

DAGMAR VAIKALAFI DYCK

'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures: An Artist Reflection

Abstract

The 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project afforded me, as one of its investigator-artists, a rare opportunity to authentically engage with ancestral objects held in museum collections across the globe. This article provides a brief history of my art practice, as well as insights into my critical sense-making process and subsequent creative outputs. My reflections highlight the importance of nurturing relationships with Indigenous communities, and underscore the critical roles of museum practitioners in caring for and sharing our Indigenous treasures. Despite challenges including intergenerational knowledge loss and institutional barriers, the project advocates for decolonizing and re-Indigenizing museum practices. The 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project exemplifies the power of authentic collaboration in preserving, honoring, and celebrating ancestral intelligence.

Keywords: 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures, Tonga, Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, Tongan art, contemporary art, museums, decolonizing museums, collections, koloa, Indigenous knowledge, identity

Laying Down My Roots: Positioning Myself in the Research

My ancestral roots on my father Dieter's side extend from the lands of the Baltic Sea port of Danzig, Germany (now Gdansk, Poland). My mother Senikau's Germanic bloodlines originate in Pyritz, Pomerania, and the northern islands of Vava'u, Tonga, where she was born in the village of 'Utungake. My great-grandfather, Wilhem Wolfgramm, or Vili 'Utungake as he was known, was a boatbuilder, and he married my great-grandmother, 'Ofa ki Vava'u, from the village of Tu'anuku. On their marriage certificate, my great-grandmother recorded her occupation as "tutu"—one who beats the *feta'aki* (plain tapa cloth). Making and working with my hands is in my blood. My Tongan ethnicity has played a fundamental role in the way I see and relate to the world and had a direct effect on how I approached the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures research project.

I was raised on the North Shore of Auckland and attended a predominantly *palangi* (European), middle-class, all-girls secondary school from the mid- to late 1980s.¹ I recall there were only a few other Pacific students, and certainly none identified as Tongan. My teachers never asked me about my identity, an experience that left me feeling culturally invisible. Despite being cognizant of my bicultural upbringing, I struggled to find a deep connection to either of my cultures, and this added strain to my inner turmoil of identity. My parents' well-meaning decision at the time to only speak English to their children compounded my sense of feeling like an outsider. However, my first visual arts teacher, the well-known New Zealand artist Judy Darragh, recognized a creative capacity in me of which I was not fully aware. Her vision of my potential as an art student resonated with an aspect of my personal identity I had not yet explored. As a visual arts student, I finally felt visible and validated, a powerful drive for success.



Figure 1. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, untitled selection of mixed media paintings of various sizes submitted for the Bursary Painting Examination, 1989. Courtesy of the artist

From that time onward, my visual arts teachers invoked the critical confidence I needed to pursue a personal journey of identity through the arts. They also supported my burgeoning dream of becoming a professional artist by highlighting the viable options for developing my art practice at the tertiary level. At my prerequisite university interview, I distinctly remember standing by my artworks and telling the lecturers the story behind my paintings. Beyond their colorful patterns, these pictures spoke of my family, culture, and identity (Fig. 1). The connection between my story and my work made a meaningful impression, and consequently, I became the first woman of Tongan descent to graduate from Elam School of Fine Arts in 1995. Artist and curator Ane Tonga has noted that my “unique pictorial language has brought aspects of Tongan cultural heritage from the fringes to the center of contemporary New Zealand.”² My passion for the arts, and my desire to inspire others to discover the possibilities in themselves that I had found through this field, led me to teach visual arts at a full primary school. Teaching has provided me with an awareness of the intersection of the creative arts industry and visual arts education sectors.

Both my educational journey and achievements are founded on the deliberate actions of my ancestors and visual arts teachers. The attainment of success in terms of seeking a better quality of life is a topic that is inherently and consistently woven throughout the history of Pacific communities living in New Zealand. Likewise, the drive to pursue further opportunities is the leading cause of migration across the world. Such was the case with my ancestors, whose adventurous spirits as inner compasses propelled them to travel over vast expanses of land and ocean in order to fulfill their dreams of a better life. From family stories—of my paternal great-grandparents Hermann and Martha Dyck owning a bakery in Sandhof, Germany; of my maternal great-grandfather Viliami Wolfgramm’s talent as a boat builder; and of my maternal grandmother and namesake Vaikalafi Hemaloto’s talent as a dressmaker—I learned that through my veins run traces of my elders’ creative and entrepreneurial capacities and a quest for determining our destiny. I wanted to locate myself in relation to my educational and artistic journey in order to contextualize the cultural and personal experiences that had propelled my artistic responses to the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures research project and shaped my position as an artist, teacher, and researcher of Tongan ethnicity.

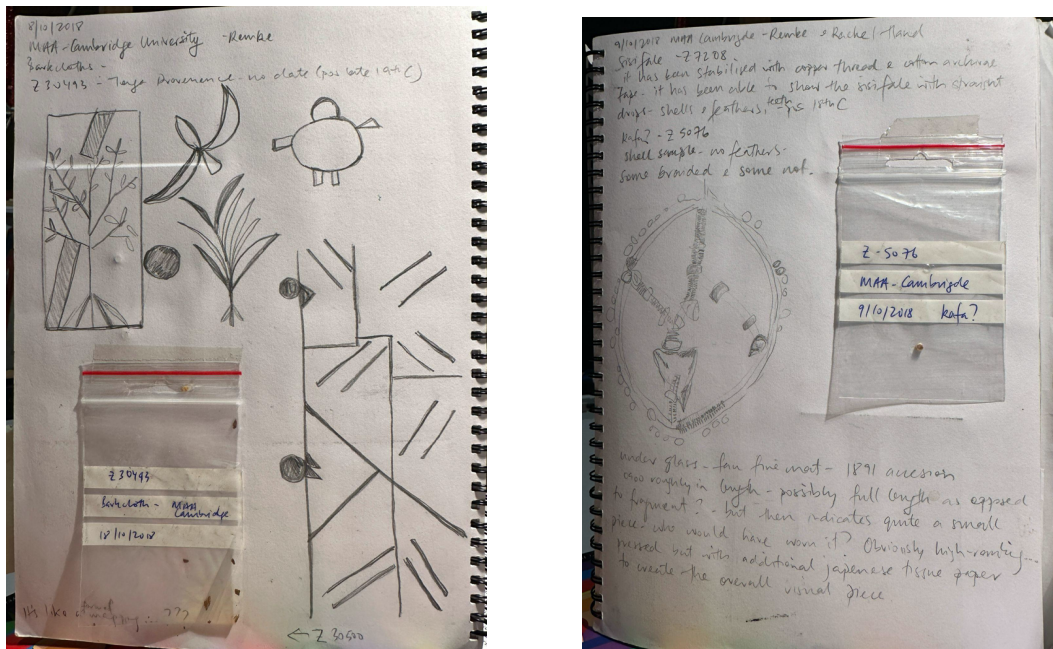


Figure 2. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, workbook sketches, 2018. Photographs courtesy of the artist

Exploring our Ancient Stories: Responding as a Creative Practitioner

My role as an investigator-artist for the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures research project, alongside senior Tongan *tufunga* (expert) Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi, has been in the vein of looking through a contemporary maker's eyes at Tongan artifacts collected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This approach was fundamental as our creative goal was to produce an exhibition of new works, all in response to the artefacts we had the privilege to be in direct contact with. My particular interest was understanding their origins, the materials used at the time, and the creative processes involved in their making. Notwithstanding, I was also invested in attempting to bring back the lost or forgotten stories that lay behind these amazing treasures of our Tongan people, whose makers and the techniques they employed were once known, but are now forgotten. As our museum visits continued, so did the often-imposed strict policies that prevent photos taken in museum stores from being published (largely for security reasons). To ensure discoveries were recorded and could be disseminated, my workbook became a source of important documentation (Fig. 2).



Figure 3. Nimafā Collective (Veā Mafile'o, Emily Mafile'o, Luana Dyck, and Dagmar Dyck), installation view of *Sisi Fale*, 2021. Moving image and sculpture installation, Pah Homestead, 2021. Photograph by Raymond Sagapolutele. Courtesy of the artists



Figure 4. Nimafā Collective (Vea Mafile'o, Emily Mafile'o, Luana Dyck, and Dagmar Dyck), *Sisi Fale* (detail), 2021. Moving image and sculpture installation, Pah Homestead, 2021. Photograph by Raymond Sagapolutele. Courtesy of the artists

For me, a stand-out artifact in our research was the *sisi fale* (waist garment)—a type of textile *koloa* (“‘wealth’, ‘possessions’ or ‘what one values’”)³ that is no longer made—in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford University, England. It was an exquisite example of the masterful craftsmanship of these incredibly precious items, and it literally took my breath away. In terms of who would have worn them, the delicacy of materials and intricacy of construction indicated that it would have been a person of very high or chiefly rank. The fact that the feathers were still attached and that one could still see a hint of the original bright coloring further indicated its prestigious nature. The materials used for the *sisi fale* were all regarded as sacred in Tonga, and the process of assembling them into a garment for chiefs was itself a sacred act.⁴

The beauty and significance of this piece propelled me to collaborate with my sister, Luana Dyck, and Tongan creative sisters, Ve'a and Emily Mafile'ō. Collectively, we created our own interpretation of *sisi fale*, which became a major work for the *Ancient Futures* exhibition in Aotearoa (Figs. 3–4). Seeking further understanding of the significance and purpose of the *sisi fale*, we organized a *talanoa* (conversation) with philosophy scholar Hūfanga 'Okusitino Māhina to help guide our thinking. We designed a response referencing *heliaki*—the Tongan art of depicting something indirectly or saying something but meaning something else. Leaning into our creative strengths, Luana took the lead with her floral-styling skills, and Emily and Ve'a contributed a moving-image soundscape, contextualizing a reverent Tongan event during which, if *sisi fale* were still being made, they surely would have been worn.

The privilege of having the ability to hold the beautiful artifacts we encountered was never far from my mind. It was quite something just to feel the physical weight of our *pōvai* (war clubs) and to consider their potential damage to one's opponent. Recognizing the hardness of the wood, these clubs were beautifully and masterfully incised. It made one ponder the types of tools and materials used to create these pieces of weaponry and status, and the significant artistic skill and innovation of our warrior ancestors.

Other highlights were the *ngatu* (barkcloth) collections housed at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA) in the United Kingdom and the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm. The *ngatu* in both collections featured sophisticated aesthetics, with highly abstract renderings and compositions of geometric shapes and forms. As a research team, our attempts to “read” these *ngatu* prompted ongoing questions, often about the histories being recorded at specific times and places by once-identifiable makers for particular recipients. The *ngatu* spoke to me as typographical documentation, which appears

both physical and celestial in nature, with an abstraction quite different from the narratives of contemporary *ngatu*. The painting *M.A.P.S* (Fig. 5) responds to my premise that part of the functionality of these ancient *ngatu* was marking significant geographical sites. The elements of shape and color form the basis of my re-interpretation, allowing a layering of my own recontextualized *kupesī* (pattern) situated in *tu'atonga* (i.e., the Tongan diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand).



Figure 5. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, *M.A.P.S.*, 2020. Acrylic and spray paint on wood board, 160 x 200 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Ways of Working: Navigating Time and Space

Understanding the importance of interpersonal relationships between our project team and the institutions enacted the Tongan concept of *tauhi vā* (keeping good relationships). An epistemological lens shows that views of time and space are arranged and experienced differently within and across cultures.⁵ Seve-Williams states that *tā-vā* can be understood as a process that necessitates “the mediation of social and intellectual spaces in order to create harmony.”⁶ An extension of this theory is *tauhi vā*. Rather than a transactional understanding of relationships that

can be concluded by agreement or equivalent exchange, in *tauhi vā*, connections do not begin and end with “you” or “me.” The concept of *vā* is multi-dimensional, fluid, and can transcend generations. It has the ability to pierce through geographical boundaries and harness the memories of a time and place in which our ancestors shared values, thoughts, and ideas. The richness of knowing who we are as Tongans emerges—an awareness that enables the use of tools for navigating the present and the future.



Figure 6. Rachel Hand and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck examine a *sisi fale* at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, October 2018. Photograph courtesy of Denis Gaudin

While our project team visited more than twenty museum collections spanning the globe, the way in which Rachel Hand and her team at CUMAA engaged with Filipe and me acknowledged our Indigenous genealogy connected to these objects. Often, when you approach museum collections and objects, you are to wear gloves to preserve the items and protect yourself from traces of chemicals used to maintain them. However, Rachel told us, “Dagmar and Filipe, I am happy for you not to wear gloves. These belong to you, these are your people, these are your ancestors, and you have every right to have that skin-to-object touch” (Fig. 6). It was a beautiful example of nurturing *tauhi vā* with the members of the Indigenous communities that travel so far to be with their ancestral treasures.

My admiration for those like Rachel, who are positioned throughout the various ethnology collections, grew with this project. Listening to Rachel candidly share how she engages with our collections heightened my understanding of the critical roles she and others like her play in providing platforms and experiences for our treasures to be cared for and respectfully shared. Throughout our travels, we encountered practitioners who were not only welcoming but also grateful for our company. It further struck me that much of the work with Indigenous objects in museum collections is done in silos, and curators are often assigned to other collections within the museum system. Therefore, Oceanic collections are typically looked after by one, maybe two people. I believe it could be, at times, lonely work.



Figure 7. Lady Dowager Tuna Fielekepa delivering her keynote presentation, 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures symposium, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, October 9, 2019. Photograph courtesy of Dagmar Dyck

Back to the Motherland: Imagining Our Past to Create Our Future

Early in the project, a collective decision was made that the first place we needed to share our findings and exhibit our first body of work was obvious; we had to take 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures back to the motherland: Tonga. The idea for an arts symposium was born out of the desire to also include as many of our fellow

Aotearoa-based creatives, supporters, and academics in the journey as possible. The weeklong event in October 2019 was hosted in Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa. The program involved a two-day art symposium, alongside several art exhibition openings, dance performances, film festival screenings, and village outreach. Most enriching was connecting with local Tongan creatives and knowledge-holders who are the backbone of our wider Tongan arts movement. Lady Dowager Tuna Fielekepa's keynote presentation included aspects of her personal story concerning her knowledge and understanding of the societal context surrounding the histories, functionality, and processes of tapa-making (Fig. 7). Her wisdom and grace were evident when she proclaimed:

Ko e me'a mahu'inga taha 'i he mo'ui ko 'etau tauhi vā lelei mo e kakaí. Pea 'i he 'ene peheé, kuo pau ke fai ia 'i he manava 'ofa māfana . . . pea neongo te ke 'ilo faka'atamai ia, ka 'e 'ikai hano tatau mo hono fai 'aki ia 'a ho lotó mo'oni.

The most important thing in life is our relationship and connection with people. And with this, there must be warmth . . . you can know it in your head, but it is in your heart that matters.

We realized that hosting the conference at a hotel was not conducive to reaching the kind of audience and community that we needed to consult with to help fill some of the gaps in the stories behind many of the artifacts. As a result, we ensured that we would visit the villages of Hihifo and Lapaha. It was imperative to take our findings to the people, as we knew the knowledge-holders would be firmly located in our villages. Furthermore, being in Tonga was also a chance to connect with local artists; the more eyes that were on these objects and artifacts, the more potential there would be to better our own understanding of them.

Final Reflections: A Journey of Gratitude

Without a doubt, it has been a huge honor to be involved in this project; Filipe and I know full well that so many of our Tongan people do not have similar opportunities. Across our travels we have been fortunate to work with a broad group of anthropologists and museum curators, all interested and passionate about our Tongan past, present, and future. It was an incredible opportunity to have them journey alongside us and help us navigate spaces, adding to the robust *talanoa* (conversation) and providing their own evidence-based understandings.

Despite the sadness that comes from realizing the extent of Indigenous, intergenerational knowledge loss, and the role and responsibility, both positive and negative, that museums have played in it, I remain steadfast in my quest to decolonize and re-Indigenize museum and curatorial practices. Having been afforded insight into the politics of some museum institutions and their self-imposed barriers to our ancestral *koloa*, I know that projects such as 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures represent all that is possible and powerful when institutions, academia, creatives, and Indigenous communities—devoid of ego or power—authentically join together for a common purpose.

Finally, collaborating with Filipe afforded me a privileged insight into his extraordinary creative practice. Working together as a male artist and female artist aided in bringing a balance to everything, not just with regard to gender but also with how we place ourselves within Tongan culture through our different lived experiences and worldviews. Filipe has always reassured me that my being Tongan is good enough. As Lady Tuna has also whispered into the chambers of my soul, "You can have all the perceived knowledge, but without a connection to your heart and your people, it is all for nothing."

**Selected Works from the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures Exhibition, Pah Home-
stead, Auckland**



Figure 8. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, *Where We Sit and Gather*, 2020. Acrylic and spray paint on wooden board, 160 x 100 cm each. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 9. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, *Reflection of an Existing Order*, 2021. Acrylic and spray paint on collage, *feta'aki* (plain tapa cloth), and wooden board, 160 x 100 cm. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 10. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, *Relishing the Splendour*, 2021. Screenprint, 95 x 65 cm. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 11. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, untitled working drawings, 1994. Gouache and pencil on paper, 37.5 x 35 cm each. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 12. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, *Markers of Community I* (left) and *Markers of Community II* (right), 2020. Acrylic on *feta'aki* (plain tapa cloth) and canvas, 1020 x 780 cm each. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 13. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck assisted by Alexis Neal and Nilesh Selwaswala, *Worn to Imply*, 2019. Handwoven and sewn relief hand-printed paper, 66 x 134 cm. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 14. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck assisted by Alexis Neal and Nilesh Selwaswala, *Worn to Suggest*, 2019. Handwoven and sewn relief printed paper, 65 x 100.4 cm. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele

Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck (Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland) is a visual artist and educator of Tongan, Dutch, Polish, and German descent. In 1995, she completed a postgraduate diploma in fine arts at Elam School of Fine Arts—the first woman of Tongan descent to do so. Her current PhD research aims to contribute to arts-based inquiry by demonstrating how Moana art forms can serve as powerful tools for reimagining cultural identity, power dynamics, and creative expression in visual arts education.

Notes

¹ The Tongan term *pāpalangi* (shortened to *pālangi*) means “people from the sky.” When Captain Cook sailed into Tonga, the locals thought the tall masts of the ship went into the sky, so they called its sailors *pāpalangi*. Since only Europeans came off the ship, the term *pāpalangi* evolved into meaning “white people.” Mary M. McCoy and Siotame Drew Havea, *Making Sense of Tonga: A Visitor’s Guide to the Kingdom’s Rich Polynesian Culture* (Nuku’alofa, Tonga: Training Group of the Pacific, 2006), 3.

² Ane Tonga, “Between the Folds: New Work by Dagmar Dyck,” *Art New Zealand* 158 (2016): 75.

³ Phyllis Herda, “The Changing Texture of Textiles in Tonga,” *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 108, no. 2 (1999): 149.

⁴ Adrienne Kaeppler, “Eighteenth Century Tonga: New Interpretations of Tongan Society and Material Culture at the Time of Captain Cook,” *Man* 6, no. 2 (1971): 204–20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2798262>

⁵ 'Ōkusitino Māhina, “Time, Space and Culture: A New Tā-Vā Theory of Moana Anthropology,” *Pacific Studies* 40, no. 1–2 (April/August 2017): 105–32.

⁶ Nuhsifa Seve-Williams, “Reading Realities through Tā-Vā,” *Pacific Studies* 40, no. 1–2 (April/August 2017): 184.