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Capturing the ‘Female Essence’? Textile Wealth in Tonga¹

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Enveloped by *koloa*

On Tuesday 3 June 2003, at the beginning of the cooler season, Sela took me to a large house named *Sia ko Veiongo* in Kolomotu‘a, the old part of the Kingdom of Tonga’s capital, Nuku‘alofa. Sela, who had always been involved with making and overseeing the production of *koloa*, including mats, barkcloth and coconut oil, was contributing textiles to the wedding bed (*mohenga mali*)² being prepared for ‘Eiki Salote Lupepau‘u Salamasina Purea Vahine Arii ‘o e Hau Tuita and Matai‘ulua-‘i-Fonuamotu Fusitu‘a.³ The oldest daughter of Princess Pilolevu was to marry the son of a noble man, the Honorable Fusitu‘a, whose estate is in Niuafu‘ou.⁴ As the composition of the wedding bed is the responsibility of the groom’s mother, ‘Eseta Fusitu‘a accordingly had older female family members directing young men who were carrying heavy bales of mats and barkcloth

1 This chapter is published in a slightly altered form as Chapter 6 in my book *Unwrapping Tongan Barkcloth: Encounters, Creativity and Female Agency* (2017).

2 The couple is supposed to spend the first night of their married life on this wedding bed made up of textile wealth. Today, however, married couples often spend the wedding night on a European bed.

3 On 8 May 2008, Nuku‘alofa Supreme Court granted Hon. Lupepau‘u Tuita and Matai‘ulua Fusitu‘a a divorce (14 May 2008).

4 On 7 May 2014, a few days after the death of his father, the title of Fusitu‘a was bestowed upon Matai‘ulua-‘i-Fonuamotu Fusitu‘a, making him the estate holder of the villages of Faletanu, Ma‘ofanga, parts of Angaha‘a in Niuatoputapu and Sapa‘ata in Niuafu‘ou (Lavulo 2014).

in and out of the house, laying them down wherever they were asked to do so. The main and largest room of the house had several women sitting around a pile of mats that had been unfolded, and that covered almost the entire surface of the floor. The wedding bed was to consist of 40 mats (*fala*) and as many layers of *ngatu*. One woman functioned as a secretary, writing down the order of the mats that were used, a task complicated by the numerous times mats were pulled out while others were put on top of the pile. The actions of some of the younger women, helped by the young men, were prompted by the phrase ‘*Ko e hā falá?*’ (Which mat?), which led to discussions among some of the older women. When the women had reached mat 23, they started pulling out more mats to keep them apart and make them ready to present to the bride’s side. The 40th and last mat of the pile was carefully oiled with *lolo niu* (scented coconut oil). Once the female relatives of the groom Matai’ulua (including his mother, ‘Eseta Fusitu’a) had finished preparing the mats, they joined a small group of women who had started folding the *ngatu lau tefuhi*—a 100 *langanga* (section of about 40 cm) long barkcloth. Here again, young men carried the large barkcloths and spread them out under the vigilant eye of the women present. The barkcloths were folded to the same width as the mats by tucking in the borders (Figure 32) or by cutting small strips of excess *ngatu*. It was on this same neat pile of barkcloth and mats—the sequence of which visually and materially translated the ideas about the rank that elder, knowledgeable women hold—that the wedding couple seated themselves a week later on Wednesday 11 June 2003, to undergo the traditional royal wedding ceremony (*tu’uvala*).⁵ Sitting on this large pile of barkcloth, the couple not only elevated their status but also became the centre of everyone’s attention—a process known as *fakalāngilangi* (bringing splendour) (Figure 33). Moreover, the couple and their attendants (*fa’e tangata*)⁶ were dressed in *kie hingoa* (fine mats with genealogies) and the bride was dripping with coconut oil.

5 Churchward (1959: 522) describes *tu’uvala* as the exchange of gifts and cloths between bride and groom in a Tongan way.

6 *Fa’e tangata* (also called *tu’asine*) are the biological and classificatory brothers of the mothers of the bride and groom. During the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom will sit in their laps and other *fa’e tangata* may sit at their feet (Douaire-Marsaudon 1998: 304; Aoyagi 1966: 168).



Figure 32. Folding a dark barkcloth (*ngatu 'uli*) decorated with motifs inspired from historical museum barkcloths to incorporate in the wedding bed (*mohenga mali*). Sia ko Veiongo, Kolomotu'a, Tongatapu

Source. Photographed by Fanny Wonu Veys, 3 June 2003



Figure 33. 'Eiki Salote Lupepau'u Salamasina Pureau Vahine Arii 'o e Hau Tuita and Matai'ulua-'i-Fonuamotu Fusitu'a sitting on the wedding bed (*mohenga mali*), which forms a throne showing their elevated status. Mala'e Pangai Lahi, Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu

Source. Photographed by Fanny Wonu Veys, 11 June 2003

Barkcloth, mats and coconut oil have long been crucial elements in wedding ceremonies. While the previous description concerned only a small part of the 10-day wedding celebrations, the Wesleyan missionary James Watkin witnessed, on 9 April 1833, a wedding ceremony that included similar materials that, through their materiality, allowed for the wrapping of people. As he wrote:

Married a couple this morning in the presence of great numbers of people [:] they are two interesting young persons and both chiefs of considerable rank, they were beautifully attired in the native style in dresses that were a burden to carry, and their persons were anointed or rather drenched in perfumed oil, considerable preparation had been made for feasting, hogs and yams in abundance having been prepared for the parties concerned and for unconcerned spectators if such they might be called who had been attracted by the fine sight and the more tempting as well as substantial feast. The *gnatoo* [*ngatu*] drapery and mats of fine texture are tastefully adjusted to the person, and produce a pretty if not an imposing effect, it pleases me as much as the more flaring and more costly habiliments of the 'great ones' of more civilised parts of the earth. After the performance of the marriage ceremony they proceeded to the habitation of the bride groom and after a change of attire a few of the harmless ceremonies which obtained in former times on such occasion were gone through, one was walking in state from the house in which they were enrobed to another at a short distance and back again, in walking from the house the Lady preceded in returning the gentleman, after a repetition of this the bride was pretty well bedaubed with a superposition of oil and turmeric and conducted to a sort of throne or elevated seat formed with large quantities of *gnatoo* [*ngatu*] and mats of superior workmanship on which she was seated to continue in [mueaz?] state for a considerable time after which she is disencumbered of her load of a dress and privileged with use of the bath by which the matrimonial ceremony terminated. A marriage in high life is an affair of 'pomp and circumstance' here as well as elsewhere. I have held the usual service this day which was well attended and was pleased to see the bride and bridegroom present the former in a dress that required more strength than her own[,] the latter too was in matrimonial attire (Watkin 1833).

The presentation of large amounts of goods and food during ceremonial occasions in Tonga has been discussed extensively in anthropological literature. Based on nineteenth-century observations and twentieth-century scholarship, a broad distinction is generally asserted between objects made by men and those made by women. The latter, comprising a variety of textile valuables as well as coconut oil and sometimes baskets, are termed *koloa faka-Tonga*, or succinctly *koloa*, and are often

categorised as the women's wealth of Tonga's island nation (Kaepler 1999a). However, from both earlier vignettes, it appears that men as well as women manipulate *koloa* and are enveloped by it. In this chapter, I want to explore how *koloa* have been defined historically and in contemporary Tonga. I will then engage in the debate of how and why *koloa* are valued to finally question the notion of gendered objects in which *koloa* are viewed exclusively as women's wealth.

Defining *koloa*

William Mariner, a shipwrecked clerk who was adopted by Tongans after most of the crew of the *Port-au-Prince* had been killed in 1806,⁷ explained in his account of his adventures, specifically in the introduction to a chapter entitled 'Arts and Manufactures', that in early nineteenth-century Tonga there was a difference between objects produced by skilled male professionals (*toofunga* [*tufunga*]) and those that do not require expert skills (Mariner 1827, vol. 2: 192). In the latter category, he moreover made a distinction between objects made by women and those produced by men. While Mariner did not name the different categories, he did make an attempt at defining groups of objects both in terms of gender and of the skill required to make them.

Tongans and scholars today refer to groups of objects that are considered precious, have special value and can be presented and given during ceremonies. The classification is made up of mats, barkcloth and coconut oil⁸ in the first group; decorated baskets, combs and chiefs' ornaments in the second; and clubs, spears, canoes, carved whale's tooth, wooden head rests and kava bowls in the third (Douaire-Marsaudon 1998: 124; Kaepler 1990: 59). The first category is generally coined *koloa* and will be at the centre of this discussion. It seems that the objects in the second group were made only by high-ranking women, but could be used by both men and women in the chiefly classes (Douaire-Marsaudon 1998: 124). The third group of objects was created by specialised male artisans (*tufunga*) who worked for chiefs, was used by men and was not distributed but kept and inherited (Douaire-Marsaudon 1998: 124). Still, historical

7 William Mariner was finally picked up by the brig *Favourite*, which took him to Macao from where he continued his voyage to London aboard an East India merchant vessel, arriving in June 1811. John Martin, a London doctor, who became fascinated with William Mariner's story when he met him a few years after his return to England, composed the narrative for him (Smith 2000: 193–94).

8 Kaepler (1990: 59) claims scented coconut oil belongs to the second category named *teuteu*.

texts testify to the presentation to Europeans of items created by *tufunga*. George Forster remarked in October 1773 that ‘arms’ were presented to Cook’s crew (Forster 1999, vol. 1: 244). Mariner told how all foreigners who came to Tonga received canoes (1827, vol. 1: 257). Also, the presence of hundreds of weapons in museum collections demonstrates that weapons created by male artisans were exchanged and gifted (Mills 2007). Wood incising has, however, with the disappearance of traditional warfare and the influence of Christianity, almost completely ceased (Kaepler 1990: 59) and been relegated to the ceremonial sphere. Adrienne Kaepler (1999a) states that some forms of *ngāue fakamé’a’a* (material treasures), such as elaborately carved weapons, are no longer gifted because they are now not necessary for daily use. Tongan scholars including ‘Okusitino Māhina (2004: 87–88) and Futa Helu (1995: 197) agree that many carved wooden objects are more likely to be appreciated as historical objects associated with and enhancing the status of specific male *tufunga*, or creators, builders and constructors of artistic or beautiful things. In 2008, during King George Tupou V’s *taumafa kava*, the kava ceremony to mark the investiture of a Tongan royal, the attendants carried relatively newly carved clubs over their shoulders.

Different interpretations of *koloa* exist. They often depend on the varying degree of knowledge to which people have access, as well as the historical period, geographic area and rank of the person and his/her family. For example, Kaepler’s discussion on *koloa* is based on information given by aristocratic women in Tongatapu and the estate (*tofi’a*) on Tungua, an island in the Ha’apai Islands. Heather Young Leslie (2007), however, did fieldwork among commoner women from Kauvai Island in Ha’apai. In a booklet put out by the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, *Ko e kava mo e ngaahi Koloa Faka-Tonga* (Kava and Tongan prestigious objects) (2002),⁹ it is explained that *koloa* comprise barkcloth, fine mats, coconut oil and baskets. Young Leslie (2007) asserts that *koloa* encompasses mainly textile wealth, as does Ping-Ann Addo (2013) who works among the diaspora communities in New Zealand. Her definition of *koloa* refers to ‘things that women exchange’ or ‘a category of valuable objects made and presented ceremonially only by women, and associated with women’s generative powers’ (Addo 2013: 2, 34–35, 200). Actually, many definitions do not include baskets. Kaepler (1990: 59) and Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon (1998: 124) classify baskets with objects that were made exclusively by

9 Author’s translation.

high-ranking women. I suggest that as combs and chiefs' ornaments and headdresses are no longer made, the decorated baskets have joined the group of valuables termed *koloa*.

On numerous occasions during the 2006 funerary rites of King Tupou IV, fresh flower arrangements or cut pieces of plant materials constructed to represent new flowers were laid on flat woven coconut palm leaf baskets (*kato kakala*) and were presented. On Saturday 16 September 2006, during a presentation presided over by Princess Pilolevu, the only daughter of the then recently deceased king, and two of Pilolevu's daughters, Lupe'olo Halaevalu Mohe'ofu and Fane Tupou Vava'u, a large number of *kato kakala* were laid out in the east marquee by Queen Sālote school girls. No mention is made of *kato kakala* in historical sources, but this innovative way of processing Tongan material is in accordance with the Methodist missionary ideals of teaching Islanders 'a work of patience' (Eves 1996: 148). On Thursday 21 September 2006, under the east marquee, women holding crocheted bedspreads (*kafu niti*) and patchwork quilts (*monomono*) formed a circle around other goods gifted by female presenters. Both quilted and crocheted bedspreads were included in this particular presentation. Crocheted and quilted bedspreads, or *kafu*, have been made in Tonga for decades. The wives of missionaries and the French Marist nuns introduced these techniques. Therefore, in Tonga, crocheting and quilting are associated with Christianity (Veys 2009). Moreover, sewing, embroidery and lace-making were imparted to Tongan women by missionaries intent on colonisation in the hope that they would create an image more befitting Victorian femininity (Küchler and Were 2005: 183–84). Phyllis Herda (1999) argues that from the 1970s, crocheted and quilted bedspreads acquired a significance beyond mere bed linen. This was exemplified in the exhibition curated by Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai and Manuēsina 'Ofa-Ki-Hautolo Māhina (2011) in Auckland, showcasing exceptionally artistic items of Tongan crochet and embroidery. They have become a form of textile wealth, albeit an inferior one to barkcloth and mats.

The presentation to the royal family, on Thursday 21 September 2006, by the Catholic school children of 'Api Fo'ou School included at least 200 cakes. The school delegation entered via the southwest gates with the girls in front carrying *ngatu* and mats, followed by other girls with cakes, which were put down in the centre under the direction of a Catholic nun. Then came other goods such as kava roots and items of food that were carried by the Catholic schoolboys and their teachers. Cakes are usually bought in one of the many bakeries of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa,

and then wrapped in cling film for public occasions; they are part of any contemporary celebration and ceremony such as birthdays, *misinale* (yearly church donations) and funerals. Women who can decoratively ice cakes share their skills through membership of cake-baking groups, or *langa fonua* groups, which are organised along the same lines as the *langa fonua* groups that make barkcloth (Jowitt and Lay 2002).

Tongan women have been making cakes, rich in sugar and fat, since the Langa Fonua established by Queen Sālote encouraged the use of western kitchens with stoves to cook and ovens to bake (Addo 2013: 69; Wood-Ellem 1999: 265). Later that day (21 September 2006), a presentation took place under the west marquee and involved goods such as mats and bedspreads and large numbers of sweets presented in *kato lole* and on screens (*tapu lole*). The *kato lole* are either plastic containers or Chinese rattan baskets filled with oranges, apples, crisps, chocolates, chewing gum and sweets. The containers are wrapped in cellophane. *Tapu lole* are rectangular screens, have two legs and are covered with shiny wrapping paper (Figure 34). Cadbury and Nestlé chocolate and packets of crisps are neatly arranged in rows. These screens are traditionally made of *ngatu* and mats or flowers and are meant to serve as grave decoration (Churchward 1959: 457). The cling film-wrapped cakes, the *kato lole* enveloped in cellophane and the *tapu lole* with their glistening paper possess a similar shininess to oil-rubbed *ngatu*, mats and baskets. The superimposition of layers and colours found in all these objects may be considered a central theme in Tongan objects of presentation. The fat and the sugar present in cakes, *kato lole* and *tapu lole* are in addition highly appreciated in Tongan culture (Cottino 2015; Veys 2009).

In the twentieth century, these objects have acquired the status of *koloa si'i*, so-called lesser or minor *koloa*, through their association with Christianity in the case of crocheted or knitted covers (*kafu niti*), patchwork quilts (*monomono*), fleece blankets (*kafu sipi*) and flower baskets (*kato kakala*), and through their affiliation with the involvement of women in the Tongan economy—thus increasing their access to cash capital and transnational connections in the case of cakes (*keke*), sweets panels (*tapu lole*) and baskets with sweets (*kato lole*) (Addo 2013: 35; Veys 2009: 138–40). The emergence of *koloa si'i* is also closely connected to the decrease of women who are capable or willing—often because of the time constraints that today's white-collar jobs entail—to produce *koloa* (Besnier 2011: 105). These lesser valuables that complement the traditional textile wealth have become an appropriate material for use in ceremonial presentations and exchanges.



Figure 34. *Koloa si'i* including crocheted bedspreads (*kafu niti*), sweets panels (*tapu lole*) and baskets with sweets (*kato lole*) presented at the marquee on the palace grounds. Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu

Source. Photographed by Fanny Wonu Veys, 20 September 2006

How can we translate a word expressing a notion as complex as *koloa*? The dictionary compiled by the Marist missionaries describes it as 'riches, every precious object, what one possesses' (Colomb and Missionnaires Maristes 1890: 165).¹⁰ The linguist Maxwell C. Churchward (1959: 270) proposes 'goods, wealth, riches, possessions'. Kaepler (1990) often uses 'treasures', while Douaire-Marsaudon (1998) talks about 'riches'. Addo (2013) uses different wordings, including 'thing of value', 'wealth' and 'women's valuables'. In analogy with the New Zealand Māori, *taonga*, usually coined as 'treasure' (Veys 2010), Addo (2013) also uses the term 'treasure' to translate *koloa*. I prefer the designation 'prestigious objects' because this encapsulates the role played by *koloa* in certain contexts and the skill and particular materials needed to make these objects. Whatever definition of *koloa* is used, everyone agrees that these objects are valuable to Tongans, as they materialise the skill and effort of women who ensure that *koloa* can participate in ceremonial exchanges, and thus potentially form the physical manifestation of past events.

¹⁰ Original quote in French: 'richesses, tout objet précieux, ce qu'on possède' (Colomb and Missionnaires Maristes 1890: 165).

The value of *koloa*

Koloa materialises ‘what one values’ through its close linkage with women. Manufactured and presented by women, it reflects the high status sisters occupy vis-à-vis their brothers whose labours and crafts are deemed *ngāue* (work) (Herda 1999: 149). Hence Kaeppler (1999b: 219) asserts that *koloa* captures the ‘female essence’. Consequently, the value of *koloa* corresponds to the value of women. In doing so, the valuing of *koloa* foregrounds ‘a predisposition to equate the value of objects with the value of people’ (Crăciun 2015: 2).

Tongan women are characterised by and held in esteem because of their female *mana* (potency), which Maxwell Churchward (1959: 330) translated as ‘miracle, supernatural act or event; supernatural power or influence or attendant circumstances’. Actually, in the past, *mana* was inseparable from rank in its practical efficacy (Shore 1989: 138). An obvious consequence was that solely high-ranking women could influence objects by their *mana* so as to create *koloa*. Therefore, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manufacture of *ngatu*, for example, happened under the supervision of chiefly women. Valuable barkcloth was created only by women in the presence of a high-ranking female. *Koloa* as such were valuable not because they were made by women, but because they were imbued with the *mana* of a high-ranking woman. This is exactly what Herda (1999: 160) points out when she argues that, in the past, a piece of barkcloth did not become *koloa* until the chiefly woman acted upon it in a chiefly manner. Thus commoners’ labour did not make the piece of barkcloth automatically *koloa*. Following the Tongan notion of chiefiness, it was the *mana* of the chiefly woman, her presence and skill that was imbued within the cloth. As anthropologists theorising value have emphasised, value depends on the context, and therefore changes in context will impact on value (Graeber 2001; Munn 1986; Thomas 1991). It can therefore be argued that the word *koloa* does not simply refer to the type of object—barkcloth, mats, etc.—but also to the context, more specifically a Tongan context, that allowed for the *mana* of a chiefly person to be incorporated into a particular object.

Kaeppler (2007) argues that what happened in the past is essentially still the case in contemporary Tonga, but it has become restricted to objects used in an aristocratic context. Once ordinary objects, specifically textiles, play a role in ceremonies they become prestigious. Their status of *koloa*

resides in the context they are used in and the specific materials—ranked hierarchically—of which they are made (Kaepler 2007: 145–46). However, Addo (2013) demonstrates that, in a diasporic context, the simple fact of a Tongan woman manipulating the cloth suffices to make it *koloa*. Actually Meredith Filihia (2001: 384) believes that all women, including commoner women, have always enjoyed an elevated status, even though, in pre-Christian times, commoners' souls might not have entered the Tongan afterworld *Pulotu*.¹¹ Now, objects are considered *koloa* because they are made by women. This transformation in conception in what constitutes *koloa* is also a consequence of an important shift occurring in the social organisation of barkcloth production spurred on by the 1875 Declaration of Rights,¹² which guaranteed the personal freedom of chiefs (*hou'eiki* [s. 'eiki]) and commoners (*tu'a*) alike (Campbell 2001: 98). According to Maxine Tamahori (1963: 134–37), the Declaration of Rights changed the residence of the commoners and the interests of chiefly women. In this void, the *kautaha*¹³ (textile wealth-making group) emerged in the twentieth century. Catherine Small (1987: 145) agrees with this 'vacuum theory' as she puts it, but adds that while chiefly women removed themselves from village leadership, commoner women were empowered with new incentives of their own, allowing them to create *koloa* without the intervention of a chiefly woman.

Tongan women themselves emphasise the need for having and producing barkcloth. The women of several Tongan families in Tongatapu and Vava'u proudly showed me the pile of barkcloth and mats they had accumulated in order to be ready for any funeral or wedding occurring within the extended family. Women take great pride in doing *koka'anga* work, and are respected for it by both male and female members of the village community. Getting together to perform the work strengthens the bonds among them. Addo (2013: 45) acknowledges that Tongan women perform the highest value of Tongan society, *ofa* (love), because they work with love in creating something that is beautiful (*faka'ofa'ofa*).

11 *Pulotu* is the Tongan afterworld. In Tongan mythology, it is perceived as being an island located somewhere to the west of Tonga (Filihia 2001: 377–78).

12 The Declaration of Rights was part of the 1875 Constitution, which was modelled on English law and which dealt with three important matters: the declaration of rights, describing a form of government, and the issue of land (Campbell 2001: 98).

13 Churchward (1959: 257) defines *kautaha* as 'union, association, company, firm, club, society, league, alliance, organisation'. Tamahori (1963: 129) claims that many organisations in Tonga might be called *kautaha*, but the term has evolved to refer to associations organising the production of *ngatu*. Now, the words *toulanganga* and *toulalanga* for barkcloth-making and mat-weaving groups respectively are more often used (Addo 2013).

The necessity of producing barkcloth is a theme that occurs in other places in the Pacific. Steven Hooper (1995: 151) states that, in the great majority, female members of a Lauan (Eastern Fiji) household, even those based at Suva, consider it necessary and desirable to have a supply of barkcloth and mats in order to be able to participate in regular rituals. Eastern Fijian women stress that they require a *gatu* (barkcloth) for a wedding in order to demonstrate skill, industriousness and respect. This fact can be connected to the idea of barkcloth being considered valuable as it appears the more energy that is put into its production the more it is worth, hence the particular high repute of the *ngatu'uli* (black barkcloth), for example. Anna-Karina Hermkens (2013: 99) explains that also for the Maisin people, living along the shores of Collingwood Bay in Papua New Guinea, women are expected to make tapa. Women told her it was not only a custom Maisin people had grown up with, but that now it also constituted their living, giving them money with which they can buy other goods.

Jehanne Teilhet (1983: 53) states, with respect to women's birth-giving capacities and hence control over life and death, that women are believed to have greater innate powers than men. In this context, *mana* is a 'generative potency' that can act upon 'organic creations' (Shore 1989: 140). There is a clear link between fecundity and *mana*. This means that without children the family lineage dies, as do all the ancestors who live in the supernatural world because there is no one left to honour them. Thus, women establish the continuity between the past and the present. Since they were given the natural power to create and control, their products have the same effect. In a broader Polynesian context, the notions of *noa* and *tapu* are often used. According to Shore (1989: 138–50), Polynesian women are perceived as being *noa*, meaning 'free', 'nothing', 'unmarked', 'unconstrained'. Therefore they have the capacity of neutralising things, places or people who are in a *tapu* state. *Tapu*, as opposed to *noa*, signifies 'contained', 'bound', but has a distinctive passive and active usage. As an active quality, *tapu* suggests a contained potency of some thing, place or person. In its passive usage, it refers to what is forbidden or dangerous.¹⁴

¹⁴ I have not encountered the word *noa* being associated with women in a Tongan context. This also equally does not agree with the rather negative definition given in the dictionary compiled by Churchward (1959: 379), where he states that *noa* means 'any kind of, any old, of no particular kind, common, ordinary, of no value or importance, worthless, unimportant, causeless, meaningless, aimless, futile, without payment or without result, unreal, purely imaginary'.



Figure 35. Pathway of *ngatu tāhina* (rusty-brown barkcloth) extending from the palace to the royal tombs. Mala'e Kula, Nuku'alofa, Tongatapu

Source. Photographed by Fanny Wonu Veys, 19 September 2006

In its social manipulation or management, textile wealth plays a role in protecting people in liminal and therefore potentially dangerous situations during life rituals. Wrapping and binding, thus enclosing and separating, are conceptually linked in the notion of 'protection'. Not only are people being wrapped and bound, ritual spaces undergo the same protective measures. This happened in nineteenth-century Tonga, but also in present-day Tonga, which was exemplified by pathways of barkcloth laid out in front of the Wesleyan centennial church during the 2003 royal wedding, the coronation of King George Tupou V and from the palace to the royal tombs (*mala'e kula*) for the funerals of both Tupou IV and V (Figure 35). The power of the protection is exponentially increased through the presence of women lining the female product—*ngatu*—which thus extends the protection to a cosmological level. *Koloa*, or prestigious objects, enshrine the *mana* of the maker and/or donor. *Koloa* is thus a metaphor for female potency, which is particularly important when dealing with bodies: women give birth, nurture and raise children. Similarly, women create and arrange the distribution, wrapping and cutting up of textile wealth. Garth Rogers summarises that 'words, titles, land, houses, and political authority, including jural control

over the children, are transmitted through males; ritual honours and mystical powers are transmitted through females' (1977: 171). Through women and the nurturing qualities of their products, the social fabric of Tonga is supported, explaining why its production and use persist to this day.

Women and their products thus bring human life into the world, nurture it, protect it and accompany it out of the world (Hooper 1995: 165). This nurturing has no physical connotation. It has more to do with mental feeding, embedding a person in a culture and by doing so incorporating him or her in the society, thus generating social and cultural life. Moreover, by participating in the rituals and interceding with their products, the women ensure that the transitions in a person's life are facilitated. *Koloa*, are, like the women themselves, valuable, while *ngāue* are like men, powerful (Kaepler 1990).

Understanding the value of *koloa* also requires taking into account its material qualities that contribute to the quest for *fimālie* (feelings of being comfortable and contented) when making and giving them. *Koloa* including *koloa si'i*, are large, have contrasting colours and glisten; they have nice perfumes and their production and presentation go hand in hand with melodious beating sounds, with the agreeable rustling of plant fibres and the assured voices of the women presenting their work (Veys 2013). In short, they display a sense of abundance (Cottino 2015). These are all qualities that correspond to Tongan sensibilities. The importance of *koloa* lies in the combination of the reproductive *mana* inherent in women and the sense of abundance that women's specialist skills produce (Veys 2009).

Are *koloa* gendered?

Complementary object categories were central to Marcel Mauss's important 1950 essay *Essai sur le don* (Mauss 1990). In Samoa specifically, the sociologist Mauss juxtaposes masculine goods versus feminine goods, termed respectively *'oloa*, objects that belong to the husband, and *tonga*,¹⁵ permanent paraphernalia, particularly mats given at marriage (Mauss 1990: 98–100). The anthropologist Serge Tcherkézoff (1997: 193–223) remarks that the man–woman dualism is actually more complex. According to

15 *Oloa* and *tonga* is the spelling used by Marcel Mauss (1990: 98–100). Contemporary Samoan spelling is *'oloa* and *'ie tōga*.

Tcherkézoff (1997: 212), Mauss naïvely based his analysis of gifts in Samoa on just one missionary ethnography made by the Reverend George Turner that only treated matrimonial exchange. Based on Turner's limited observations, Mauss concluded that all exchanges of goods in Samoa were gendered. According to Tcherkézoff (1997: 212), Mauss naïvely based his analysis of gifts in Samoa on just one missionary ethnography made by the Reverend George Turner that only treated matrimonial exchange. Based on Turner's limited observations, Mauss concluded that all exchanges of goods in Samoa were gendered. However, Tcherkézoff (1997: 193–223) argues that *'oloa* is cognate to the Tongan term *koloa*, which in the Samoan context encompasses all kinds of valued objects. Turner actually never suggested that *'oloa* and *tōga* were gendered, but rather referred to them as 'foreign property' and 'native property' respectively. Nevertheless, the notion of gendered objects has influenced many anthropologists, including Annette Weiner (1992), who, based on extensive fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands and shorter fieldwork in Western Samoa, theorises on fibre-based objects in societies of Polynesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia. She convincingly argues that these fibre-based objects, which she glosses 'cloth', give women who are generally the producers, exchangers and conservators, power in the political process (Weiner 1992).

Even though men and women are enveloped by and handle *koloa*, it is mostly women who beat, paste, weave, boil, dry, dye and decorate *koloa*. Evidenced in the 2003 royal wedding and 2006 royal funeral, women not only play a prominent role in making it, but also in sequencing, presenting and exchanging it at significant life stages, including births, weddings, funerals and investiture, and also events such as graduations and 21st birthdays (Addo 2013; Hooper 1995; Kaeppler 1995: 119). However, the involvement with *koloa* is not an exclusive female activity. On 26 April 2003, I witnessed a husband beating bark (*tutu*) together with his wife in their home in 'Ohonua, the capital of 'Eua, the island southeast of Tongatapu. He was helping out his wife, who had to prepare strips of beaten barkcloth for the *toulanganga* (the barkcloth-making club) she was attending later that day. The husband felt it was inappropriate for him to engage in this kind of activity and absolutely did not want me to photograph him doing this, claiming he was not good at *tutu*. Men and boys also help with growing the paper mulberry tree, carrying large bales of *ngatu* and *lālanga* (woven textiles) onto the presentation grounds and putting them into storage containers. This was strikingly obvious during the 2006 funerary rituals of King Taufa'āhau Tupou IV. Men also

bring food to cater for the women's weekly get-togethers for the *koka'anga* process, young boys climb the *koka* tree (*Bischofia javanica*) to collect its scrapings in order to make dye and help with swinging the *fautaukoka* (hibiscus fibre dye wringer) over a pole, which wrings the *koka* dye out of it. Addo (2013: 48) asked an older woman how she felt about a younger man demonstrating the workings of the *misini tutu* (barkcloth-beating machine), which had been introduced in the early 1980s by Geoffrey Houghland, a former Peace Corps Volunteer. She feared, however, the woman would feel uncomfortable with a man being so closely involved with the barkcloth-making process. The woman replied that as a younger man he was performing his duty helping an older female family member. Addo (2013: 48) concludes that 'the importance of accomplishing work related to textile production—with varied materials—seems to be more important than expressly delineating textile work along gender lines in all situations'. As long as women are able to control and feel the responsibility of the different aspects involved in making and manipulating barkcloth, the help of men is welcome.

When driving around the main island of Tongatapu in 2012, I noticed the growing number of *kautaha nō pa'anga* (financial establishments). In these businesses, women and also men trade in *koloa faka-Tonga* only. This differentiates them from the western pawnshop on which they are modelled (Besnier 2011: 104). The pawnshop emerged in the 1980s and really developed from 2006 onwards, when a whole group of civil servants wanted to do something with the redundancy packages they had received in an attempt to downsize the Tongan civil service. Moreover, the decrease in the number of women who had the time and willingness to make *koloa*, even though they were faced with the ever-increasing demand of *koloa* for ceremonial use, played a part in the creation of the pawnshop. The business of the pawnbroker is notoriously lucrative, but because they are making money on the backs of people who are already cash poor, they also operate on the social fringe (Addo and Besnier 2008: 40–41; Besnier 2011: 104–06). Dotted with these 'money-borrowing companies', the Tongan landscape had considerably changed since my initial stay in 2003 and subsequent research visits. An unwanted consequence of these money-making 'banks' were the raids on the premises by young boys, who stole all the *koloa* stored in order to resell them (Lucy Moala Mafi, personal communication, March 2012). As such, the emergence of the pawnshop has contributed to a growing involvement of men with *koloa*.

Many anthropologists theorising women's wealth in Tonga understand *koloa* to be the complementary domain to *ngāue*,¹⁶ products derived from agricultural work and animal husbandry (Addo 2013; Douaire-Marsaudon 1998: 207; Herda 1999; Kaeppler 1995: 103; Kaeppler 2007: 146; Young Leslie 1999). They form complementary oppositions, which exist between men and women (Chave-Dartoen 2012: 96), and by extension between goods produced through female or male intervention. The notions of *koloa* and *ngāue* constitute an organising principle for values, status, responsibility, temporality and space (Chave-Dartoen 2012: 96–97). They both play a role at key moments of every *kātoanga* (ceremony). While the distinction between *koloa* and *ngāue* is not explicitly discussed in historical texts, the two groups are represented separately in the description of most important ceremonial occasions (Amos 1853; Mariner 1827, vol. 1: 122–23; Watkin 1833; Williams 1841: 276). *Koloa* can be redistributed, but the most precious ones will be conserved by the chiefs and can be inherited, while *ngāue* have to be consumed, eaten in order to fulfil their function. Kaeppler explains that the contrast between *ngāue* and *koloa* reflects the high status of women in Tongan society: *ngāue* can be ritually offered to equals, while *koloa*, like the prestige they embody, should move upward to someone of higher rank, or to someone whose status should be recognised because of illustrious ancestral connections (Kaeppler 1999b: 170). Kaeppler's vision is nuanced by Addo (2013: 4), who stresses that the gifting of especially long yams, kava and pigs was the prerogative of commoner men to their chiefs. Under Taufā'ahau Tupou I, the first king in the contemporary royal dynasty, commoners could acquire their own wealth in the form of *koloa* and *ngāue*. The latter could even contribute to paying taxes to the church (Addo 2013: 7–8). However, some elites continued to make gifts of *koloa* and *ngāue* (Addo 2013: 37). The association of *koloa* and *ngāue*, with men's and women's labour respectively, has prompted many scholars to assert that these categories are 'strongly gendered' (Douaire-Marsaudon 2004: 207).

16 Depending on the scholar, the male goods cultivated, baked, cooked or presented by men receive various names. Douaire-Marsaudon (2008) uses the word *kai* for the male goods that are presented during *kātoanga*. Strictly speaking, *kai* refers to food and could in theory also be food that is produced by women. Therefore not all *kai* is suitable to represent group identity. Sometimes the word *ngoue* is used (Addo 2013: 94; 2004). Again, this only includes agricultural produce, and therefore excludes all men's wealth, which results from animal husbandry. *Ngāue*, on the other hand, is a wide concept that can encompass different types of goods and is closely connected to the 'work' men do for a ceremonial presentation.

To a certain extent, all objects are gendered. As Niko Besnier infers, when objects and people meet, one encounters gender: ‘Objects are gendered through their production, consumption, and circulation, and bodies are gendered by default’ (2011: 26). He does offer a note of caution by saying that the gendering often operates in subtle ways, which perhaps is a reflection of the complex hierarchies of Tongan society where women rank higher than their brothers but lower than their husbands (Besnier 2011: 26; Kaeppler 1971: 175). Thus, the father’s side (*kāinga* ‘i *tamai*) is higher than the mother’s side (*kāinga* ‘i *fa’ē*).¹⁷ Kaeppler (1971: 177) and Elizabeth Bott (1981: 19) add a third principle within the *kāinga*, which includes everyone to whom one can bilaterally trace a relationship. Older is ranked higher than younger. The gendering is also found on a societal level in the distinction between *kāinga*¹⁸ (kinsmen) and *ha’a* (a form of societal ranking by which titles and their holders are organised): the rank acquired through women—within the *kāinga*—is personal, while the rank acquired through men—within the *ha’a*—is the impersonal public rank of title and office (Biersack 1982: 196; 2006: 241). So cultural value is derived from women, while political ‘power’ is received through men.

While most scholars agree that goods in Tonga *are* gendered, some accentuate the fluctuating nature of this dualistic view of *koloa* and *ngāue* as respectively female and male. Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk (1991: 47, 62) and Kerry James (1988: 33–36), for example, explain that a very old kava bowl can be considered *koloa* because it has transcended its pure utilitarian value to acquire a transactional or exchange value. Conversely, *ngāue* is often used to refer to any kind of work. Teilhet-Fisk (1991: 47, 62) has even recorded women referring to making *ngatu* as *ngāue*. Both *ngāue* and *koloa* are concepts that can take on different meanings depending on the context in which they are circulating. Moreover, items incorporating barkcloth and sold as souvenirs or handicrafts¹⁹ to tourists are not *koloa* (Addo 2013: 36), because they are objects that have been adapted in size, style and function to what people can and want to take with them. Besnier

17 Bott (1981: 19) explains that the *kāinga* ‘i *fa’ā* includes the set of brothers and brothers’ children to whom the mother and her children are superior.

18 Shulamit R. Decktor Korn (1974: 9) sees *kāinga* as a form of domestic kin group next to and sometimes overlapping with *’api* (the household group) and *fānili* (family, village based action group).

19 The most common handicraft objects are placemats, baskets, fans and jewellery, decorated with or in the shape of turtles, dolphins and the map of Tonga. These handicrafts are available at the main Talamahu market, on temporary stalls set up for cruise ship tourists coming on land and at the Langa Fonua ‘ae Fefine Tonga, the women’s cooperative that Queen Sālote Tupou III founded in 1953 (von Gizycki 1997).

(2011: 108) warns that because Tongans, when speaking English, use the word 'handicraft' both for tourist items and for *koloa*, it devalues *koloa*. This is particularly the case when this conflation occurs in interactions with people who are unfamiliar with the local context of both *koloa* and handicrafts.

There are objections to viewing objects as gendered, because female objects or objects made by women do not 'automatically represent "femaleness"' (Hermkens 2013: 108). I believe Hermkens makes an important point here. Tongan textile wealth does not simply represent the division of labour or ideological concepts relating to what it means to be a woman. *Koloa* indexes the *mana* of Tongan women by virtue of the work and love (*ofā*) they have put into it. Taking into account historical and contemporary developments, I believe that most textile wealth, through its connection with mainly chiefly women in the past and all Tongan women today, has the potential to be considered *koloa*, especially when performing its role of protecting people in liminal situations, masking vulnerabilities, revealing abundance and linking society. It is also in this context that I refrain from calling *koloa* women's wealth or even women's property—as Weiner (1992) perhaps too readily does—but argue for using 'prestigious objects' to translate the word *koloa*.

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