much for them to own or claim them.



Figure 22: *An offering*, (2021)

I begin my physical making by hand painting motifs that represent the people and places that inspire my research project. Hand painting motifs for my fabric prints is adopted from my ancestors' ngatu making process.

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<sup>50</sup> Traditional woven garb worn around the waist by men and women on special occasions made from pandanus leaves.

<sup>51</sup> "Benjamin Work - the Enriching Value of Tongan Visual Language — Thecoconet.Tv - The World's Largest Hub of Pacific Island Content.," accessed

Hand painting motifs is a step that sits further into their making process but is the first step in mine. Opening my print making process with a method adopted by my ancestors is my way of having them at the fore of my practice. The colours used to paint my motifs are drawn from photographs or memories that I have of my ancestors.

Once my paintings have dried, I take photographs and scan them into digital form where I prepare the motifs as a repeat print. A repeat print is a motif that can be repeated vertically and horizontally, forever, without a break in the design. Repeated motifs are often found painted onto traditional ngatu and embroidered onto both ta'ovala<sup>50</sup> and fala. Repetition in my print designs help maintain the aesthetic of traditional textile practices. The use of motifs in my practice is another method adopted by ancestors. For centuries now, Tongan practitioners have used motifs to narrate our stories. Benjamin Work was intrigued as a young boy by his mother's koloa practice and has created his own motifs to communicate knowledge he has acquired about Tongan weaponry<sup>51</sup>.

June 9, 2022, <https://www.thecoconet.tv/moana-arts/island-arts/benjamin-work-the-enriching-value-of-tongan/>.



Figure 23: *Write it on the land, seal it on the heart*, (2018). Benjamin Work.

I had the joy of being raised by my grandmother while my parents were at work. Being at my grandmother's home was an experience; all day she would have 5.31 pi radio station playing and if she was not weaving fala or ta'ovala she would be re-painting her ngatu. One day as my dad picked me up, after thanking my grandmother for taking care of me he noticed she was painting ngatu and sat down to ask about the motifs shown. I noticed that they both had their own understanding of each motif and they both celebrated the others

understanding. My dad specifically asked about the three dots that are often found on ngatu. My dad told my grandmother that his comprehension of the motif was based off the myth that each dot represented the three ways in which James Cook was defeated, by air, land, and sea. My grandmother then shared that she understood the three dots to be the eyes and mouth of the coconut.

This exchange between my grandmother and dad always stuck with me for three reasons; it was the first time I had learned something about the motifs found on ngatu. Secondly, I realised how both my grandmother and my dad had different interpretations of the same motif and neither fought to be right; rather, their exchange was to share the knowledge they both held and both interpretations were accepted with love. Through this fakafetongi the third thing I realised was that both interpretations also represented each of their roles in my life.

Dr Tevita O. Ka’ili is a Tongan sociocultural anthropologist<sup>52</sup> who speaks about the representations of kula<sup>53</sup> and uli<sup>54</sup> in Tongan culture. The colour kula represents the man and how kula their skin is after being out in the sun all day while working to provide for his family. Uli represents the woman for she is much like the Earth, giver of love and life. Both men and women in Tonga have their roles and each one is just as important as the other. My dad's interpretation of the motif shows how seriously he takes his role of being a provider by going kula at work each day. My grandmother's interpretation of the coconut eyes and mouth conveys how she as a woman provides life and nourishment. Traditionally, women and men have their own role in every Tongan ceremony and making process. Neither role is more important than the other as both roles are necessary to protecting our culture– one cannot exist without the other. If our men did not grow and collect our materials from their plantations, our women would not have the tools and materials to make our koloa. If women did not make our koloa, our ceremonies would no longer hold our cultural traditions.

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<sup>52</sup> Tevita O Ka’ili, “Tauhi Vā: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 17, no. 1 (2005): 32.

<sup>53</sup> Red.

After digitally cleaning my hand painted motifs, I create a placement print on a digital A3 sized page. This step is important because my goal for a repeat print is for it to be seamless so that viewers will not know where the print ends or begins. This method helps protect the placement of the print because when repeated, the print is seamless and goes on forever. This method is used so that I can keep some things to myself – keeping parts of my process allows me to feel less exposed as an artist and keeps the recipe to my print, mine.

For each print created there will be somewhere between twenty to forty test placements and prints and sometimes even more. There is a lot of colour testing that happens at this point of my process. I test different colour harmonies while making sure that the added colours compliment the ones that represent the stories behind the print. I ask myself if the extra colours take away from the main colours and this is answered by referring to colour theories learned in undergrad<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Black.

<sup>55</sup> “Basic Color Theory,” accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.colormatters.com/color-and-design/basic-color-theory>.

My making process can often feel time consuming. Unlike our cultural process of textile making where our women create pieces of ngatu and lalanga together, as a village; my paint and print designs are executed alone, and these steps require time and patience. When I begin to feel alone and disconnected in my making, I look to the words of Hindin who expresses that “everything is connected. Cultural practices come with their own protocols and rely on relationships with knowledge holders that have been nurtured over time”<sup>56</sup>. Hindin's words are a reminder of what and who it took to get here, I am encouraged to think of the knowledge and connections that my textiles hold and that is enough for me to continue.

Once I am happy with the placement, I then send it off to AUT's Textile and Design Lab (TDL) to be test printed. Before preparing the pattern for printing I liaise with TDL's manager, Peter Heslop to find out the width of my desired fabric. After a repeat print is finalised, staying on Adobe Photoshop, I prepare the print for digital printing at TDL. I choose to print my fabrics at here because over the past five

years, during my time at university I have established a relationship with the staff and machines used. There are several fabric printing companies based around the world that I could go to and pay less money, but those places would not have been able to test on ngatu or tell me the certain parts of the printer that needs to be raised when working with ngatu due to its textural surface.

My knowledge of these intrinsic details about the fabric printer have been gained by establishing a working relationship with Peter and the team at TDL. This relationship exists because of the exchange of knowledge passed to me through Peter over the years. Through the exchange of knowledge being passed my way, my confidence as an artist grew as I knew I had people I can trust to guide me through the ups and downs of test printing.

In Tonga, when women make ngatu, they often gather with other women in their village and as a unit create ngatu. Each woman has their own part in the making process and that is the type of

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<sup>56</sup> “How Nikau Hindin Is Reviving an Art That Hasn't Been Practiced in a Century,” Your Home and Garden, February 25,

2020, <https://www.yourhomeandgarden.co.nz/inspiration/people-and-places/nikau-hindin-reviving-art-aute>.

togetherness I look for in my practice. Through fakafetongi, TDL is the village that my practice is physically able to grow within. Once my prints are returned to me in physical form, I then take them over to my Aunty Talavao to sew my collection.



When I am making, there are also a series of questions running through my mind: why do I want to apply these colours? What do they represent? What is the silhouette of the garment? What fabrics will I use and why? If this work represents my ancestors, then how do we look united but celebrated individually at the same time? My answers are that colours chosen represent details about my ancestors that only our bloodline will know. As we are a small nation it is easy for another Tongan person to know certain things; for example, know that my grandmother always wore a red scarf to church every Sunday. To make things more personal I refer to an ancestor's favourite treat or a certain pair of socks they wore through my colour selection so that when my family members encounter a specific work, they know who they are looking at. I particularly enjoy the intimacy that these finer details introduce to the relationship between my family and my practice. My koloa looks united because every garment has the same silhouette, which shows a sense of unity. Having the same garment silhouette for each garment usually does not happen in a traditional clothing collection but my practice needs the same silhouette to represent our family make-up; this similarity shows that the things that shape us spiritually and culturally are what connects us. The colours and the prints

on each garment draw from my ancestors' memories to honour the details about them that only our family will remember and miss about them.

For my contemporary ngatu I have decided to use canvas because of its material similarities to ngatu. Canvas has a thick consistency and behaves a lot like ngatu. The cream colour of untreated canvas is the same colour achieved with ngatu after being beaten with a mallet. An artist group of wahine toa who create large artworks bigger than ngatu is Mata Aho Collective<sup>57</sup>. "Mata Aho Collective is a collaboration between four Māori women who produce large scale fibre-based works, commenting on the complexity of Māori lives". They produce works from a single collective authorship which is bigger than their individual capabilities. Their work titled *Kiko Moana* (2017), made from layers of sewn and slashed tarpaulins that are eleven metres long and five metres wide, informs this project. Collective member, Bridget Reweti spoke with *Radio New Zealand* and acknowledges that they like to use materials that are utilitarian. Part of Mata Aho's research for *Kiko Moana* was to photograph tarpaulin in the wild. Reweti opens up that *Kiko Moana* was the first work that the collective sent overseas, and they wanted to use a material that the

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<sup>57</sup> "About," Mata Aho Collective, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.mataahocollective.com/about>.

communities they are from can recognise and that was their way of taking their communities with them to an international audience<sup>58</sup>. Mata Aho is important to my project because both our practices are held together by women who use large scale textiles that comment on the complexity of our ancestors' lives.

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<sup>58</sup> "The Mata Aho Collective's Tarpaulin Art-Work," RNZ, October 28, 2018, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/standing-room-only/audio/2018668689/the-mata-aho-collective-s-tarpaulin-art-work>.



Figure 25: Kiko Moana, (2016). Mata Aho Collective.

## **4. KIA 'AMELIA**

### **4.1. Faka'osi**

July 1st, 2022

In *Research is Ceremony* (2018), Dr. Shawn Wilson concludes that "if research does not change you as a person, then you have not done it right". Wilson comes to this conclusion when he realised that changes within his research that had occurred were not big revelations, flashes of insight or dramatic differences in his life or lifestyle. In connection to my research, my findings have all been an amalgamation of ceremonial rituals of connecting with loved ones who have helped shape my research through their offerings of knowledge.

Before embarking on this research project, I had no sense of privacy for my cultural knowledge, nor did I protect it within foreign spaces I carried this knowledge

in to.

So like Wilson, I also leave behind, in the forms of handwritten notes, some research advice for my nieces, nephews and every other brown child that needs it. This advice can also be applied to everyday life.

- Write everything down as it happens. Documenting things help for recounting it later as you piece together your exegesis. You do not want to scavenge through book pages trying to remember what you read.

Seek further information in our language, you will find ~~the~~ answers in our words. Map each word out like I did with the word fakafetongi so as to discover an in depth meaning.

I respond well to tight deadlines so to keep me on track during my research, my supervisors asked me to document the things I would do for my research.

each day in an email and to send it to them before 8am the following day. The best thing about this form of documentation was reading through those emails to piece together my exegesis.

- Respect our koloa. Koloa is your elder, it is our family member, it is your research. To respect your koloa is to preserve and to prepare it for its next destination. Throughout my research and in this exegesis, I unfold mine and my family's koloa to learn the processes and ceremonies our ancestors generated to preserve our people and our traditions.

I have added to our family koloa my findings and my personal methods and methodologies. And to conclude, I fold it all up and prepare our family koloa for you, Amelia, to unfold when you are ready.

Referring to the graphical intersection I introduced to break-up the word fakafetongi, this research is also an invitation for you, Amelia and our descendants, to

Continue to shape and carve out our family koloa.

An invitation to not let the research into our family koloa end here, but for you to continue to add to it. What you enjoy most about our cultural traditions in your own way. In the same way that I am adding to our family koloa today and like our ancestors have before me.

Koloa is embedded in us from even before birth. Knowledge in koloa carries us through life and our bodies are wrapped in it as we leave this life.

Our family koloa will outlive me as they will you, so let us protect them as best we can while they are in our care.

Ko ha kii tohi ma'a 'Amelia.

Mia, I write this to you a week after abortion rights for women in eight out of fifty-two states in America have been banned. One of these states, house a dozen women who share our bloodline. I want you to know that in a time where minority people's rights are still being taken away, that there is no better time to hold onto our culture and traditions.

People will test you; they will strip you of the beauty that makes you, you. And when they do, hold onto your great-great grandmother Leata's advice to kataki ke lahi. Know that our culture and traditions are not on you, they are in you and what is within you, they can never take away.

-Love, Auntie Sia.



Figure 36: Descending from 'Uiha







Figure 40: Hake





Figure 44: Heka

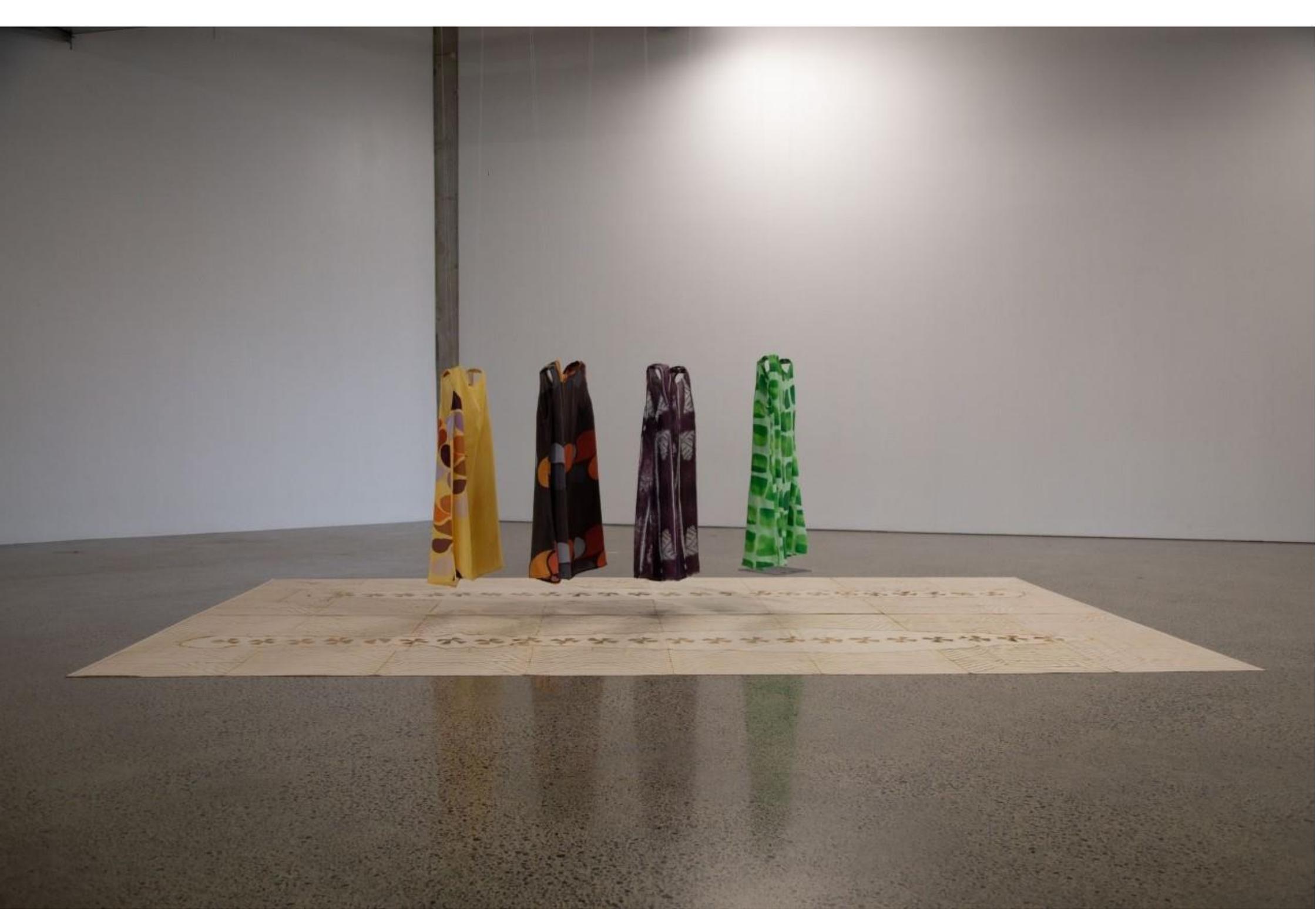


Figure 46: Foa 'eni

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