

**ELA TO‘OMAGA KAIKILEKOFÉ**

## **Learning to Surf (Se‘e) on a Wave, from Island to Urbanesia**

### **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the role of artists and art instruction in New Caledonia, with particular emphasis on workshops used to teach traditional arts in a contemporary Pacific context. It articulates realistic insight into the life of Pacific artists and their work as and with tagata fenua (the Kanaky people of New Caledonia) and Polynesian participants from Uvea, Futuna, Tahiti, and other islands. Workshops at the Siapo Art Centre are designed to find ways to adapt the cultural environment to urban situations with the support of local associations, the government, and social agencies in order to develop long term initiatives. By focusing on the Kupesi Contemporary Artist in Residence program at the University of New Caledonia–Higher School of Teaching and Education (École Supérieure du Professorat et de l’Éducation, UNC ESPE) center, as well as other projects, this essay provides a window into the role of public art education in the Pacific.*

**Keywords:** *New Caledonia, siapo, arts organizations, contemporary Pacific art education and lifestyles, art, education*

**URBANESIA:** a reference to an urban city lifestyle

**URBANESIA:** the many islands of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia

Creatively speaking, my day starts out like a normal day, surfing against the winds and the currents under the Pacific sun. As with surfing, I enjoy catching a ride on a huge wave in my art education practice—a huge wave of fresh thoughts, spontaneous ideas influenced by our Polynesian environment and way of life. Eventually, as a project develops over time and with community support, these ideas manifest to become art-based events and/or play an integral role in community happenings. It is for this reason that I introduce teaching experiences in the context of contemporary art-making in the Pacific Islands. I will focus on a visual arts program I participated in to provide a closer look at the teaching of art by two Polynesian contemporary artists in Nouméa, the largest city and Kanak capital of New Caledonia.

For this particular program at the University of New Caledonia (UNC) teaching center, Patrice Kaikilekofé<sup>1</sup> and I collaborate to share ideas, individual skills unique to our lifestyles, and artistic teaching capacities; we highlight cultural aspects of traditional carving, Polynesian

*tapa* (barkcloth), and contemporary printmaking techniques, as well as acknowledge our creative part in the renaissance of *tapa* and its modern interpretations today.<sup>2</sup> Using contemporary materials such as wire, paper, commercial textiles, and acrylic paint in our education programs, we provide a deeper sense of Pacific art in today's modern society for our students (Fig. 1). We utilize historical artistic developments from artists who are influencing a younger urban generation, such as world-renowned, New Zealand-born, Sāmoan Hip-hop choreographer Parris Goebel. We also introduce new, hybrid art practices into creative industries, such as those of Tongan master carver and visual artist Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi.



Figure 1. Jean-Philippe Tjibaou (Kanak artist from Hienghen) drawing with a young participant, at “Elevation Day,” Hip-Hop Artist in Residence Program, Siapo Art Centre, Païta, New Caledonia, 2016. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Siapo Art Centre

It is vital for us as active artists to stay true to who we really are when we engage in education and teaching, so we can bring positive change to misinformation about contemporary Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. The history of colonialism in the Pacific Islands is relevant and part of what is happening to us; those stories play out in our art today. Sometimes art education may seem superficial, but for me it is vital for our well-being, from all sides of the spectrum. Exercising our capabilities academically to maintain in-depth discussion and critical community development allows us to be more open and visible, and we can find ways to creatively surf . . . meaning, to learn to speak openly and express ourselves.

Challenging misinformation about Polynesia that is often conveyed in schools, we strive to encourage more positive and constructive attitudes about and usage of contemporary art practices. Due to the remnants of colonialism, as well as restrictive attitudes here in New Caledonia, education about our Pacific culture is superficial. Thus, the capacity or academic leverage to maintain in-depth discussion and critical development is lacking. Therefore, as practicing artists, we work towards endorsing an open approach to teaching and, in doing so, changing our traditional and contemporary knowledge of art, culture, and society. We also take a more naturalistic approach towards agriculture, through both sustainable and eco-friendly means based on our centuries-old Polynesian way of life. In our workshops, we use both traditional and urban forms of Oceanic languages, which is a continuous linguistic interaction. We recognize words and sounds that echo from island to island, as they sustain our verbal communications. This is the kind of dialogue that stimulates daily conversations as descendants of the greatest navigators of the Pacific Ocean. This is music to our ears, mingling and reconnecting us as Oceanic people. It also triggers the power for Moana cultures to evolve, reviving Polynesian art history and practices as we strive to remove the stigma concerning our traditional cultures that is perpetuated through the current, old-fashioned educational system. I encourage and support a more positive and realistic perspective to preparing teaching methods and materials. Thus, the focus of creativity is centered in and around contemporary Pacific art history. Being part of community-based art projects is vital; it enables us to support and encourage traditional and contemporary Pacific artists to teach in educational environments, and to advocate this approach as a mandatory practice (Fig. 2).

Experiencing general aspects of village life and family knowledge brings out diverse perspectives. Such endeavors are assets to shaping and forming ideas for artistic compositions. How we associate and identify with a mountain, petroglyph, or a wooden sculpture brings significant meaning to humanity. Colonization in the present has helped us to forget who we are, and the forces of urbanism have brought the earth down to her knees. For ex-

ample, we draw on traditional cultural references when teaching about how plants and vegetables relate to health and wellbeing. The impact of native trees, carving a canoe, one's family identity, and inherited symbolism connect us to certain animals and to the sea; all these are relevant to cultural knowledge and personal wellbeing. References to the natural environment of the Pacific region, our connection to the land of our ancestors, and comprehension of Indigenous knowledge are key to and incorporated in our teaching process. These include educational, mathematical, navigational, and spiritual, as well as scientific information and research. These elements are sustainable enough to build a strong, supportive, healthy community deeply rooted in Polynesian culture.



Figure 2. Mural workshop participants at “Elevation Day,” Hip-Hop Artist in Residence program with SELEKA artists from Tonga, Tavita Latu, and Taniela Petelo, Siapo Art Centre, Païta, New Caledonia, 2017. Photograph by the author. Couresty of Siapo Art Centre



Figure 3. 'Upeti fala (tapa pattern board), Sāmoa, maker unknown. Purchased 1916. Pandanus, 965 x 490 mm. Courtesy of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (FE001129; CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



Figure 4. Students making contemporary *kupesi* using wire coiling techniques as part of an in-house graduate teachers training school, Higher School of Teaching and Education (ESPE), University of New Caledonia (UNC), June 2019. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Siapo Art Centre

The Siapo Art Centre has been a community arts organization for the last five years. It has come a long way since its inception as a local Indigenous Pacific entity and community arts hub that functions independently. The word *siapo*, Sāmoan for *tapa* or barkcloth, is a reference to the specific fibers on each of our Pacific islands that we use for traditional or contemporary forms of *tapa*-making. Thus, the word represents our shared Indigenous cultural heritage and identity. As director of the Siapo Art Centre, Patrice Kaikilekofe is a key facilitator of community art programs, engaging with local youth who fall between the gaps of the educational system in and around the region. The Centre organizes visual art exhibitions, art, music and dance workshops, along with sports and cultural events.<sup>3</sup>

In 2019, the Centre initiated the Kupesi Contemporary Artist in Residence program, a three-week workshop at the University of New Caledonia. In the program we focused on the teaching of two traditional *tapa* impression techniques, but applied to paper instead of barkcloth. One technique we taught, *kupesi*, is based on the wood-carving methods from the island of Uvea (Wallis Island). The other technique was inspired by traditional *tapa* motifs and patterns in Tonga and Sāmoa where designs made from coconut fiber cord, bamboo strips, pandanus leaves, and coconut midribs are sewn onto pandanus leaves to create an '*upeti fala*' (Fig. 3). To create the designs, a piece of cloth is placed over the relief pattern and wiped with pigment. The pattern of the underlying matrix comes through in much the same way as when one does a pencil rubbing of a coin. In the workshop, modern materials were used to form the individual motifs, inspired from traditional island basket-making and *upeti* (Fig. 4).

As each day of the workshop passed and the weeks progressed, a high percentage of the students developed a strong grasp of the skills of a craftsman as they created designs using animals, insects, and objects (Figs. 5–6). The students had a strong, innate sense of cultural symbolism, seen in their use of forms and objects from their Pacific heritage and religious beliefs, including traditional *tatau* (tattoo) symbols and patterns (Figs. 7–8). Their motifs were very descriptive interpretations of their culture and identity. These are some of the visual ideas and identity traits that we see in Nouméa today. These are the expressions of art in which students and community members find the comfort and confidence to strengthen our cultural well-being. It is the students' desire to know and experience more, that curious nature, that drives them to learn about traditional and contemporary art practices in the Pacific Islands. Art-making is also a positive exercise for us to acknowledge and respect each other culturally, as a diverse society, in New Caledonia and the Pacific region in general.



Figure 5 (top) and Figure 6 (bottom). Students in a kupesi woodblock carving and printing workshop led by Patrice Kaikilekofe (standing in the back), UNC campus ESPE site, 2019. Courtesy of Siapo Art Centre



Figure 7 (top). *Navigation*, 2019. Figure 8 (bottom). *Tapa, Kupesi Pacifique*, 2019. Collaborative student work using wire, plastic raffia, pearls, feathers, coconut tree bark, ink, and machine- and hand-pressed woodblock prints, 122 x 61 cm each. Contemporary 3D tapa art composition workshops led by Ela To'omaga and Patrice Kaikilekofe, UNC campus ESPE site. Courtesy of Siapo Art Centre



Figure 9. Sculpture works by artists Steeve Pwere Kwido, Basil Sionepoe, and local youth from the region

Details on carvings: Kanak ancestry

Siapo Art Centre, Maison des hauts-du-musée, Païta, New Caledonia, August 31, 2021. Photograph by Siapo Pacific Arts correspondent Ela To'omaga Kaikilekofe

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Thierry Koindredi, Nenukwa Kanak representative, Païta  
The Païta City Council  
Mark Richer, The Dock, Païta  
Association Siapo, New Caledonia

Today at the Siapo Art Centre, there are newly installed carvings—made with the help of local youth—that greet the public at the gate (Fig. 9). Planted alongside them is vegetation, such as *Araucaria* conifers, yams, taros, bananas, and sweet potatoes, which introduces visitors to the Kanak people, their way of life, and the history of the local community. The cultivation of traditional Kanak plants and flowers on the Centre's grounds has been made possible under the direction of local visual artist Steeve Pwere Kwido, a Kanak traditional carver and contemporary visual artist from the Uindo/COO Tribe of Thio. The plant cultivation program includes a wide variety of plants, some of which are used even today for the purposes of healing and protection. The garden also thrives with the support of the wider community donating plants and trees, adding to a bounty of fresh island fruit and a range of delightful

vegetables. These are all planted for people to enjoy and to sustain our community by allowing people to harvest food if they are in need. Our plans for the near future are to plant flowers for cultural adornment purposes and a variety of trees and plants that can be used in traditional tapa-making.

Since 2015, the Siapo Art Centre has been part of Quinzaine du Hip Hop (Hip-Hop Fortnight), a community youth program that sponsors events highlighting urban culture throughout the country. Every April there is always a sense of innovation, motivation, and the drive to go forth as artists, administrators as the community begins collaborating in preparation for the annual program (Fig. 10). These events and happenings have matured and evolved each year, promoting interconnected community and a growing society in New Caledonia.



Figure 10. Poster for *Quinzaine du Hip Hop* (A Fortnight of Hip-Hop), 2015. The event was part of the “Elevation Day” Siapo Art Centre Hip-Hop Artist in Residence program. Courtesy of QHH Southern Province, New Caledonia

Upon reflection, I have gotten an immense sense of fulfillment contributing to *siapo* projects in my role as a Pacific arts regional liaison in New Caledonia. In this capacity, I support contemporary arts and cultural exchanges, connecting Indigenous people to specific island events and community groups. I also network and engage in artistic dialogue with territories of English, French, and Indigenous Polynesian cultures within New Caledonia, Uvea, and Futuna, exchanging links with English speakers throughout Polynesia by connecting with artists in Aotearoa New Zealand, Sāmoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Futuna, Wallis, and Australia. Regional arts gatherings in the village or inner city provide us with opportunities to contribute what we know is essential in life, because such events are positive and generally get an open community response. Actively participating in art education helps to maintain cultural wellbeing; it brings Urbanesia into focus, through our connectedness to contemporary Pacific art practices. Another source of information is on the other side of the world—in Paris, France. Siapo–Paris works towards bringing Pacific communities together to share knowledge in supportive environments in and around Europe.<sup>4</sup>

*Thus, if we can learn to catch creative waves.  
Then we can creatively surf on ideas,  
That can be heard in our music,  
And seen in our contemporary visual art.  
These designs can be read in our poetry  
And listened to in our creative writing  
In-between beats we can chant and dance,  
As we celebrate together  
As Tagata Fenua (people of the land).  
— Ela To'omaga Kaikilekofe (2020)*

*Ela To'omaga Kaikilekofe is Sāmoan from Falelatai Siufaga and Safa'atoa Lefaga. She was born in Aotearoa New Zealand and raised Sāmoan. She received a certificate in craft art and design from Whitireia Community Polytechnic (currently known as Whitireia New Zealand). In 1995 she was commissioned by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa to create a piece of body adornment made of copper wire that was exhibited in conjunction with Shigeyuki Kihara's Teuanoa'i - Adorn to Excess exhibition (1999). In 2001, she moved to Nouméa, New Caledonia, where she works as a full-time creative. She received the Creative New Zealand Pasifika Arts Special Recognition Award in 2014 and was commissioned to create a sculpture titled Journey de la femmes to commemorate International Women's Day for Secrétariat de la Communauté du Pacifique, Ans Vata, Nouméa Nouvelle Calédonie in 2004. She is a founding member of the Siapo Art Centre.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As an artist, Patrice Kaikilekofe specializes in woodblock printing and papermaking. He was a participant in the exhibition *Islands in the Sun: Prints by Indigenous Artists from Australia and the Australasian Region*, National Gallery of Australia, 2001. Catalog edited by Roger Butler.

<sup>2</sup> The ESPE Higher School of Teaching and Education of the University of New Caledonia is dedicated to the training and support of future teachers in the professional world.

<sup>3</sup> The Siapo Association celebrated 20 years in 2019. The organization has an art center located in the small town of Païta, which has been active for the last five years. Thus, it was very sad to learn of the passing in May 2021 of Marc Richer, the Director of “The Dock,” Païta's social and cultural center. We respectfully acknowledge him as a colleague of community arts initiatives and also as a dear friend to the many who worked with him. He was influential in the development of community art projects and initiatives, and a great driving force for the Siapo Art Centre in Païta. We are truly grateful for, and will always remember, his contributions to keeping the sustainable development of our art and society in the highest of esteem.

<sup>4</sup> Siapo–Paris correspondent Raphael Kaikilekofe has been leading community initiatives that support Pacific Island culture and contemporary visual arts. He is also a founding member and advocate of the Federation of Wallis and Futuna Associations in France.