

Native Hawaiian Kapa: Rebuilding a Sustainable Future

Page Chang (Kumu Kapa)

Fig. 1: Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; Object number: 1886.1.1214.1; Name: Kapa, bark cloth; Place & Community Details: Hawaiian Islands; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: Wauke tree (Broussonetia Papyrifera); Collector: Frederick William Beechey; Date collected: 1825 – 1828.



As a modern Native Hawaiian Kapa maker, I am sad for the Wahine (the Native Hawaiian woman) who laboured over this piece of Kapa cloth, whose work has been reduced to a catalogue number and a description that is sorely lacking in information. I don't blame the cataloguer or the collections manager for not knowing more. Kapa making is a practice that was almost completely lost in Hawai'i after American missionaries brought woven fabrics from America and Europe. Hawaiian women were then taught to weave using imported foreign fibres, tools, and protocols. Kapa making is one of many examples of our brilliant Native Hawaiian practices being put away, locked in a drawer by the proverbial 'colonist'. The practice of Kapa making, a practice that partners with nature, holds far-reaching life lessons that could and should be re-examined, re-learned, and re-implemented in today's injured world. Here, I attempt to give you an opportunity to see this object from a different point of view, to see this piece of Kapa as a symbol of a promising future.

What is Kapa

Hawaiian Barkcloth, Kapa, or Tapa, is the fabric of Hawai'i. It is made primarily from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, or *Broussonetia Papyrifera*, a plant that has travelled the world and has been used in many cultures for similar purposes. In Hawai'i the plant itself is called *Wauke* and was brought to Hawai'i by Polynesian voyagers over a thousand years ago. It was cultivated to grow in tall, skinny stalks, successfully propagating itself through underground runners.

Kapa cloth was used for trade, clothing, bedding, decoration, ceremony, and any other fabric needed in daily life. Hawaiian Kapa cloth was considered the highest form of textile design and finery in all of Polynesia. Kapa making creates a deep partnership with the 'Āina (land), resulting in a physical creative expression of that connection. It represented ancient Hawaiian fashion, art, and the cultural practice of *Aloha 'Āina* (to love the land).

How Kapa is Made

This piece of Hawaiian Kapa cloth is easily recognized as Hawaiian due to its surface decoration that brilliantly uses a combination of carved 'Ohe Kapala (Bamboo stamps), an exclusive Hawaiian practice. At first glance it looks like a checkerboard. A closer inspection reveals the artist having thoughtfully inked and placed a narrow stamp of 'zig-zags' in rows of five to create one rectangle, and then repeating this process 150 times on this small sample piece, always using cultivated or gathered dye-materials.

Looking past the surface design, we see the slightly raised watermark in the Kapa, created as the artisan beats the material with her own custom carved wooden *I'e Kuku* (Kapa beater). The four-sided beater has three sides of long straight grooves called *Pū'ili*. The fourth side has a distinct pattern carved into it, called the watermark, of crossing lines creating squares or lozenges, unique to each Kapa maker. As she pounds the fibres with the *I'e Kuku*, moving them across her *Kua La'au* (carved wooden anvil), the fabric becomes thinner and wider with each pass. She finishes with the watermark, leaving her personal mark within the Kapa. Because no other barkcloth-making society used this watermarking technique, we know that this piece is Hawaiian.

The watermark is visible because the material went through a natural fermentation process, another exclusively Hawaiian practice. Fermenting the material before its final production into a sheet of Kapa made it very pliable, even dough-like, allowing it to be felted into a solid sheet that could be very soft, but also very strong. It gives the Kapa a beautiful, smooth finish, diminishes the rough, fibrous quality commonly seen in other barkcloth traditions, and allows for a clean watermark impression.

There's more to making Kapa than these few steps mentioned, including: cultivating the *Wauke* trees, harvesting and stripping the outer bark from the trees, peeling off the *Mo'omo'o* (inner bark) and beating the *Mo'omo'o* initially on a *Kua Pōhaku* (wooden anvil) with a *Hohoa* (round wooden mallet). When we see this piece of Kapa, we are seeing the daily habits of the maker.

Restoring Nature through Indigenous Practice

Sadly, Kapa making in Hawai'i was another of many casualties of colonialism. Now is the time to focus on revitalizing and reimplementing these native practices that can bring solutions to the global environmental crisis.

My Kapa practice is a subsistence farming lifestyle. It is a practice of sustainability, of exercise, of experimentation, of cultivation, of propagation and fertilization, of creativity, and most of all, of discovery. If we build on the Kapa research of our ancestors, there is a cornucopia of discoveries to be made or inventions created from the practice, the *Wauke*, and all the other *lau* (plants) involved. If we reconnect with and re-build our unique local natural environments that support these plants and practices, we can continue to grow and to thrive in creative balance and harmony with nature.

I believe that we can find balance through Indigenous practices, which are rooted in cherishing the natural world. We can find balance with the *Āina* and all that she has to offer, and in the community, working together to live in sufficiency,

sustainability, and regeneration. We can find balance in ourselves as we regularly, rhythmically tend to the many tasks involved in our life practices.

If everyone incorporated even a small part of a Native practice specific to their location, practices which were painstakingly developed over millennia, there would be a shifting of environmental consciousness that would surely be of global benefit.

This piece of Kapa represents the possibility of a better, different world than the one we now occupy, the one we were meant to inherit and must fight to reclaim.

As a Kapa maker, the rhythmic tapping of my I'e Kuku is the call to fight.