Compte rendu de *Unwrapping Tongan barkcloth. Encounters, Creativity and Female Agency* par Fany Wonu Veys

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VEYS Fanny Wonu, 2017. *Unwrapping Tongan barkcloth. Encounters, Creativity and Female Agency*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 227 p., bibliogr., ill.

- 1 Barkcloth, an unwoven cloth-like material made out of the bark of specific tree species, has long aroused the interest of both haphazard and professional collectors, the general public, and academic scholars. European explorers encountered this “native cloth”, which has been generically referred to as “tapa”, during their voyages into the Pacific, but it is also known and used in other parts of the world, such as in Latin America, Africa and Asia. After the British succeeded the Dutch in the exploration of the Pacific, increasing amounts of Tongan barkcloth were brought to Europe. James Cook and his crew, who visited Tonga in 1773 and 1774, brought back some of the earliest pieces of barkcloth that have been collected (p. 53). The European curiosity in barkcloth is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that the diverse coloured, designed and patterned pieces of barkcloth collected by Cook and his crew from various Pacific Islands, were cut up and reassembled in catalogues (sample-books) that have been distributed across the Pacific (Australia and New Zealand), Europe and the US (including Hawaii).
- 2 More recent academic interest in Pacific tapa roughly started with Simon Kooijman’s (1972) work on Polynesian barkcloth in the 1970s. Subsequently, this material has received increased attention outside the Pacific, with international exhibitions, publications, and conferences dedicated to tapa. Building upon this legacy, Fanny Wonu Veys, Oceania curator at the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands,

has combined her interest and work on historical Tongan barkcloth collections in museums across the globe with contemporary creations and validations of barkcloth in Tonga. The result is a monograph that unwraps and simultaneously entangles both the history and contemporary significance of Tongan barkcloth.

- 3 The first five chapters of *Unwrapping Tongan barkcloth* interweave historical encounters and accounts of Tongan barkcloth, locally called “ngatu”, with contemporary reflections on making barkcloth. Veys discusses early European reports on and depictions of Tongan barkcloth, and collecting activities by explorers, travellers, merchants, beachcombers and missionaries, which resulted in the ongoing circulation of both large and small cut-out pieces of Tongan barkcloth across the world. She also shows how the work of making barkcloth shifted from being an activity performed by chiefly Tongan women towards being an activity performed by commoner women, and how the proselytizing activities of missionaries impacted the local wearing and manufacturing of barkcloth. Veys includes a discussion of how European collecting activities became part of Tongan gift exchanges, with the latter giving abundances of cloth and other gifts to establish relationships that were, in most instances, never reciprocated by the European receivers. These historical accounts that detail reasons and processes of collecting are interwoven with explorations of historical and current terminology, techniques, practices and skills involved with growing and making ngatu.
- 4 The final two chapters, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, focus on female agency in relation to barkcloth, and on the importance of Tongan sensibilities (vision, audition, tactility, and olfaction), respectively. Describing ceremonies such as funerals and coronations, Veys elucidates how Tongan sensibilities are captured and embodied in ngatu, and in presentations of ngatu. Hence, barkcloth and identity are strongly intertwined and Veys aptly discusses the significance of gender in articulations and materializations of Tongan identity. The conclusion emphasizes how Tongans have been, and still are, profoundly shaped by barkcloth.
- 5 *Unwrapping Tongan barkcloth* provides a thorough and extensive account of historical sources related to Tongan barkcloth, while the author’s analysis of contemporary local validations ties in beautifully with another recent publication on Tongan barkcloth by Ping-Ann Addo (2013). While the latter monograph, titled *Creating a Nation with Cloth*, demonstrates the entanglement between barkcloth, Tongan identity and the Tongan Nation in the diaspora, Veys’ work provides insight into the historical and colonial dynamics that shaped contemporary Tongan validations and significances of ngatu. Together, these monographs provide an exhaustive historical and anthropological account of ngatu in historical and present-day contexts. *Unwrapping Tongan barkcloth* is accessibly written with many black & white and colour photographs. And although the focus is on ngatu, the book is of interest to scholars, students and the wider public who are interested in broader topics, such as Museum Studies, Anthropology, Pacific History, Pacific material culture, and Tongan culture.

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