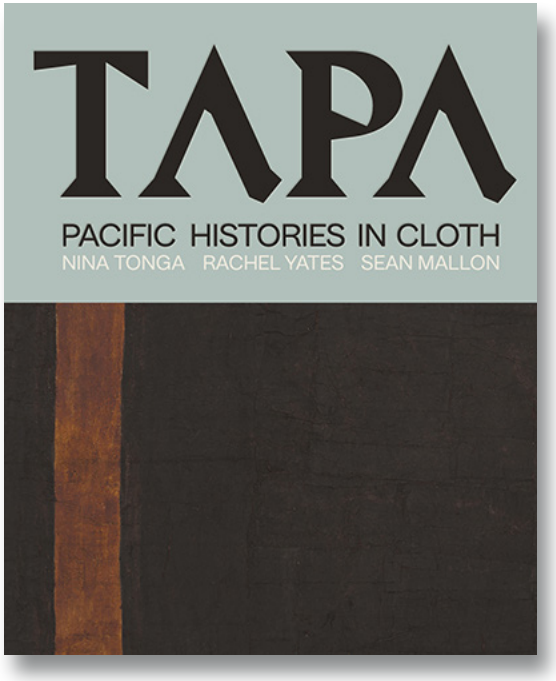
Tapa

Pacific histories in cloth

NINA TONGA, RACHEL YATES AND SEAN MALLON



THE STORY OF TAPA ACROSS THE PACIFIC – ART, DRESS, CULTURE AND CURATION

Tapa: Pacific histories in cloth is the most significant contribution of knowledge about tapa in a generation, offering new views on its practices, meanings and histories across art, dress, culture and curation. This multi-authored book draws upon the vast collections of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, illustrating over two hundred tapa from 18 Pacific island nations, from Taiwan to Hawai'i, to explore its lineages.

For centuries, people across Pacific communities have created beautiful and functional tapa cloth from tropical tree bark. Understood by many names, its uses for mats, clothing, ceremony and art are well known and have been further highlighted by the recent revitalisation of customary techniques.

Tapa reveals the many creative processes that shape how tapa mediates these Indigenous histories, both in and out of the museum. Placing artists and makers at its centre, the authors and contributors explore the processes and cultural politics of contemporary tapa making alongside experiences of migration, art, dress, conservation and curatorship that reflect the complex social and cultural lives of tapa cloth.

SALES POINTS

- Related 9-month exhibition planned in Toi Art at Te Papa late 2027.
- First book about tapa to be published in New Zealand in thirty years.
- Specialist detailed photography brings these taonga into focus as never before seen.
- Pages fold out for the largest tapa cloths.
- Many tapa have never been published or displayed.
- Each section features indigenous bilingual responses from people with connections to the tapa.
- 43 contributing writers.
- Chapters cover the communal making of tapa, its art history, tapa and fashion, contemporary art, collecting, curating, care and display.

The jacket design unfolds as a ngatu tā'uli, made in 2010 by Christchurch-based Tongan artist Kulimoe'anga Stone Maka. Ngatu tā'uli is considered the highest-ranking bark cloth in Tonga and is traditionally made for royalty. The artist considers its use as a book jacket to be a heliaki (visual metaphor), 'for those about to open the book to unlock the knowledge of our ancestors. Ngatu tā'uli is an ocean to explore – the jacket of your ancestors.'

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Dr Rachel Yates is a Pacific historian whose gafa connects her to the Sāmoan villages of Vaisala and Sataua, and to English heritage from Merseyside. A former Curator Pacific Cultures at Te Papa, she has contributed to several publications including Te Papa Press titles *Flora* (2023) and *Tatau: A history of Sāmoan tattooing* (2018). She now works as a historian for Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage.

Dr Sean Mallon is of Sāmoan and Irish descent and is Senior Curator Pacific Cultures at Te Papa. He is the author of articles and books on the history of Pacific peoples in New Zealand, Pacific arts and museology. He most recently co-authored *Tatau: A history of Sāmoan tattooing*, with Sebastien Galliot (2018). His exhibitions include *Tangata o le Moana: The story of Pacific people and New Zealand* (2006), *Paperskin: The art of tapa cloth* (2010) and *Tatau: Sāmoan tattooing and photography* (2019).

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PING-ANN ADDO ♣ SANA BALAI
NIRMALA BALRAM ♣ YIHAO CHENG
NGARINO ELLIS ♣ EBONIE FIFITA-
LAUFILITOGA MAKA ♣ REGGIE
MEREDITH FITIAO ♣ TEPAERU-ARIKI
FRENCH ♣ ENERIKE HOTU ♣ GRACE
HUTTON ♣ KATRINA IGGLESDEN
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PAULINE REYNOLDS ♣ DORON RIKI-
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MERE TAITO ♣ RIHI TEIKITUTOUA
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ANE TONGA ♣ INANGARO VAKAAFI
ROBIN WHITE ♣ MATARIKI WILLIAMS
SONYA WITHERS ♣ JOCELYN ZEKE

TAPA

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RACHEL YATES
SEAN MALLON

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† Glenn Jowitt, Pacific Island Cultural Festival, 2000.
Te Papa E.007680. Gift of Glenn Jowitt Trust, 2015.

↓ Shaneel Lal at the Auckland Pride Festival, 2021.
Photograph by Sylvie Whinray.



Schwenke has proudly worn tapa-based and tapa-inspired garments from all over the Pacific. With each appearance, she honours the work of the artisans and designers who bring these cultural visions to life, mindful to remind audiences of collaboration and the collective responsibility part of this work. Her show-stopping, traditionally inspired gown entry for the Miss Pacific Islands competition in Nauru was centred on siapo, complemented by woven fau (hibiscus fibre) and fuiono shell, and dedicated to the manusina (white tern) of Sāmoa (see page 63).

Beyond pageants, tapa is also central to other large-scale cultural celebrations, where Pacific identity is performed, learned and affirmed. In Aotearoa, one of the most visible expressions of this is through cultural festivals. Among these, the secondary schools' Polyfestival, commonly known as Polyfest or simply Poly, stands out as a major event on the landscape. Held annually, these festivals centre on performances that showcase customary music, dance, oratory and dress. The ASB Polyfest in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland is the largest Pacific performance festival in the world, with students competing across six main stages dedicated to Cook Islands, Māori, Niuean, Sāmoan and Tongan performances, along with a diversity stage that features performances from a wide range of cultural groups, including Fijian, Tokelauan, Chinese, Korean and Indian groups.[27]

Polyfest is first and foremost a celebration for the culture, but it also navigates complex tensions. Issues around funding, scheduling and external sponsorship often surface, as do broader debates about Polycentrism,[28] the relationship between Pacific and Māori peoples, and how to navigate Indigenous sovereignty within shared public spaces. Yet these tensions reflect the festival's evolving importance. Not everyone moves in unison, but all show up for something bigger than themselves. For volunteers, organisers, sponsors, tutors, schools, families and especially student performers, Polyfest is a moment that brings Pacific cultures from the margins to the centre. Every year, tapa cloth features prominently – worn by performers, displayed on stage and styled among the crowd – acting as both a cultural anchor and a distinctive marker of a Pacific future.

An act of cultural presence and personal truth was also made visible at the 2021 Auckland Pride Festival, where queer iTaukei and Girmitiya activist Shaneel Lal wore a full-length garment made of ngatu, gifted to them by a friend's mother. First worn during the Mr Gay New Zealand 2020 competition, the ngatu was later worn again as a protest and declaration, a challenge to the exclusionary politics of the Pride Festival itself. Wearing ngatu at this event was intentional; Lal has consistently spoken out about the imposition of white frameworks of queerness, describing them as a form of neocolonial erasure. They have also highlighted the double marginalisation faced by queer Pacific people, both within colonial systems and within rigid expectations in their own cultural communities. The parade that year was led by the mothers of Pacific Ballroom, who focused on highlighting transgender rights, but it was also marked by a confrontation between Lal and a Christian outreach

27 In 2025, ASB Polyfest celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with over 11,000 student performers, 291 groups and 77 participating schools.

28 Polycentrism refers to the dominance of Polynesian narratives and perspectives within the Pacific diaspora, especially in the context of Aotearoa. There is an ongoing and important conversation about inclusivity and exclusivity across our region, particularly in relation to how Pacific identities and voices are represented and engaged.

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it returned to Aotearoa for the Te Papa version of the exhibition, titled *Paperskin: The art of tapa cloth*. It then went back into storage. In 2018, its photograph was published in the book *Tatau: A history of Sāmoan tattooing* as an example of the relationship between siapo and tatau (tattooing) motifs.[4] Since 2001, it has been visited in the collections by tapa artists and researchers. Between July 2023 and July 2025, 124 people viewed it on the Collections Online web page. It awaits its next visitor, in print, online or in person.

♣

People working in or visiting the Pacific Islands collected tapa as souvenirs or as gifts and later sold or donated them to the museum. From the earliest days of the tourist trade, tapa's portability and distinctiveness has helped it find a market among travellers. For example, in Sāmoa in the 1890s, people in canoes approached cruise ships trying to sell siapo, model canoes and other merchandise.[5] Tourists and other travellers took them home as mementos of their time abroad. As shipping and aircraft routes developed, so, too, did demand for exotic artworks in burgeoning tourist markets abroad. For example, in the 1920s, celebrated siapo maker Mary Pritchard established a business in Tutuila in eastern Sāmoa exporting siapo, floor-mats, table mats and hula skirts to dealers in Honolulu. She wrote of one of her trips to Savai'i in 1929, where she bought over two thousand pieces of siapo called vala, and over the two-week trip wore out two pairs of new tennis shoes.[6] Many of the smallest pieces of tapa in Te Papa are from tourist markets. They are evidence of people's travels in the Pacific, the transactions that occurred, and what creators and buyers considered marketable products of the region.

Tapa also came to the museum from missionaries, colonial administrators, sailors and soldiers working in the Pacific Islands. One stunning example is a cope (priest's vestment) made by the women of Gona village, Papua New Guinea, as a farewell gift for the Reverend Wardman in 1962 (see page 205). The Anglican missionary had lived and worked with the community for twelve years. The cope is important not only for its representation of the relationships between Christian missionaries and locals, but also for the innovative Indigenous tapa cloth featuring machine-sewing techniques and Christian symbolism – a cross, fish and doves. On his retirement, Wardman had no further use for the garment, and it found its way to a tribal arts dealer and then on to the museum.

Likewise, the colonial presence in Sāmoa, spanning more than a century, is represented by several siapo mamanu associated with Thomas Trood, the British Vice-Consul in Sāmoa in the early 1900s (see pages 366–67), and, as mentioned earlier, four siapo mamanu associated with Guy Richardson Powles. Aside from their connection to colonial administrators, they are also beautiful examples of siapo design from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

4 Sean Mallon and Sébastien Galliot, *Tatau: A history of Sāmoan tattooing*, Te Papa Press, Wellington, 2018.

5 Union Steam Ship Company, *A Cruise in the Islands: Tonga: Samoa: Fiji*, J Wilkie and Co. Printers and Publishers, Dunedin, 1895, pp.21–22.

6 Mary J Pritchard, *Siapo: Bark cloth art of Samoa*, American Samoa Council on Culture Arts and Humanities, Honolulu, 1984, p.11.

MARY J PRITCHARD: SIAPO ARTIST

REGGIE MEREDITH FITIAO



↓ Mary Pritchard, 1984. Photograph reproduced from *Siapo: Bark cloth art of Samoa*, by Mary Pritchard.

Mary Jewett Pritchard of Tutuila, American Sāmoa, referred to by many as Aunty Mary, was an artist whose choice of creative medium was barkcloth from the paper mulberry tree, painted with natural dyes to make siapo. Her knowledge of the ancestral art form came to her under the tutelage of the Leone village women, namely Kolone Fai'ivae Leoso. The knowledge Aunty Mary acquired, fused with the siapo she created and her desire to share it with others, had a lasting impact on many siapo makers today. Some consider siapo simply a handicraft-style art form, however, Aunty Mary took siapo making to another level, transforming it into contemporary works of art imbued with ancestral energy. Her skill at making siapo tāsina (using the rubbing method) or siapo mamanu (freehand method) was undeniably distinguished.

Aunty Mary's aptitude with mamanu (motifs) was exceptional. Her ability to paint the fa'agogo birds in flight, or repetitions of fa'atulī birds juxtaposed with fa'asigago (male pandanus blooms), meticulously arranged next to fa'alau'ulu (breadfruit leaves), made the siapo come to life, filled with intricately laid-out patterning and colour. Whether it was on a large or small scale, Aunty Mary's devotion to every siapo piece she created evoked a rich love for siapo, for her family, her people, and the Sāmoan culture.

Aunty Mary's relationship to siapo was more than the making of siapo; she thought deeply about her relationship with nature as a siapo maker. She commented, 'When you go into the forest to collect your materials – the bark of the u'a (the paper mulberry), the dyes and what else you need, a profound communion with Nature takes place. If you remain still the even greater stillness around you works itself into you. No one who makes siapo and who has experienced that silent communion ever feels that they are making mere handicraft. Something deeply felt, like a prayer, gets into your being, your limbs, and through them into the siapo itself.'[1]

REGGIE MEREDITH FITIAO is an artist, teacher and niece of Mary Pritchard.

1 Mary Pritchard, quoted in Frederick Koehler Sutter, *The Samoans: A global family*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1989, p.210.

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Taiwan is a group of islands located at the furthest geographical edges of the Pacific. Its peoples and cultures, and those of its closest neighbours, are a focus for scholars debating the origins of the first human settlement of the region.

At the 2025 Amis Music Festival in Taitung, Taiwan, just beyond the long lines of tents housing performers, artisans and handicraft sellers, a small group of people huddled around a man working in the sun with a hammer, beating bark strips to create an ever-widening piece of cloth. His name was Atay, a man in his fifties, and one of a growing number of tapa-making practitioners in Taiwan who are part of the revival led by the Amis elder Panai since the 1990s.

One of the undecorated tapa cloths made by Atay at the festival is the first from Taiwan to come into the Pacific Cultures collections at Te Papa. It is symbolic of our curiosity about what the history of the paper mulberry plant and tapa-cloth making might reveal about our connections to Taiwan, and other locations in south China and east Asia where the making of barkcloth was part of the local cultures.

TAIWAN

Over ninety years old, Panai is the oldest elder in the 'Etolan community, where the Taiwanese Indigenous Amis people live. He is the key figure in revitalising the craft of barkcloth making. Due to the community's long-standing encounters and frequent interactions with the outside world and the rapid circulation of material resources since the late nineteenth century, traditional barkcloth and its production techniques gradually declined. Drawing on Panai's childhood memories of seeing barkcloth garments in the hunting huts of his elders, and the oral histories of elders, Panai and peers from his age group persisted through repeated experimentation and finally brought this long-lost technique back to the community in 1995.

Panai then worked with his wife, Asaw, to break out of the framework of tradition by referencing modern clothing styles. They created works such as top hats, skirts and suit jackets. They not only completed an intricate barkcloth wedding gown, but also turned the material into striking garments worn by Taiwanese Austronesian singers on major cultural occasions, such as on the red carpet at the Golden Melody Awards. Some of their works have even been collected by national and local museums.

The main materials used in 'Etolan to make barkcloth are lolang (paper mulberry) and calamay or kafay (red fruit fig). The pounding motion used in making barkcloth is called toktok, and the lengths produced are tapad, a term that may be related to tapa.

Like the resilient yet gentle vitality of the paper mulberry tree, Panai and Asaw remain strong and continue to pass on the craft of barkcloth making in 'Etolan. If you have the chance to visit there, don't forget to stop by Panai Faki's Amis Barkcloth Culture Studio and say hello to this lovely couple.

LEKAL FC LIN is a curator and researcher at the National Museum of Prehistory, Taiwan. YIHAO CHENG is a cultural practitioner and curator based on the East Coast of Taiwan.

Itini i 'Etolan a niyaro' no masa'amisay, ona mata'elifay to ko siwa polo' a mihecaan a faki ci Panay, o tadamaanay mipalowad a micokokroh to modac no kilang a riko' cingra. Iti:ya ho, adihay to ko kasasiini no niyaro' ato i papotalay, itini i kakaliki a mafalic ko dafong i orip no mita', o mamalahedaw to ko pisanga' to modac no kilang a tayal, pakayni i piharateng ningra to ma'araway no to'as ningra i talo'an, ato kapot nira, mitikor a miharateng to nanosowal no to'as, saliyaliyaw sa mitanam a mitinako, itini to i 1995 a mihecaan, miliyaw to a mapatalahekal i 'Etolan.

Ikor, ira ko misafaelohan ni Panay faki aci Asaw fayi, pakayni i modac no kilang a misanga' to aniniay a kafong, talip, ato kasahirahira a caedong, milaheci tona sapipaka'etim a riko', a mala tadamaanay a caedong no milihofiay, o malatadamaanay hahopeden a dafong i kitakit no mita.

Ona sapisanga' no Etolan a niyaro' tona modac no kilang i, masaheto o lolang ato cepo, ona sapisanga' to modac no kilang a demak i, o tatoktoken, ona misanga'an a tapad a ngangan i, alatek ira ko kalalecadan no 'tapa' a tilid.

Matiya o 'icel no loloang damsay a koda'it, tanektek ko tatirengan ni faki aci fayi a miparayray tona misanga'an a modac no kilang, ano ira ko romi'ad, katayni i 'Etolan a miliso', aka pitawal a tayni i mipatirengan ni faki 'Panay talikong' mi'araw a minengmeng.

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P190.1 Nicmaget (Malagan mask) attributed to Tabar, New Ireland
Maker unidentified, c.1900
Barkcloth, fibre, cane, gum and pigments
520 × 300 × 330mm
FE001100 Gift of Alexander Turnbull, 1915

P190.2 Hevehe mask from Orokolo in the Gulf Province
Maker unidentified, early 1900s
Barkcloth, wood, cane, feathers and pigments
1060 × 490mm
FE000985 Purchased 1914

P190.3 Kiva kuku mask from Muru
Maker unidentified, early 1900s
Barkcloth, cane and pigments
410 × 520 × 101mm
FE001019/2 Purchased 1914

P191.1 Eharo (dance mask with fish totem) from Orokolo in the Gulf Province
Maker unidentified, early 1900s
Barkcloth, cane, pigment
1200 × 1140mm
FE000987 Purchased 1914

P191.2 Eharo (dance mask) from from Orokolo in the Gulf Province
Maker unidentified, early 1900s
Barkcloth, cane, pigment
FE000988 Purchased 1914

Eharo masks are one of three types of masks worn by the Western Elema people of the Papuan Gulf. They are made and worn as part of the Hevehe, a grand cycle of ceremonies that dominated the ceremonial and artistic life of the Elema people during the early twentieth century.

P192 Tapa fragment from Baining people, New Britain
Maker unidentified, early 1900s
Barkcloth, fibre and pigments
1132 × 287mm
FE004100 Gift of Mrs JA Crump, 1935

P194 Tapa from Malsin people in Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, c.1970
Barkcloth and pigments
1140 × 2030mm
FE007720 Gift of Gisborne Museum & Art Centre, 1981

P196 Bo (tapa cloth for dance costume) from Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, 1966–67
Barkcloth and pigments
1560 × 1490mm
FE009996 Purchased 1992

P197 Tapa from Gaulim Village, Baining people, East New Britain
Maker unidentified, 1970s
Barkcloth and pigments
705 × 445mm
FE007707 Gift of GD Anderson, 1981

P198 Tapa from Wanigela, Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, c.1960
Barkcloth and pigments
1200 × 720mm
FE011155 Gift of Ted and Barbara Kedgley, 1998

P199.1 Bo (tapa cloth for dance costume) from Togaraya village, Mount Lamington, Oro (Northern) Province
Beru, 1966–67
Barkcloth and pigments
1550 × 640mm
FE009988 Purchased 1992

This bo is part of a collection assembled by Zeska Schwimmer in 1966–67 while she investigated the production and marketing of handicrafts in Oro Province for the Papua New Guinea Department of Trade and Industry.

P199.2 Bo (tapa cloth for dance costume) from Managalas in Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, 1966–67
Barkcloth and pigments
1475 × 615mm
FE009989 Purchased 1992

P200 Bo (tapa cloth for dance costume) from Oro (Northern) Province
Bera, 1966–67
Barkcloth and pigments
1690 × 1705mm
FE009992 Purchased 1992

P201 Bo (tapa cloth for dance costume) attributed to Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, 1966–67
Barkcloth and pigments
2055 × 1140mm
FE009997 Purchased 1992

P202 Bo (tapa cloth for dance costume) from Managalas in Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, 1966–67
Barkcloth and pigments
1215 × 915mm
FE009999 Purchased 1992

P203 Tapa from Wanigela, Oro (Northern) Province
Maker unidentified, c.1960
Barkcloth and pigments
1000 × 650mm
FE011156 Gift of Ted and Barbara Kedgley, 1998

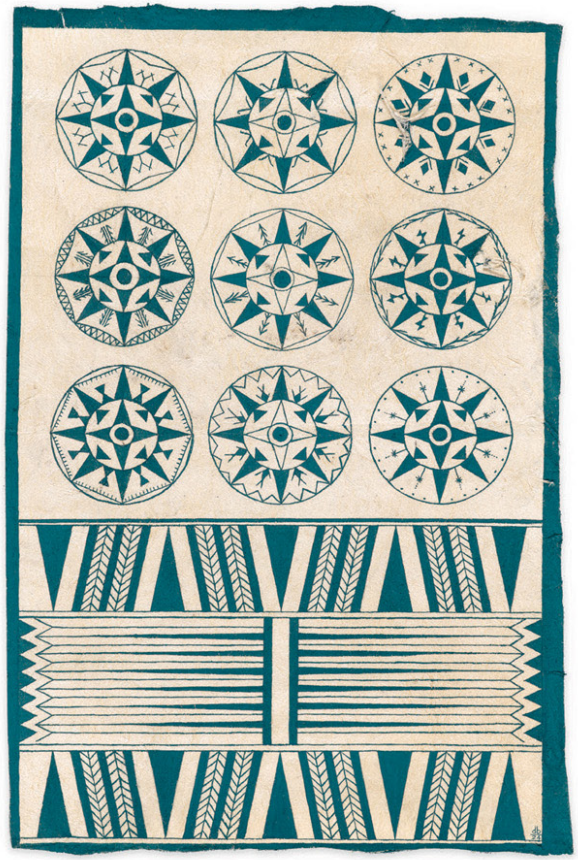
P205 Cope (priest's liturgical vestment)
Made by the women of Gona near Popondetta, Oro (Northern) Province, 1962
Barkcloth and pigments
1490 × 3150mm (approx.)
FE011266 Purchased 1999

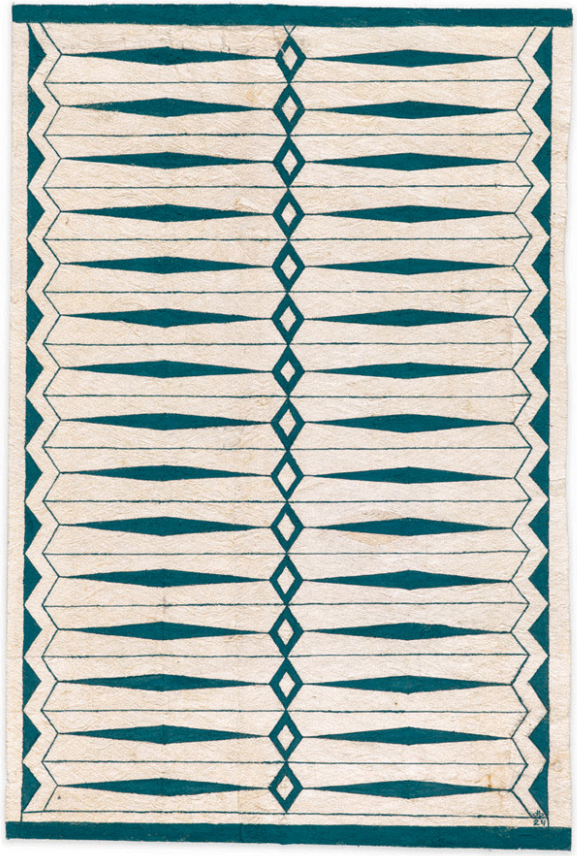
This cope was a farewell gift from the church women of Gona to the Anglican missionary Reverend John Wardman at the completion of his stay there from 1951 to 1962.

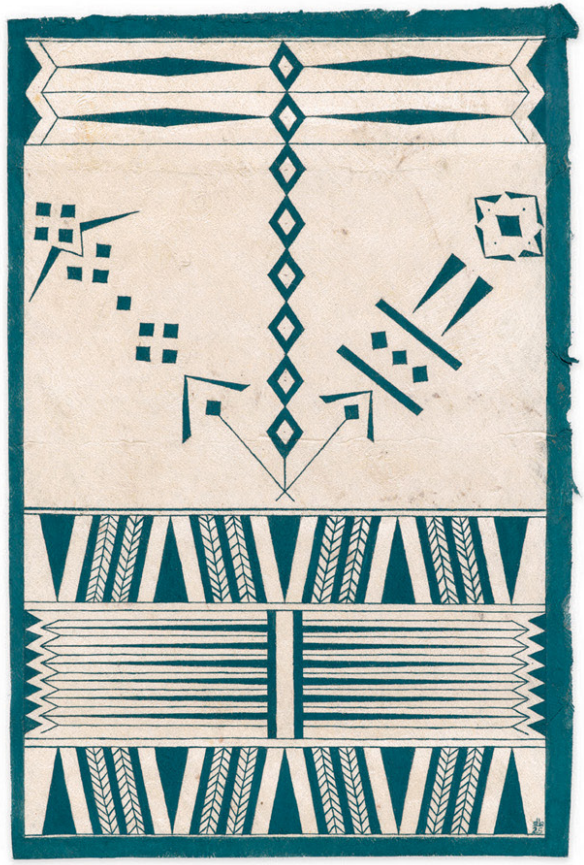




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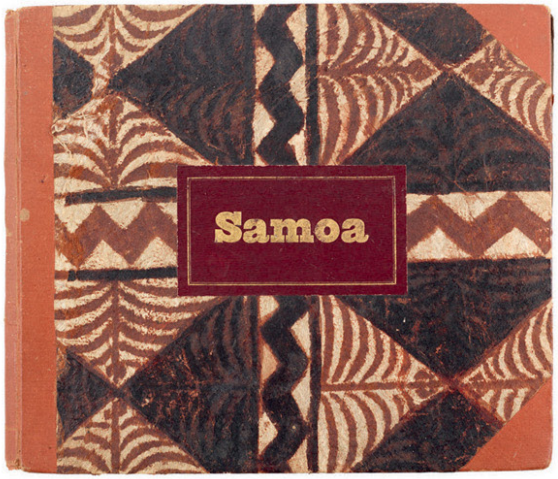


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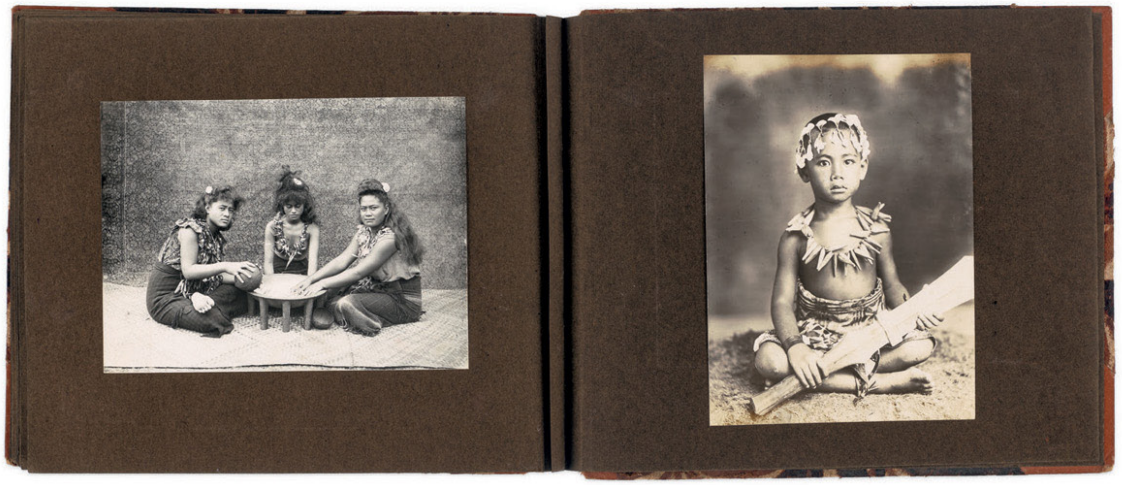


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