

# KIE HINGOA 'NAMED MATS', 'IE TŌGA 'FINE MATS' AND OTHER TREASURED TEXTILES OF SAMOA AND TONGA

Journal of the Polynesian Society, Special Issue 108(2), June 1999

REVIEW ARTICLE by Rod Ewins IN *Pacific Arts: the Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* (23 & 24): 123-126. 2002

This slim volume brings together three papers by acknowledged authorities on Pacific culture, Adrienne Kaeppler, Penelope Schoeffel and Phyllis Herda. Originally presented in draft form as conference papers, they concern the most highly valued symbolic objects of Samoa and Tonga, their finely-woven mats. Pacific studies have reached a stage where the crossing of national boundaries is not merely desirable, but virtually inevitable (discussed in Ewins 1999). Neil Gunson has written that 'the links between Tonga and Samoa are so ancient that they are recognised in the mythology of both archipelagoes: a Samoan orator summed it up in the mid-19th century: "We are your friends, your sons and daughters. You know that Tonga chiefs are chiefs here, and Samoa chiefs are chiefs at Tonga."' (Gunson 1990:176). The oratorical flourish inclines toward a rose-colored reading of the relationship, which as Gunson shows was as often that of war, not love. Conflicts continued after the long Tongan colonization of Samoa (a colonization rather surprisingly not mentioned by any of these authors), which ended with the forcible expulsion of the 15th Tu'i Tonga by the Malietoa line of Samoa. But despite its turbulence, the connection was abiding, and certainly there was extensive intermingling of noble lines.

Colonization invariably involves an intensification of cultural interchange, and it certainly does not only flow from colonizer to colonized. It seems that assigning primacy of place among ceremonial valuables to heirloom mats was first done in Samoa, and the oldest and most valuable of Tongan named mats not only came from Samoa, but as Kaeppler explains, often continue to bear Samoan names and biographies. She cites a Tongan informant who stated that historically bark-cloth was more important than mats, at least for the Tu'i Tonga line, though he doubted whether it ever carried the great spiritual weight it bears in Fiji. But that changed long before Western influence became a major force.

Given the long period of inter-Group colonization and the ongoing entanglement of noble lineages, it is not surprising that heirloom mats inscribed with their identities should have become the ultimate symbols of status in both countries. Kaeppler points out that in Tonga these have been supplemented by indigenous, also biographical, *ngafingafi* mats. The capacity of these textiles, produced by women, to provide temporal continuities, to bring the past into the present and inscribe the present for the future, is the recurrent theme of all of these papers.

The authors are generous with data from their own fieldwork. For instance, the close association Kaeppler has long enjoyed with the Tongan nobility and royal family has been critical to her task of documenting and interpreting the names and stories associated with Tongan 'named mats' or *kie hingoa*, since, as she and Herda both point out, detailed knowledge of these resides only with the highest-ranking nobles. All of the papers also provide important re-evaluations of previously-presented data, sometimes reaffirming, sometimes challenging, previous accounts. Schoeffel in particular notes the dangers of compressing or conflating historical information, and must be applauded for attempting a diachronic exercise which is very difficult at this late date. She attempts to disentangle the origins of meanings and practices associated with Samoan *'ie tōga* from the intrusions of authorial attitudes and the contemporary practices often presumed to be 'timeless' in the accounts and received wisdom of a succession of Western writers.

Both the new data and the personal perspectives expand the basis of our understanding of the social role of this important category of Pacific art. And it is in the authors' insistence on the central and continuing role of art in Tongan and Samoan social life that I feel their most important contribution lies.

For decades the literature of Pacific art has tended to polarize into two extremes. On the one hand, objects have been alienated from their originating contexts and roles and viewed with a 'detached aesthetic eye', placed in some putative but phantasmic 'universal' domain of fine art objects. Beautifully-lit and -photographed, handsomely printed images in coffee-table books invite aesthetic delectation rather than a cultural analysis of the objects depicted (see Ewins 1997). And many ethnographic museums have escaped their legacy of dusty dark timber cases full of 'curiosities', only for their displays to become almost indistinguishable from Western fine art exhibitions, unavoidably inviting response on the same terms as contemporary Western art, and conveying little of the culture-specific meaning or significance attached to the objects by their makers. This issue was discussed at some length, though I think not resolved, by Gell (1996).

At the other extreme, many social anthropologists have consigned all of the physical products of the groups they have studied to the grab-bag of 'material culture'. Incorporating everything from an elaborate feather cloak, associated only with the highest chiefly lines (deities incarnate), down to a quickly-made vegetable-collecting basket, the grab-bag became, almost inevitably, a too-hard basket. There emerged a tendency among many social anthropologists to treat all 'material culture' as the 'mere trappings' of life, with little to contribute to understanding the important issues of social interaction and structure. Even the great value that obviously attaches to such objects as those discussed here, has often been rationalized in economic terms, rather than analyzed as essential elements in a symbolic system for defining and sustaining the social order.

Happily, scholarship has over the last couple of decades largely outgrown such distortions, as these papers show. Here, the distinction *is* drawn between those articles of manufacture (including *fala* domestic mats) that have to do with physical sustenance and everyday life, and the 'fine' mats under discussion, which as the authors show relate to cultural sustenance and regeneration. In the first paper,

Schoeffel provides a carefully-constructed reading of how *'ie tōga* came to embed such potency. She rejects Weiner's position on both the inalienability of fine mats, and their being seen as 'women's wealth' (p.122). On the former, she points out that they 'were passed around among Samoa's nobility, affirming its exclusive identity and divine ancestry', and on the latter, their association with the women who made them was not, she argues, as wealth, but rather as a symbol of the women's centrality to the transmission of status.

Schoeffel fine-tunes earlier accounts of fine mats as historically important signs of both the virginity of young women in the *ali'i* (chiefly) line, and of their ritual deflowering at the moment when they were given to potent *ali'i*, formally joining their descent lines. In addition to its denotation of garments worn by the élite, she suggests that the word *tōga* thus originally connoted 'sanctified procreation', and that it was from this association that the unique value of the mats derived (pp.124-9). Similarly, Kaeppler speaks of '*kie hingoa* that contain the reproductive power of the Tupou dynasty itself' (p.220).

However, all societies constantly redefine the meanings they attach to objects, and by corollary the roles these are made to play. Schoeffel describes how this has occurred with Samoan *'ie tōga*. She contends that historically their singularity precluded any commodity role (a view, she admits, at odds with those of many significant scholars and historical sources, and I felt perhaps the case least convincingly made in her otherwise persuasive argument). Whether anything that could be called commoditization existed in pre-Western Samoa/Tonga, it has certainly occurred progressively since Western contact, particularly since the 1960s, along with revised meanings. Schoeffel points out that today's *'ie tōga* have changed physically, with different aesthetic yardsticks applied, but the *category* has retained singular cultural importance. Today, fine mats symbolize Samoan identity, and 'vast quantities of them circle the globe in aircraft linking island and overseas communities' (p.137).

They are the only ceremonial goods for which there are still no acceptable Western-derived substitutes, though given the level of change to date, the question that inevitably presents itself is whether that 'patent' may also be breached over time, at least in relation to new mats. The oldest mats remain the heirlooms of the loftiest families, so sacred that they are only produced on the most weighty of occasions. Schoeffel suggests an interesting paradox, which is that it is their very singularity that may cause some cash-strapped Samoan families to sell them, for in today's changing society they cannot foresee ever needing to, or being able to, use them.

Herda's attention to what can be deduced by closely observing changes in the sociology surrounding the manufacture of significant objects lends an unusual and valuable perspective from which to observe changes. I thought her discussion of *ngatu* bark-cloth could be confusing to a non-expert reader, whereas the highlighting of the democratization of the weaving of ceremonial mats, and the implications that may have, is clear and thought-provoking. Most interesting is her acute observation and early documentation of an important evolution in which quilts are gradually becoming sanctioned, if not yet quite sanctified, as Tongan women's ceremonial goods, both at home and in the Tongan diaspora in New Zealand, the USA and

elsewhere. As she points out, women overseas have little or no access to the materials to make fine mats, but they need appropriate social symbols for the ceremonies that are indispensable to sustaining their Tongan identities, as well as to make appropriate contributions to events back in Tonga and thus sustain kinship ties. They have turned to the quilts for which the materials are readily available and the skills growing. It may be doubtful whether quilts could ever substitute for the several strata of ceremonial mats, but their acceptance as *koloa* ceremonial valuables would seem, from her account, to be on track.

For one not immersed in their cultures, the subtle differences in the use and meaning of mats in Samoa and Tonga are sometimes difficult to follow. But it is clear in all of the accounts that the hierarchy of goods, of which *'ie tōga* and *kie hingoa* are at the apex, functions in strict relation to the status of the actors - effectively, one hierarchy mirrors the other. It would be difficult to find a clearer exemplification of Durkheim's proposition that in classifying objects 'not only the external form of classes, but also the relations uniting them to each other, are of social origin the totality of things is conceived as a single system because society itself is seen in the same way' (Durkheim & Mauss (1903)1963:83). Thus the ranking of goods, even within the categories of goods sanctioned as being appropriate to prestation and ritual, is entirely logical in societies as obsessed with status and rank as are Tonga's and Samoa's.

Like Schoeffel, Kaeppler revisits Weiner's argument that objects carry 'permanent histories' that 'inalienably' attach them to their original owners. However, she shows that such histories are not 'permanent' but are rather, like all histories, works-in-progress. Even though the original owners *have* in some cases been forgotten, she points out, the *kie hingoa* still signify lines of descent, and carry myths and legends deriving from the historical events, people or places with which they are successively associated. Thus she cleverly inverts Weiner by showing how in Tonga *people* become 'attached' to the *mats* rather than the reverse. Indeed, she privileges the mats over the people, since their very 'biographies' are the source of their power, and it is the knowledge and/or recounting of these that provides tangible validation of those currently using them in important events. Many examples of the nature of these events are provided in Kaeppler's account, even down to listing and naming the *kie hingoa* worn at particular royal weddings and funerals. She shares with us a number of photographs which contextualise the discussion richly, and highlight the regrettable absence of these in the other two papers.

The above can only hint at the density of the discussion in this volume. It is probably inevitable that there are some areas one is left wishing were discussed more. For example, while their relative *rank* is made clear, what is the relationship of the attached *meanings* of *kie hingoa* to the meanings of other women's *koloa*. And while it is stated that *koloa* 'is not a complementary or contrasting domain' but works together with men's *ngāue* objects, the symbolism of the latter, and how that integrates with the symbolism of *koloa*, is not explored. Also, in the nature of three papers on and around the same topic, there is considerable overlap and repetition, particularly between Herda's and Kaeppler's papers. But these are small criticisms in comparison with the overall richness of the discussions provided. What would be wonderful in an ideal world would be for these authors to team up with some of the

other scholars who have brought us particular insights into 'fine mats' and the social world in which they operate, such as Jocelyn Linnekin (e.g. Linnekin 1991) and Martin Orans (e.g. Orans 1997), and jointly produce a major work tying together all of the historical and social threads. For the moment, however, this volume is a most valuable first stage in what is, rather like the mats themselves, a work-in-progress.

**Roderick Ewins. University of Tasmania. 03/04/2000**

## REFERENCES

Ewins, Roderick

1997 All things bright and beautiful, or all things wise and wonderful? Objects from Island Oceania in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. *Pacific Arts* 15 & 16:71-87.

Ewins, Roderick

1999 The poetic power of place: comparative perspectives on Austronesian ideas of locality (Book Review). *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 10(1):104-5.

Gell, Alfred

1996 Vogel's net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps. *Journal of Material Culture* 1(1):39-62.

Gunson, Neil

1990 The Tonga-Samoa connection 1777-1845. *Journal of Pacific History* 25(2):176-87.

Linnekin, Jocelyn

1991 Fine mats and money: contending exchange paradigms in colonial Samoa. *Anthropological Quarterly* 64(1):1-13.

Orans, Martin

1997 Are fine mats "funny money"? San Diego: (unpublished paper presented to meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Oceania).