

Bark-cloth drifting: The migration of Pacific woodblock prints, arising hybrid forms and digital counterparts

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Introduction

This paper explores how indigenous Pacific forms of block printmaking have become contemporary modes of expression through migration and hybridisation.

Printing methods such as 'Mokuhanga'; a Japanese relief-printing process which constitutes burnishing with hand-tools, 'hiapo' from Niue, 'masi tapa' from Fiji and 'siapo' from Samoa, all share similar processes of hand-tooling to make paper which is subsequently printed and/or painted upon by hand. The paper used for this is made from mulberry tree bark and collectively this is known as 'barkcloth' or 'tapa cloth'. These traditional technologies have established ecological pedigrees using agricultural practices, which have out of necessity needed to meet island economies for sustainable practice.

The relevance of barkcloth in the Pacific

Evidence suggests the craft of making barkcloth paper originated in Eastern China and its coastal islands from around 600 BC as records appear on wooden tablets at this time. It is most likely that barkcloth use moved eastwards from the North Coast of New Guinea to the Solomons, Vanuatu and to Fiji around 1,500 years ago. From there the practice spread to Tonga and Samoa. The original tree species is *Broussonetia papyrifera*, which is closely related to the Japanese *Kozo* (*Broussonetia kazinoki*). Climate differences have affected the adaption of species to new conditions, reflecting the barks relative thickness and texture. These qualities of rough to smooth texture seem to indicate the eventual progression of barkcloth across the Pacific to Hawaii (Ewins 1987).

The tradition of woodcut printing in the Pacific has an almost inseparable relationship with barkcloth paper. Barkcloth technologies emanated from different continents all over the globe and their purpose was not confined to the manufacture of paper. Barkcloth paper was possibly first crafted as clothing over two thousand years ago. Mayans firstly used fig-tree bark for initially making tunics, then later folded books in which the priests recorded their culture and knowledge. Almost destroyed, the remains of the craft can be seen in the making of 'Amate' paper in Mexico today. In Europe, barkcloth gauntlets were found on a bronze-age man remarkably preserved in a 5,000 year old glacier (Ewins 1987).

The barkcloth genealogy of the Pacific is interesting for its continued use over 3,000 years and varied evolution that has spread across the world's biggest ocean from island to island. This process has produced as many unique strands of the barkcloth form, its design specific to each distinct island environment and culture.

Pacific diasporas and the migration of Pacific woodblock prints

In the Pacific the term 'diasporas' has been used to describe the phenomenon of the Pacific people's periodic migration as they migrate across Polynesia. Gershon (2007) suggested families extend their trans-national connections through family extensions across Pacific Islands, rather than nation forming.

'This question takes a very specific perspective on Pacific Island diasporas, one that is shaped by the culturally specific structures of families, rather than "ethnoscapes" or nations,' (Gershon 2007: 475)

Extending family as scattered branches of people across oceans, relies on knowledge being transmitted and retained by these families. Bark cloth prints would have been chosen as migratory artefacts that made the voyage to new land.

Gershon (2007) aligns himself with Epeli Hau'ofa (1994), in the belief that Pacific people's daily lives have long been interconnected by exchanges and kinship that must have strong mechanisms to retain cultural connections, suggesting families are 'culturally specific, integral units that constitute diasporas,' (ibid.: 474). He believed diasporas and families in the Pacific are so intertwined, that connections can exist over generations and over vast tracts of separation.

James (1997) suggests ways in which exchanged objects are powerful tools to connect families from different islands. Locally valued mats and barkcloths move back and forth across the Pacific between communities. In Tonga these exchanges are very important for connecting family, something that seems to sit outside the Western capitalist model. Instead the culture is one that looks at exchange of food and craft as a societal function.

Gershon (2007) builds on research by Evans (2001) to explain how ceremonies in Tongan villages provide a public space to make visible the relationship between chiefs of villages or heads of the community and the community gathered.

These are ceremonies that enable people to explore what it means to present unity as iconic—through the link made visible in exchanges between a group and a person who embodies that group at different levels of scale, from village to nation. In these moments, the act of representing a unity constitutes the social group and affirms that it is unified (Gershon 2007: 480-1).

Ceremonies often involve the ritual of a feast, between two 'unities'; the people offering the feast and those who receive it. Those who receive the feast become part of the unity by consuming the food and then offering speeches in honour of the feast givers. A speech-giver generally will remind the community of the social unities between each party (Gershon 2007). Tapa or barkcloth is very much a part of these activities having a symbolic role in the event, being presented to 'Matai', or chiefs as gifts. Although the mats are can be used for floors to sit upon, they are often considered artworks and are displayed on the walls of the house, and their importance reference the importance of the relationships between families.

Forms of barkcloth from selected Pacific Island nations

Barkcloth paper is made all over the Pacific and essentially the process is the same, although individual differences from island to island have evolved to meet particulars of environment or culture. In Samoa the cloth is called 'siapo', in Tonga 'ngatu', Hawaii it is 'kapa', and in Fiji, it is known as 'masi'. After the plant has reached around 20cm in diameter, the bark is harvested by cutting or biting the bottom of the trunk and stripping from the stem with an even strong pull. From here the bark is turned inside out and a knife is used to separate the inner bark from the outer (Spicer and Rondo 2004). In Fiji this separation is performed by the women, who will often take a bite out of the tree with their teeth, piercing the bark, before separating the outer 'kulina' from the softer 'lewena'. The bark is then kept permanently wet, and scraped with a seashell, to remove any traces of the outside bark, but also to soften and spread the fibres.

To spread and mesh these fibres together, intensive beating is then carried out with a wooden anvil and beating stick. The anvil is usually a long hard-wood log that many people, usually women sit at communally attending to the task. The beater is a short hand-sized mallet, that is multi-faceted with several grooved sides for meshing the paper, and usually one smooth side that is used in the final stages to flatten and smooth the bark paper surface. In Samoa the mallet is called an 'ike', in Tonga a 'dutua', in Fiji it is called 'tutua'. After beating, the individual sheets are laid out on mats outside, weighed by stones and left to dry.



Figure 1. Stripping u'a using two hands and a foot (Pritchard 1984)

Once formed, the cloth can be then patterned. This can be hand-painted, or by rubbing the pigment into the cloth, with a design tablet underneath. These are made in ingenious ways: In Tonga, a 'kupesi' is used. This is a textured cloth made with 'pandanus' leaves, coconut leaf midribs and coir fibre to give it a raised 'relief' to impart pigment to the 'ngatu', once rubbed with ink. Strips of 'feta'aki' or paper are rubbed with a brown pigment, made from the 'koka' tree, before being bonded with half-cooked arrowroot. Then the process is repeated, adding another pair at right angles to the first (Neich and Pendergrast 1997).

In Samoa, the 'tapa' is known as 'siapo'. 'Siapo mamanu' was painted freehand by women, but 'siapo tasina' or 'siapo 'elei' is patterned using a rubbing tablet, or 'upeti', traditionally made by sewing pieces of coconut midrib, bamboo fibre and coconut fibre sennit onto a rectangle of 'pandanus' leaves. These 'boards' have been gradually replaced by wooden alternatives, possibly from Fiji. In this rubbing process, a plain sheet of 'tapa' is laid over the tablet and rubbed with an old piece of 'tapa' that has been dipped in dye, transferring the pattern to both sides of the 'siapo', where in contact with the relief. Individual pieces are bonded together by rubbing the arrowroot tubers called 'masoa' against the two surfaces (Neich and Pendergrast 1997).

Arising hybrid forms and digital counterparts

Modern migrations of Pacific Islanders have taken significant populations of Cook Islanders, Tongans, Tokelauans, Samoans and Fijians to New Zealand, Hawaii and California. Modern technology has allowed for an ease of communications between these different island groups and their homes or neighbouring island nations, encouraging a flow of influences, from cities to the homelands and vice versa. The consequence of this enhanced communication and ease of travel has also led to increasing tourism and commercialisation. Traditional 'tapa' forms are being manufactured for souvenirs and some meanings or function of culture has become stretched or diminished.

In contrast, there are contemporary print-makers in New Zealand whose work explores the craft in richer contexts. These artists have deep understanding of barkcloth-printing in the Pacific and its anthroponomy. As Pacific Islanders migrate to New Zealand, they have explored contexts of diasporas.

Michel Tuffery is a New Zealand artist that draws on the traditions of 'siapo' and its related culture. He works in the area of printmaking, but also that of sculpture, performance art, painting and animation. His work stems from his curiosity for his Polynesian (Samoan, Rarotongan, Tahitian, Papa'a) heritage and his connection to the wider Pacific region, its people and the environment. Tuffery is one of a number of New Zealand-born Pacific Islanders who reference their Pacific identity in their work whilst using a mix of Pacific and European crafts (Mallon and Fulimalo Pereira 1997)

Tuffery's work engages with the history and culture of the Pacific. His work references the Samoan tattoo. 'Anufe' – the caterpillar, 'Atualoa' - the centipede and the 'Ngongo' - the tern feature strongly in his prints.

In the late Edo period Katsushika Hokusai started a series of prints, all based on views of Mount Fujiyama. Of the Thirty-six Views of one has become truly iconic: [The Great Wave off Kanagawa](#) by Hokusai (1760–1849). The sea is ferocious with one huge wave threatening boats and the work has been interpreted as the depiction of Tsunami. The print is held in many Western collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the British Museum in London and Claude Monet's house in Giverny, France.

Tuffery was intrigued by the number of prints in the Hokusai series. His motivation was to draw attention to the similarity between the Japanese and Maori cultural respect for the mountain. For 'iwi' or tribes around Mount Taranaki, New Zealand – 'Te Kahui Maunga', the mountain is sacred or 'tapu'. Its iconic cone shape has a remarkable similarity with Mount Fuji in Japan. Both Japan and New Zealand are made up from a series of islands lying on fault-lines between major tectonic plates, punctuated with both dormant and active volcanoes, lying lengthwise to the sun rising in the east, and setting in the west. Tuffery's has been long influenced by Pacific cultures and its forms of printmaking. [Mount Taranaki, New Zealand - view from Whanganui River Head](#), pays homage to Japanese printmaking (M.Tuffery, personal communication, 17 July 2014). In Tuffery's oeuvre there is an impression of reaching out to the values of the Pacific community, almost a sense of cultural sampling and collection.

John Pule is a New Zealand artist who also has strong links to migration and hybridisation. Born on the coral atoll of Niue, in the middle of the South Pacific, Pule is an artist whose work stems from the tradition of 'hiapo' which is a practice where water-based media is applied by hand-rubbing on 'tapa' cloth. The practice was introduced to Niue around 1880 from Samoa by missionaries (Pule and Thomas 2005). It has a brown-yellow colour that comes from being soaked in coconut oil, and then heated over fire. Pule studied the craft for many years, writing a significant book on its history and has assimilated many aspects of the craft for his practice.

Tukulagi Tukumuitea (Forever and Ever, 2005 oil on canvas / Triptych 19.9 x 199.9cm, each panel) is a series of three large works by Pule with abstract and figurative shapes; scattered figures and objects such as pigs and sharks, hanging vines and ephemeral red clouds (see fig 2). His worlds float suspended with vines, the dangling flower stems of the Pacific cordyline; Ti-mata-alea and Pule sees these shapes as signification for the spiritual. In Niue it is believed that human life sprang from the tree and the flowering stems can be seen as a metaphor for the migration of people (Pule et al. 2010).



Figure 2, tukumuitea (forever and ever, 2005 oil on canvas) John Pule (Pule et al 2010)

There is a similarity between these works and of 'Ukiyo-e', the Japanese wood-block print form. The translation of 'Ukiyo-e' is 'floating worlds'. The subjects for 'Ukiyo-e' range from 'kibyōshi' (satirical novels), 'sharebon' (books on urban culture), art books or play scripts for the 'jōruri' (puppet) theatre. At its height in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the medium referenced and critiqued Japanese culture and society with narratives of all areas of life (Till 1986). Those prints that were sold outside theatres, were filled with allegories and references to famous battles and myths. Pule's subject material is equally loaded with narrative references to his Pacific culture. Sunset-red clouds are connected with vines, but these shapes could allude to nuclear mushroom-clouds from nuclear testing in the Pacific. **How are these indigenous practices interfacing with digital processes and new technology?**

The process of carving would at one time have been essential in the production of a woodcut. At present, there are a number of technologies that are making the transposition of drawings and photography to a surface easier to accomplish. In laser-cutting the drawing is turned into a bit-map for the machine to burn away an area to impressive detail. A laser cutter works by directing a very powerful laser beam, at a precise focal length, to cut or etch the material.

Technical detail aside, the use of new technologies for print-makers has opened up the woodcut's parameters for expression. We think of woodcuts as principal vehicles for expression of the carved mark, but now it is possible to etch and cut wood in fine matrices that can deliver subtle grades of colour and mark. Sensitive grounds and photographic tropes have crept into the gamut of expression. It seems paradoxical that the most organic materials – wood, has now become a matrix to receive the distillation of the camera's lens capturing subtle shifts of tonality. When these digitally etched matrices are hand-burnished the print seems to embody the ultimate hybrid of machine and manual. It is perhaps at the moment of transfer of ink from matrix to paper, that the traditional and new technology seamlessly merge, boundaries are bridged, machine and human fused in the making.

Katsutoshi Yuasa makes woodcut prints of landscapes, distilled from digital photographs that are manipulated and transposed onto woodblocks. He changes the original digital photograph into a matrix of carving. Yuasa has talked of his practice being a combination between digital and analogue processes. His works can take as long a month to carve, ink and print by hand.

The original meaning of photography is a primitive light picture using a camera for catching light. However I lost the vague atmosphere and personal emotions when I take the photographs by the camera. There is just the fictional two-dimensional information in the surface and there is no reality or no real existence. Therefore I cannot be satisfied with a result of the photographs as my representation. I have decided to use the woodcut technique as a way of exposing images for adapting the subjective perception to the objective fiction. (Katsutoshi Yuasa 2015).

The development of digital processes allows for the transposition of images to almost any surface and accordingly the mechanics of reproduction for the printmaker has been streamlined if the digital process is adopted. Artists like Katsutoshi Yuasa, have other motives. For him, printing takes time. His photography records an instant that is then carved into a relief, rolled-up with ink, to be burnished against paper over several hours to achieve the large-format print. The result is image that has a sense of the mechanics of the camera lens through a wood-grained exposure.

Conclusion

The Pacific and its history of block printing are bound up in the exchange system of its migrating peoples. In these diasporas, barkcloth has an iconic place as a material that signifies the migration of culture across vast distances of the Pacific with the need to preserve links between families who leave to colonise new shores with barkcloth prints.

Technology has always had a symbiotic relationship with the visual arts and design, but as each generation explores new technologies that offer efficient reproductive solutions, there is often a counter-reaction from artists that compels them to find a physical interaction to compliment the automation of a craft. For certain printmakers, becoming part of the machinery – even if it means slowing the process – seems to be vital for the experience of the print.

Where the hand is involved in carving and printing ink from block to paper there is a more intimate consideration of mark and surface for the printer. For those who collect prints, there is a greater sense of connection with the printer, whose hands have handled the print.

The nature of print-making is to reproduce many children. These are children that more often than not, will travel far from the place of their inception as gifts or as ambassadors. It could be argued that this migration is a catalyst encouraging the development of hybrid block-print technologies for contemporary expression.

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