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## **Irony and Ephemerality: Siapo in the Exhibition *Atalilo: Motifs in Sāmoan Material Culture* (2024)**

### **Abstract**

*Atalilo: Motifs in Sāmoan Material Culture (2024–27) is the first exhibition staged in the newly established Ōfaga o Sa’li’iliga National University of Sāmoa Research Museum. The exhibition explores the myriad uses of motifs across six genres of Sāmoan material culture: tatau (tattooing), afa (sennit lashing), ‘ele (pottery), ma’a (petroglyphs), la’au (wood carvings), and siapo (barkcloth). While displays of each genre had its own challenges in presentation, design, and curation, the most complex was the section on siapo. This article begins with an introduction to siapo’s cultural and historical significance and its contemporary production and use. It then outlines emerging institutional and cultural ironies in attempting to display nineteenth-century siapo in contemporary Sāmoa—issues that prompt deeper questions about the urgent need to recognize and support both the living and ephemeral dimensions of Sāmoan heritage.*

**Keywords:** *siapo, barkcloth, museums, living heritage, ephemerality, continuity, measina, Sāmoa, exhibitions, National University of Sāmoa Centre for Sāmoan Studies, Übersee-Museum Bremen, cultural heritage, cultural preservation*

In 2019, the National University of Sāmoa’s (NUS) Centre for Sāmoan Studies (CSS) and the Übersee-Museum Bremen (UMB) initiated discussions that led to a multi-year collaboration officially titled “Oceania Virtually.” The project was originally conceived as part of the redesign of the UMB’s permanent exhibition *Oceania*, which opened in March 2025.<sup>1</sup> Executed in a series of transnational activities, the project was designed to build capacity in Sāmoa by providing advanced on-the-job training on curation and exhibition design in a professional museum setting to an individual who lives and works in Sāmoa, as well as inform the ongoing exhibition revamp in Bremen. In 2021, the project established two new roles for individuals of Sāmoan heritage to work and learn alongside UMB staff for the duration of the project. One position was for a Co-Curator of the Oceanic collection and the other

for a Curatorial Assistant. In 2022, the CSS and the UMB co-hosted a six-part online workshop series in which knowledge holders and cultural practitioners in Sāmoa were guided through the UMB's storage spaces via virtual tours. In 2023 and 2024, teams from the UMB and CSS paid visits to each other's sites. Heading up the teams were the Director of CSS and the Director of UMB, with assistance from relevant staff as needed. The author is a lecturer at the CSS and served as the Project Manager and Co-curator of the exhibition. The project culminated in the co-curation and mounting of an exhibition entitled *Atalilo: Motifs in Sāmoan Material Culture*, which opened on August 31, 2024, in the newly established Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga NUS Research Museum, Sāmoa, and will run through December 31, 2027.



Figure 1. The siapo display in *Atalilo: Motifs in Sāmoan Material Culture*, September 2024. Ōfaga faga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum, Apia, Sāmoa. Photograph by Vaiwilmalua Maotua. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

*Atalilo* is an exhibition exploring how motifs were, and are, used in the production of six genres of Sāmoan material culture: ‘ele (Lapita pottery), ma‘a (petroglyphs), la‘au (wood carvings), afa (sennit braiding and lashing), tatau (tattooing), and siapo (barkcloth).<sup>2</sup> These categories were selected partly to correlate with UMB objects that were available as loans, and partly due to limited resources available to mount an exhibition in Sāmoa as will be discussed. As a result, the exhibition is a mix of artifacts on loan from the UMB and object replicas and artistic renderings produced in Sāmoa.

Looking at the UMB’s holdings, and considering the goals of the *Atalilo* exhibition, the curatorial team at CSS chose eight siapo from the UMB’s Oceania collections for inclusion in the show (see Figs. 2–9). These siapo were photographed by the curatorial team at the UMB and the images sent to our team in Sāmoa, where they were edited by a graphic designer and printed as full-scale replicas on plastic banner sheeting. In *Atalilo*, the replicas were suspended from the ceiling using PVC rods and fishing wire in a gallery space approximately three meters wide (Fig. 1). While, initially, this process seemed relatively simple, and was ultimately successful, the curatorial process for and outcome of the siapo section were very different than what we had anticipated.

This article discusses some of the nuanced challenges faced by the CSS curatorial team in designing, developing, and mounting the siapo section of the *Atalilo* exhibition. We did not anticipate the hurdles we ultimately faced while mounting the siapo section of the exhibition. Specific issues included our inability to exhibit nineteenth-century siapo held in the UMB; challenges with photographing the UMB siapo, as well as with editing and printing photos of them; and how photo replicas—in place of actual siapo—would be received at the CSS when the exhibition opened.

### **Sāmoan Siapo**

“Siapo” is the Sāmoan term used generally to refer to a multipurpose textile made by processing the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). Siapo-making is a time- and labor-intensive task that can take several weeks or months depending on the targeted size. Every single stage of the multistep process has historically been carried out exclusively by women.<sup>3</sup> Collectively, siapo was made by the aualuma (women’s group) of individual villages. Geographer and

Sāmoan scholar Luamanuvae Professor Sa'iliomanu Lilomaiava-Doktor provides a succinct description of this important Sāmoan social institution:<sup>4</sup>

The tama'ita'i or aualuma group contains the daughters of matai [chiefs] who reside locally and are no longer at school, unmarried, or widowed. They are the faioa “producers” (they manufacture traditional wealth like mats, fine-mats, and tapa cloth).<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Siapo, Sāmoa, nineteenth century. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 1.7 x 1.7 m. Collected by Albert Anton Rosenkrantz in 1931. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D04821. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

Siapo was, and still is, women's work because siapo occupies a position at the pinnacle of Sāmoan material wealth. Māori ethnologist Te Rangi Hiroa notes a specific example of how siapo was produced by the elite, for the elite:

Before contact with Europeans, and indeed for some time after, the use of siapo as an article of dress was confined to a few unmarried females of the highest rank, *O Tausala*, titled ladies; all others being prohibited from wearing it upon pain of heavy chastisement. The privileged few only wore it in the house.<sup>6</sup>

That ceremonial-adornment siapo was made and worn exclusively by women in pre-contact Sāmoa is an indication of siapo's elevated status—as an object of superior material wealth, ritual and ceremonial importance, and, until its decline, an integral part of everyday Sāmoan life.

The cloth, also called u'a, is decorated by dyeing or painting. Siapo are primarily distinguished by their differing styles of decoration: for example, siapo mamanu are painted free-hand while siapo tasiga have their patterns rubbed on using a stencil. Siapo mamanu were made by temporarily adhering the cloth to a board and then painting the patterns on at will. Afterwards, the finished piece was removed from the board and ready for use.<sup>7</sup> Siapo tasiga is made using an upeti, or stencil. Upeti fala (mat stencil), the older version, are made of natural materials foraged from local trees and plants that are adhered or sewn to a pandanus mat. After metal was introduced to Sāmoans, upeti fala were replaced by upeti la'au—stencils carved out of wood. Both types of stencils are used the same way; a plain barkcloth is laid across the upeti and red clay ('ele) is grated or shaved across the cloth, then rubbed in to reveal the relief pattern underneath.

Different color dyes are applied onto the cloth to enhance the patterns or painted over until the maker is satisfied with their design. Dyes were sourced from nature, in a range of primary and secondary colors.<sup>8</sup> Along with dyes, several naturally occurring adhesives and varnishes were required. Masoā (arrowroot), ulu (breadfruit), and tou were used to adhere multiple pieces of cloth together; sogā temporarily affixed siapo to wood backing for support while painting; and o'a was used as a varnish when complete.<sup>9</sup>

Until Western cotton was introduced and popularized in the mid-1800s, siapo was the primary choice of textile across the Sāmoan archipelago. Different sizes and thickness of siapo were used for many different purposes. They functioned as clothing, sleepwear, and as household items (such as curtains, bedding, etc.). They were used as ceremonial adornment, war regalia, and signifiers of rank. Siapo were included in wedding dowries, and were also used for exhuming

corpses, wrapping the dead, fishing, straining oils and foods, bartering, and ritual gift exchange.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3. Siapo, Sāmoa, nineteenth century. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 1.7 x 1.27 m. Collected by Albert Anton Rosenkrantz in 1931. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D04817. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

Sāmoans previously stored, and in many cases still store, their siapo with other family treasures and valuables. Sāmoa-based textile expert Fuimaono Rosalia Me describes three timeless methods of oiling, hanging, and storing siapo and mats under bedding:

After decorating, apply oil or turmeric to the entire piece and let it dry thoroughly, then hang it up, or store it under a bed and ensure that no air can touch it. Every six months, take it out to reapply oil/turmeric, dry, air it out, and store it again.

Hanging: [after] decorating traditional goods in ancient times (items such as fine mats, barkcloth, tuiga hair, war clubs, feather skirts, boars tooth necklaces, pandanus wreaths, nautilus shell headbands, shaggy white mats, various immersed mats and other valuable traditional goods are wrapped tightly with cloth and plain barkcloth, with siapo on the inside, use sleeping mats and sitting mats to make it thicker. Wrap it in rope or sennit to keep it well-protected, so that no air can get in), [they are] placed on or hung from the upper rafters of the family house.

Similarly, when layering under bedding, the bottom is covered with sitting mats, sleeping mats, and other valuable textiles such as plain barkcloth, siapo, fine mats, white shaggy mats, and some other mats.<sup>11</sup>

Before the popularity of Western-style homes, siapo was stored in the upper rafters of the fale (house) occupied by the family, or folded and stacked under bedding, only to be taken out for use in special events where it was worn, traded, or displayed, and then stored again until the next occasion.<sup>12</sup>

Siapo is widely acknowledged and classified as measina, a treasure of collective Sāmoan culture. Siapo was, and still is, a significant element of Sāmoan material wealth, although it is no longer used for clothing as it once was. As with traditional forms of Indigenous clothing in other parts of the world, the use of siapo for clothing declined beginning in the early 1800s, heavily influenced by Christian missionaries.

Sāmoans began converting to Christianity in the 1820s, sporadically at first, and then more deliberately after 1830. By the early 1900s, siapo production was severely reduced, as it had been almost entirely replaced by “cambric, calico, linen, serge and silk—from the mills of Manchester and New England and the workshops of China.”<sup>13</sup> Concurrently, siapo produced for home decor was increasing in popularity, mostly supported by growing tourism in the islands and to supply the market for curiosities.

Siapo found a place in overseas markets, a trend that some resourceful artisans capitalized on, but the outbreak of World War II halted siapo production almost completely across most of the archipelago.<sup>14</sup> After the war, siapo production resumed; Lowell D. Holmes, who lived on the island of Ta’u in the Manu’a group reported in 1954 that “the manufacture of bark cloth (siapo) is carried on in nearly every household of Ta’u village.”<sup>15</sup> By the 1970s, in American Sāmoa, the only women still regularly producing siapo were a modest cohort living in the

village of Leone. Pritchard, and other pioneers including Kolone Fai'iva'e Leoso, re-invigorated siapo-making in those islands. By comparison, siapo-making continued more widely in Independent Sāmoa, but not by much.



Figure 4. Siapo, Sāmoa, nineteenth century. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 73 x 75 cm. Collected by Albert Anton Rosenkrantz in 1931. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D04821. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

### Siapo Today

Today, specifically in Independent Sāmoa, siapo is produced by only a handful of makers; these either work independently from home and sell siapo to vendors at the local markets or makers who are also vendors. While aualuma (women's groups) still exist in villages across Sāmoa, albeit in a much-diluted role from that of the past, very few produce siapo.<sup>16</sup> There are two widely known women-led collectives who still make siapo within their villages: the Salū family in Vailoa Pa-lauli and the fale lalaga (weaving house) in Sala'ilua, both on the island of Savai'i.<sup>17</sup> All of these makers practice independently but many are also affiliated with national organizations such as the Samoa Tourism Authority (STA) and Women in Business Development Incorporated (WIBDI).<sup>18</sup>



Figure 5. Siapo, Sāmoa, nineteenth century. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 186 x 120 cm. Collected by O. Paul Liesau in 1935. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D05336. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

Today, siapo is still made for a variety of purposes, both ceremonial and everyday. Siapo made as decorative pieces that can be framed and hung on walls or to adorn tables are common. It is no longer used as bedding, which is now exclusively purchased from stores. Lace is the preferred material for curtains, and everyday clothing is decidedly Western or a hybrid of Sāmoan-influenced fashion.<sup>19</sup> In ceremonial rituals, siapo can still be seen adorning high-ranking individuals or decorating the spaces they occupy. Siapo is also commonly worn by high-ranking chiefs at ceremonial events, and tulafale (orators) are particularly well known for wearing a siapo belt (*fusi*) (see Fig. 8) during formal occasions. Because siapo is favored as home decor in the diaspora, and therefore has to travel long distances, export pieces are made in relatively small sizes compared to the larger pieces typical of the past; today, larger sizes are produced on-demand for cultural events. Siapo is also popular among designers who work in the local and overseas pageant world.<sup>20</sup>

The production of siapo has remained somewhat the same as in the past, with some notable exceptions in personnel and resourcing. Today, men are heavily involved in the process—a change that started when the first foreign settlers began arriving in Sāmoa—but women still direct and participate in all stages, especially the decorating of the barkcloth.<sup>21</sup> Only four or five of the natural dyes of the past are still in use, with some modern variations. On Savai'i, the Salū family uses three main colors for their work: brown as a base, black which is now made from hydrating charcoal powder, and red sourced from the bark of the togo (red mangrove). On American Sāmoa, artisans still use the primary colors of black, brown, red, and yellow, and also implement acrylics when needed.

Contemporarily, siapo has increased in visibility as an identity marker in the Sāmoan diaspora. Over the past decade, overseas Sāmoans, as well as other Pacific cultures such as Tongan, Fijian, Māori, Hawaiian, and Tuvaluan, have increasingly participated in cultural photography—staged photographs where the subject(s) are dressed in full ceremonial regalia. Many young entrepreneurial Sāmoans have created business ventures as “dressers” who specialize in pre-contact Sāmoan adornment. Dressers use nineteenth-century archival images as inspirations, creating a wide range of formal regalia out of siapo or fine mats. They generally source the siapo from other Sāmoans or their own families' collections, or they order it specially made from Tonga or Sāmoa. Increasingly, there are also contemporary artists who produce siapo as part of their multidisciplinary practice in the diaspora.

The status of siapo as a long-held object of Sāmoan material wealth has shifted significantly. While it still occupies a theoretically high place in cultural practices and rituals in both Sāmoas, it has disappeared entirely from everyday use. Across the archipelago it remains the adornment of the elite and one of the highest indicators of respect, and thus is seen primarily during special events involving those of high rank. Siapo has also become a part of modern-day pageantry of Sāmoa and a vehicle for artistic expression in culturally-inspired fashion (see siapo wedding dress and train by Paula Chan Cheuk in Francisco Mellén Blanco's exhibition review in this volume, fig. 14). In the diaspora, siapo has evolved into a proudly displayed marker of identity, distinguishing Sāmoans from other Polynesians and Pacific peoples; it is still a common feature in Sāmoan homes globally, as a decorative object or a treasure reserved for special occasions.

## Siapo in the Übersee-Museum Bremen Collection

At the UMB, siapo are stored according to standards of museum conservation and preservation, which include flat storage with minimal folding in a stable, dark environment; controlled temperature and humidity levels; and measures to prevent insect and mold infestation.<sup>22</sup> Sāmoan siapo, generally, can be stored the same way barkcloth from other parts of the world are, although, according to a 1988 report on the tapa collection held at Bishop Museum, “because of the paste and surface decoration, Sāmoan barkcloth tends to be stiff and resistant to folding or rolling.” Sāmoan barkcloth is also especially susceptible to insect infestation due to the heavy use of arrowroot starch as an adhesive between multiple layers, unlike Hawaiian kapa which uses breadfruit tree sap as an adhesive, or Fijian masi, which uses yam or taro.<sup>23</sup>

According to the UMB’s accession records, the museum’s oldest siapo was possibly produced in the eighteenth century, while the most recent examples were likely made in the nineteenth century. None of the museum’s Sāmoan siapo are currently on public display, although in its storage spaces, several can be seen hanging in glass cabinets or stored flat in metal lockers.

## The *Atalilo* Siapo

Because siapo, both of the past and contemporary, are heavily motif-oriented, they were a natural inclusion for the *Atalilo* exhibition. Initially, we hoped that a selection of siapo could be brought over from the UMB and displayed in Sāmoa. Most Sāmoans who live in Sāmoa have never visited a museum before, and we anticipated it would be a treat for them to see actual siapo from the nineteenth century. We wanted to juxtapose ancient and modern siapo, and specifically showcase examples that illustrated the greatest variety in motif use, size, and color. This logically drew us to the oldest siapo in the UMB collection because, by comparison, modern siapo are generally smaller and feature less variety in color and motif. Requesting loans of siapo that were made prior to 1900, before the artform started to decline, presented us with the following complexities.



Figure 6. Siapo, Sāmoa, pre-1932.<sup>24</sup> Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 1.6 x 1.17 m. Collected by Albert Anton Rosenkrantz in 1931. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D15865. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

### *Real Replicas*

Very early in the exhibition's planning stages, curators at the UMB told us that none of the Sāmoan siapo in the collection could be sent to and displayed in Sāmoa due to their extreme fragility. The UMB's siapo are so brittle, we were told, that they would likely not survive the trip to Sāmoa, and even if they did, once they were reintroduced to the warm, humid climate, their inevitable decay would accelerate. This meant that the siapo examples we had most hoped to include in the exhibition for purposes of comparing old and new would not be available. The only option, if we wanted to showcase historic siapo, would be to use photo replicas.



Figure 7. Siapo, Sāmoa, nineteenth century. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 158 x 172 cm. Collected by Köper, Dock & Camp, year unknown. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D07896. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa'ili'iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

Our disappointment in hearing this news was preceded by Indigenous indignation (“We are the National University of Sāmoa. Surely, we cannot be expected to show replicas of our own measina to our own people . . .”) mixed with impostor syndrome, as this was our team’s first time curating an exhibition. “How on earth,” we pondered, “do you show siapo without *showing* siapo?” Simmering beneath this dilemma, certainly, were sobering parallels to contemporary efforts by other Indigenous peoples to decolonize museums and other extractive Western institutions. Our planning had not factored in any institutional limitations, especially ones that concerned the stability of artifacts. And while none of us wanted

to contribute to advancing the deterioration of any Sāmoan measina, the irony of the situation was not lost on us. Presumably, museums do the job of protecting cultural artifacts when the average person, society, or government cannot, but now it was clear that museums also cannot keep siapo “alive” forever.

Without the option of “real” siapo to display, we were prompted to reconsider our exhibition plan. Being novices to the museum world, we considered what was possible for a display based on replicas. We contemplated commissioning a local siapo maker to produce modern copies of the UMB siapo, but quickly abandoned that idea when we accounted for time, budget, and the improbable success of such an endeavor. We also realized that this would not align with the spirit of our intended exhibition. Our objective with *Atalilo* was to celebrate motifs, highly flexible vehicles of cultural value and meaning that are the elemental building blocks of Sāmoan material culture.<sup>25</sup> The transmission of their message(s) falls squarely on masterful tufuga and the manipulation of motifs in their hands. We recognized that cultural change in Sāmoa has not only occurred but is expected and embraced. In the case of siapo—an artform that has evolved and declined but is still practiced today—the transformation is happening right before our eyes.

Our plan for a simple juxtaposition of old and new could obviously address the unique history of Sāmoan siapo, but we wanted to go deeper than that. We decided to lean into the realities of the situation. By highlighting the need to use replicas, we could initiate a timely celebration of a product of Sāmoan culture that has survived hundreds of years of pressure and neglect. We would not hide the fact that institutional conservation had led to the necessary exclusion of real siapo and the alternative use of siapo replicas; in fact, we would focus on it and center the section’s narrative on a frank and open discussion exposing this stark reality. We wanted our audience to stumble viscerally into the space(s) left unoccupied, and in truth bastardized, by the convenient Western products that replaced siapo, which used to be part of almost every aspect of Sāmoan life. We wanted visitors to see the replicas; to feel for themselves what was lost, compromised, and replaced; and to appreciate the degree to which siapo has survived and thrived.

As we continued to negotiate with our German partners, we settled on a new plan—the UMB staff would take high-resolution images of the siapo which they would then send to our team to print and display as replicas. With this new strategy in mind, we set about choosing the *Atalilo* siapo.



Figure 8. Siapo, Sāmoa, undated. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 2.83 x 50 m. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D14133. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa’ili’iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

### *Siapo Shelf Life*

Of the UMB’s 127 siapo, the oldest are six siapo that, according to the museum’s accessioning records, were produced between 1800 and 1900—four of these are noted to “probably” have been made between 1800 and 1890 and only two have their sources (“Köper, Dock & Camp” and Hugo Schauinsland) documented.<sup>26</sup> Two more siapo have accession records that state they were created between 1850 and 1900.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the siapo in the Übersee collection were made after 1900. Just over half, sixty-seven, were collected by Otto Tetens between 1902 and 1906, but there is no clear indication of when any of these were actually made. While it can be assumed that all of Tetens’ siapo were produced before 1906—the year he removed them from Sāmoa—the more difficult question is how long before 1906, and, most importantly, could they have been made before Western influence truly impacted the artform? If we wanted to showcase siapo free from colonial and settler influence, we needed examples of siapo that were produced, at the very least, before or around 1800—a full century before Tetens, or any other collector, came to Sāmoa.<sup>28</sup> However, we had no feasible way of confirming this, since the museum records were inconclusive and siapo are not known to have a long shelf life, nor have Sāmoans ever considered setting one. All of this was complicated by considering geographical and climatic conditions—how long could siapo be expected to have lasted *in Sāmoa* before they entered a climate-controlled museum in Germany?

We discussed this with our colleagues at the Centre for Sāmoan Studies and the results were interesting. Of the fourteen CSS staff members surveyed, none had ever made siapo themselves, although a few are related to current

siapo-makers. About half collectively owned siapo through their various family connections, and three acknowledged that they currently have siapo stored in their homes. When asked how long they thought siapo could reasonably be expected to keep before physically breaking down, their answers varied from “fifty years” to “infinity,” but all responded that how long siapo lasted was absolutely contingent on how well it was cared for. “If people take good care of their siapo, it can last forever,” one of my colleagues confidently insisted. This seems to be the opinion of experts like Mary Pritchard as well, who, in 1985, said, “I am not an anthropologist or someone that dissects with a microscope to look into the fiber or the material, but I have pieces that I feel that are way, way over one hundred, maybe two hundred years old, who knows.”<sup>29</sup>

In the end, realizing we could not make much more than educated guesses on the age of the earliest siapo in the UMB’s collection, we decided to showcase, instead, the most visually diverse examples. If siapo can last as long as owners enable them to, then, for our purposes, it did not matter when the pieces we included in the exhibition were made. Siapo has evolved so much that siapo from fifty years ago, in the era of pioneers like Mary Pritchard, are on the opposite end of the creative spectrum when compared with siapo made today. The evolution of siapo, we could now see, reflects the evolution of Sāmoan society and we would not shy away from that fact.

Ultimately, we chose eight pieces (Fig. 1), regardless of their age, based on their visible uniqueness in comparison to modern-day siapo produced in Independent Sāmoa. We also aimed for including a wide range of sizes, from long thin strips to circles to variously-scaled rectangles and squares. The oldest five siapo on view are noted in their accession records as having been created between 1800 and 1931 and collected in the 1930s—four are credited as having been collected by Albert Anton Rosenkranz (Figs. 2–4, 6), and the fifth by O. Paul Liesau (Fig. 5). One is credited as having been collected by “Köper, Dock & Camp” (Fig. 7), although it has no collection date recorded. The remaining two on display (Figs. 8–9) have no dates recorded in their accession records, but satisfied our criteria of being visually and aesthetically unique.

### *Technical Cultural Difficulties*

Photographing the UMB siapo was an unexpectedly complicated process, compounded mostly by the storage and handling restrictions faced by the

conservation team in Bremen. Every attempt was made to minimize overhandling the siapo; wrinkles and creases were left unsmoothed and folded-under edges and corners remained that way. Larger or awkwardly shaped pieces would not fit in the frame of the camera, so they could only be photographed in sections without unfolding or stretching them out for fear of damaging them. While this was an obvious necessity, it made things more difficult for our team in Sāmoa.

When we started receiving images of the siapo from the UMB team, we realized that the files were not always immediately ready for printing and display. This was not the fault of our collaborators, but rather, the byproduct of Indigenous Sāmoan design and methods. Because siapo are handmade, they are rarely perfect squares or rectangles with straight sides—even today. The edges of siapo are subject to the artist's will and natural shrinkage over time; they are scalloped, serrated, or frayed—some by design, some by accident. In many cases, siapo are borderless—painted all the way to their edges. As a result, we learned, photographing them for our purposes required the addition of extra physical space around them to achieve images that could then be cropped and/or rotated slightly during the editing stage so that each piece did not appear crooked. This addition of space around each siapo was difficult for our partners at the UMB, who had technical restrictions to contend with.

The condition and required handling of the UMB siapo had another side effect. Sāmoans have an intensely tactile approach to measina, including siapo, especially when they are still in active use. Before being traded or exchanged, fine mats and siapo are brought before the family and opened up one by one to be examined and judged for their quality and appropriateness. We pull, stretch, unravel, lift, and sometimes toss the mats and siapo, all in the name of a thorough collective appraisal. Size, composition, adornment, thickness, weight, beauty, and rarity are all gauged and measured through handling before a siapo or mat is either approved and put into rotation or deemed inappropriate and reserved for another occasion. Siapo in Sāmoan hands are stretched to their full length and have the dust snapped off and out of them—the absolute opposite of what museum conservators do (and in this case, did), and we could tell. The moment we downloaded and opened the files was bittersweet. While the intricate designs, rare colors, and genius of each piece radiated through without question, the siapo looked sterile, untouched, unused. They had unsmoothed wrinkles and creases, upturned corners and bent back edges and, even though they were photographed flat, still featured the soft undulations of extended periods of storage rather than the signature flatness preferred by and required for Sāmoan use. They would need

to be “revived” in order for us to progress, which meant going through several rounds of photography until we had images that we could actually work with here in Sāmoa. All the additional images would still need some form of editing.

We asked the UMB team to smooth out particularly conspicuous wrinkles, creases and edges, as much as they could, and, to their credit, they valiantly tried to meet our polite demands, re-photographing select pieces several more times. Only four of the siapo were small enough to be photographed whole, and even those images underwent very basic overall editing. The remaining four siapo would need to be photographed in sections. Editing these images was also a challenge because the graphic designer had to pinpoint the exact joints between multiple images in order to create a single one. We also decided to print the siapo with a four-inch-wide white border to further accentuate their two-dimensionality and highlight their imperfect borders and alignment.

Once all the photographs had been edited, they were sent to a local printer. More issues ensued. Initially, the printer did not realize the white border around each siapo was deliberate and necessary, so he removed them. In the subsequent round of printing, the printer selected the edge that he thought was the top—a longer end for all the rectangular pieces—and we ended up with prints that were all in landscape orientation, which was not the way we had laid them out to display. Inadvertently, this presented us with a new problem: trying to figure out the correct orientation of the siapo. Without being able to turn the pieces in our own hands, none of us in Sāmoa could tell which side of each siapo was the top. In the end, we oriented them according to the allocated display space, layering and puzzling them together in a way that we hoped would provide the viewers with the best opportunity to see each piece individually while forming a cohesive display.

### *Sensory Overload*

The siapo installation was the first section in the exhibition gallery to be completed—it was finished almost three weeks before the exhibition was set to open. Once the siapo section was up, it was absolutely impossible to ignore. When any museum or university staff member walked into the gallery, the sight of the siapo literally stopped them in their tracks and everyone, without exception, was drawn to the display. As our curatorial team worked our way around the gallery, slowly installing the other five sections, we settled into a work pattern that orbited

around the siapo; the siapo became our new favorite gathering place, preferred break and lunch spot, and end-of-day debrief location. We spent countless hours sitting in front of the siapo—gazing at the replicas, identifying motifs, speculating on the source of the dyes, guessing each piece’s purpose, speculating about the identities of the makers and wearers, and marveling at the ingenuity of ancestral Sāmoan siapo-making.



Figure 9. Siapo, Sāmoa, undated. Paper mulberry bark and natural dyes, 1.71 x 2 m. Übersee-Museum Bremen, D14117. Photograph by Volker Beinhorn. Courtesy of Ōfaga o Sa’ili’iliga, National University of Sāmoa Research Museum

When the exhibition opened later that month, the siapo were received with the same fervor and enthusiasm by the public. The fact that they were replicas became secondary to the experience of being in the presence of measina. The works clearly harkened to a time long since passed and to an artform in decline, but were unmistakably and proudly Sāmoan nonetheless. Adult guests reminisced about their beloved grandmothers and aunts and the power of the aualuma in its heyday, or recalled the steady thump of the tutua (wooden beater) on the i'e (wooden anvil used for siapo production) echoing across the village. Student guests, who could not fathom a time when siapo was everyday wear, posted on Instagram and TikTok about the variety of naturally sourced colors and the realism of the motifs. In our narrated tour, we unpack the complicated story behind the making of the siapo display, explaining the necessary absence of “real” siapo and the logic behind the scaled reproductions. We make sure our audience understands the phases of Sāmoan history that the siapo in the *Atalilo* exhibition exist across, and we are painfully realistic about the challenges that Indigenous cultures like ours face in managing elements of our cultural heritage that have been collected to fill up foreign museums. For this experience, the response from our people is consistently, and overwhelmingly, one of gratitude.

### **The Ironic and the Ephemeral**

Throughout this process, I found myself continuously thinking about the siapo in the UMB, fixated on the fact that they could likely never return “home.” How is it possible for siapo to have been institutionally acclimated to such an extreme degree that their return to their homeland would destabilize them to the point of disintegration, a “death” of materiality, essentially? Should museums be held accountable for this? Or, to be fair, is this partly due to a gross overestimation that communities like ours have inadvertently imposed on museums, that once an object is safely ensconced in a climate-controlled museum, under the expert supervision of museum professionals, all threats to its longevity are neutralized? Siapo in Sāmoa is allowed to “die” all the time, and siapo-making and exchange, as a holistic social practice, has continued to exist and evolve despite the constant threat of decay and promises of unrequited salvage from museums. Museums are useful repositories of the past, but, as we saw in the making of this exhibition, when dealing with elements of heritage that have a life outside of museum walls, they are limited and cannot actually stop the natural degradation of artifacts.

Accession records are often incomplete, provenance remains unexamined, and environmental conditions can be inflexible and debilitating. The Übersee Museum Bremen has been instrumental in safeguarding siapo for, possibly, two hundred years, but, otherwise, they are not the agents of Sāmoan material continuity that I/we, perhaps mistakenly, thought them to be.

What I realized is needed to inform realistic heritage management in contemporary Sāmoa, speaking as well for myself, is a shift in perspective. Instead of seeing siapo held in museums as idyllic remnants of the past, or an adaptable element of living Sāmoan heritage, perhaps we need to focus on the ephemeral nature of siapo as a vehicle for continuity. Sāmoan culture is very much a living culture, and siapo is an example of living heritage that has steadily evolved for the past two hundred years. Living heritage, according to UNESCO, includes elements of cultural heritage that are continuously evolving and adapting as they are transmitted from makers, artists, and practitioners to their descendants, who still practice and use them today. Living heritage indicates the resilience of societies, and can help responsibly drive a nation's sustainable development strategies as current generations design their futures with cultural heritage management in mind. Museums are the antithesis of living heritage, as pointed out by Tatiana Poddubnykh:

Living heritage cannot be protected if it is placed in the museum. Museum means death for it. Living heritage should be practiced, otherwise, it disappears. To stay “living” these practices, expressions, representations, skills, and cultural spaces associated with it, have to be recognized by the communities and individuals as part of their cultural heritage.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of Sāmoa—and siapo specifically—this is a possibility. Rather than reacting to a theoretical loss of opportunity to see “real” siapo, presenting siapo in the *Atalilo* exhibition helped our team, and particularly me, focus our attention on the ancient ingenuity behind siapo-making. In my opinion, CSS guests do not view the siapo as a dead or dormant artform, nor do they bemoan the institutional restrictions we faced. Instead, the siapo elicited commentary on the subjective symbology of motifs, the creative use of color, ancient connections to nature, and, most encouragingly, how to permanently embed these ideas in siapo-making today. Most rewarding of all was the affirmation that the continuity of siapo lies securely in Sāmoan hands.

If I have learned anything from this experience, it is that siapo will only continue to thrive if Sāmoans continue to make it. The key to the continuity of siapo, perhaps, is the complete embrace of its ephemerality—we have to grow it, process it, dye it, circulate it, store it, trade it, give it away, receive it, let it die a natural death, and, most importantly, do it all over again.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uebersee-museum.de/en/the-blue-continent-islands-in-the-pacific/>

<sup>2</sup> The terms “siapo” and “tapa” are generally used interchangeably in Sāmoa, even now, but in this article, my preference is to use “siapo” because many siapo practitioners, including Mary Pritchard, claim that siapo is the Sāmoan term for bark-cloth and that “tapa” is adopted.

<sup>3</sup> German naturalist and ethnographer Augustin Kramer lists siapo-making under the category of “Women’s Work,” acknowledging women as “tufuga fai siapo” (master artisans/makers of siapo). Augustin Krämer, *The Samoa Islands: An Outline of a Monograph with Particular Consideration of German Samoa: Constitution, Pedigrees and Traditions*, Vol. 2 (University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>4</sup> “Luamanuvae” is a chiefly title and precedes academic titles in Sāmoa.

<sup>5</sup> Sailiemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor, “Women Matai (chiefs): Navigating and Negotiating the Paradox of Boundaries and Responsibilities,” *Pacific Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 61–82. Latai Latai extends the role of the aualuma to include a unique status called the feagaia, one half of a sacred brother-sister symbiosis—a role that enjoyed its own vaunted status in pre-Christian Sāmoan society. Latai states, “This power of women is seen collectively in the village setting in which all the sisters and daughters of the local men make up the social institution of aualuma, ‘the front group.’ This describes the aualuma’s prestigious position within the village ranking, because it constitutes the feagaiga of the village. . . . In pre-Christian times, the institution of the aualuma, as the front group, stood for the honour and respect of the village. In times of war, the aualuma led in order to solicit the

favours of the gods. The feagaiga’s venerated status, however, comes with serious responsibilities.” Latu Latai, “Changing Covenants in Sāmoa? From Brothers and Sisters to Husbands and Wives?” *Oceania* 85, no. 1 (2015): 95.

<sup>6</sup> Te Rangi Hiroa (P. H. Buck), *Samoan Material Culture*, Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin no. 75 (Bishop Museum, 1930), 282.

<sup>7</sup> Legendary siapo maker Mary Pritchard noted that leaving the cloth on the board permanently is a modern innovation and that, in her time, siapo mamamu were also heavily influenced by the stained glass windows that adorned Sāmoan churches. Hawaii Public Television, “Mary Pritchard Sāmoan Tapa 1985,” 1985, video, posted by Phil Wilson, May 5, 2022, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpDy8QHh9go>.

<sup>8</sup> I compiled the lists below from a number of sources: Hiroa, *Samoan Material Culture*, 297–304; Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 351; John W. Hart, *Sāmoan Culture* (Atu’s Sāmoan Print Shop, 1966), 2; and Siapo.com, accessed March 29, 2025, <http://www.siapo.com/about-siapo.html>. First is a list of primary dyes derived from a specific source, while the second list are secondary dyes made by mixing primary dyes:

Primary Dyes: white/sina or tetea (namu or lime), black/uli or lama (candlenut), brown/o’a (blood tree) or pani (pandanus tree), red/’ele (clay), loa (lipstick tree) or togo (red mangrove), pink/’aute (red hibiscus), yellow/ago or lega (turmeric root), purple/pauli comes from the soa’ā (plantain banana), green/lanulau’ava, blue/lanumoana

Secondary Dyes: grey/tapumiti, yellow brown/ena or memea, bright red/ma, bluish red/melomelo, crimson, dark yellow/nonu (noni plant)

<sup>9</sup> Regarding breadfruit, specifically, the flesh of overripe breadfruit. The following plant species are being referred to: arrowroot (*Tacca leontopetaloides*), breadfruit (*Artocarpus altillia*), tou (*Cordia aspera*), sogā (*Pipturus propinquus*), o’a (*Bischofia javanica*), and paogo (*Pandanus tectorius*).

<sup>10</sup> On the diverse uses of siapo: for clothing, see Hiroa, *Samoan Material Culture*, 312; Stair, “Jottings,” 115. For household items, such as curtains and bedding, see Hiroa, *Samoan Material Culture*, 312–13; Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 348; Stair, “Jottings,” 109. For sleepwear, see Hiroa, *Samoan Material Culture*, 283, 313. For ceremonial adornment, see Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 332, 334, 339. Regarding distinguishing rank, see Hiroa, *Samoan Material Culture*, 140, 141; Stair, “Jottings,” 115. For wedding dowries, see Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 152. For exhuming

corpses and wrapping the dead, see Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 189; Stair, “Jottings,” 182, 184. Related to fishing, see Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 218, 224. For straining oils and foods, see Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 318, 323. For war regalia, see Krämer, *Samoa Islands*, 297. For barter and ritual gift exchange, see Hiroa, *Samoa Material Culture*, 145, 283; Stair, “Jottings,” 74.

<sup>11</sup> “A uma na teuga ia u’u atoa le ‘ie i suau’u/lega ma ia mago lelei, faata’ui loa, pe teu i lalo o se moega aua nei sao iai se ‘ea, ia ta’i ono masina ma laga e toe u’u, fa’ala, fa’asavili, ma toe teu.

Faata'ui: teuga o oloa fa’aleaganu’u, i aso anamua. (o oloa e pei o ie samoa (ie toga), Siapo, laulu o se tuiga, nifo’oti, titi fulumanu, ula nifo, ula lei, pale fuiono, ‘iesina, ‘ieta’ele, ‘iefuipani ma nisi oloa taua fa’aleaganu’u, e afifi malu lava i se ‘ie ma lauu’a, siapo e pito i totonu, avane ai fala ninii, ni papa laufala e pito i tua ia fa’amafiafia ai. Avane loa se maea poo se afa ua sai ai ia malu lelei, e le toe sao i tatonu se ‘ea), ona fa’ae’e loa lea i luga o se talitali, pe fa’atautau ifo i se maea mai le talitali o le faletalimalo.

E fa’apena foi pe a tatao i lalo a se moega ia pito i lalo ni falapapa, papa laufala falanini’i, o isi ‘ie taua pei o lauu’a, siapo ma ‘ie samoa, (ie toga) ‘ie sina, fala lau’ie o nisi fala.” Fuimaono Paepaeolemuliaga Rosalia Me, *Fa’avagagaina Faiva Alofi Lima o Tama’ita’i Samoa* (Women in Business Development Incorporated, 2008), 18. English translation by author.

<sup>12</sup> Stair, “Jottings,” 112.

<sup>13</sup> Hiroa, *Samoa Material Culture*, 283; Margaret Jolly, “A Saturated History of Cloth and Christianity in Oceania,” in *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Hyaeweol Choi and Margaret Jolly (ANU Press, 2014), 429.

<sup>14</sup> Noticing the foreign demand for Sāmoan products, Mary Pritchard started an export business in 1927, “shipping siapo, floor mats, table mats and hula skirts to dealers in Honolulu.” She sourced products from one end of the archipelago to the other, from Manu’a to Savai’i. Siapo became so popular outside of Sāmoa that in 1929 Pritchard made a special buying trip to Savai’i, where she purchased over 2,000 pieces from the villages of Safune, Sasina, Asau, Falelima, and Sala’ilua. Pritchard noted that on her 1929 trip, “at Falelima I saw for the first time a leaf upeti in use but never since have seen one in regular use in Sāmoa.” “Mary Jewett Pritchard,” Siapo.com, accessed March 29, 2025, <http://www.siapo.com/mary-pritchard.html>. On the impact of the war, see John Enright, “Contemporary Sāmoan Artists,” *Pacific Arts* 15/16 (1997): 69.

<sup>15</sup> Lowell D. Holmes, “Ta’u: Stability and Change in a Sāmoan Village,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 66, no. 3 (1957): 311.

<sup>16</sup> Since the decline of siapo making in the last century, generally speaking, two schools of siapo have emerged in contemporary Sāmoa. Siapo made in American Sāmoa is heavily rooted in the work of Mary Pritchard and other pioneers from

Leone, who popularized siapo mamanu and the freehand style of painting. Siapo made in Independent Sāmoa is driven by producers based on Savai'i, who exclusively produce siapo tasiga and use wooden stencils. Men are involved in both of these practices.

<sup>17</sup> Fale lalaga are an appendage to aualuma (women's group). If a village has a fale lalaga, it is considered part of the aualuma, although not all modern day aualuma have fale lalaga.

<sup>18</sup> STA maintains a designated space for siapo-makers at the centrally located Samoa Cultural Village in downtown Apia, and WIBDI supports sustainable development initiatives led by women and rural producers. Samoa Cultural Village was established as a space for Sāmoan artisans to showcase their skills and market their wares. Also featured are tattooists, carvers, healers, printmakers, weavers, performances, and cooking demonstrations. WIBDI also links local producers with international entities including The Body Shop and Ethique. See "About Samoa Tourism Authority," Samoa Tourism Authority, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.samoa.travel/pagepreview/about-samoa-tourism-authority>; and "Women in Business Development Inc," Women in Business Development Inc, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.womeninbusiness.ws/women-in-business-home.html>. In American Sāmoa, siapo is primarily produced by independent local artisans such as Nicholas King, Pua Tofaeono, and husband-and-wife duo Regina "Reggie" Meredith-Fitiaio and Su'a Uilisona Fitiaio. The Fitiaios own and operate Fa'asamoa Arts, a nonprofit arts studio and gallery "working to preserve the indigenous arts of American Sāmoa." The full name of the organization is Folauga o le Tatau ma Laga Aganu'u Fa'asamoa: Art Studio & Gallery of American Samoa, but it is widely known as Fa'asamoa Arts. "Fa'asamoa Arts: A Nonprofit Working to Preserve the Indigenous Arts of American Sāmoa," Fa'asamoa Arts, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.faasamoaarts.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> Siapo clothing has been replaced by a healthy local industry around handmade elei printmaking. "Elei" is the Sāmoan word for motifs but also applies to the practice of painting motifs. Motifs are applied to fabric that is then taken to local seamstresses to make everyday clothing, such as puletasi (matching top and wrap around skirt or lavalava worn by women), safari or "aloha" shirts for men, and other various clothing items.

<sup>20</sup> Annual events such as Miss Sāmoa or the fa'afafine equivalent, the Miss Sāmoa Fa'afafine Pageant, in Sāmoa and the Sāmoan diaspora, frequently include garments and costumes that feature siapo. Fa'afafine means men who exhibit the mannerisms typically associated with women.

<sup>21</sup> When nineteenth-century sailors and merchants introduced metal implements, they quickly replaced stone tools. Metal tools were easily adopted by master carvers who were responsible for building everything from large scale fale (houses) to

portable tanoa ('ava bowls). This inadvertently led to a significant shift in production for siapo-makers, who previously made their stencils out of natural materials such as leaves, twigs, and fruits. Metal tools also allowed for the advent of the upeti la'au (wooden stencil), an innovation that not only made for longer-lasting upeti, but ease for the siapo maker. Because carving is the exclusive domain of men, they are now irreversibly folded into the siapo-making process. Today, men assist in the growing and farming of u'a, the carving of upeti, and other steps such as scraping and pounding out the cloth.

<sup>22</sup> Most museums storing siapo subscribe to the general conservation methods and criteria described in "Tapa: Situating Pacific Barkcloth in Time and Place," Care Guidelines, University of Glasgow, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://tapa.gla.ac.uk/care-guidelines/>.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Rose et al., "The Bishop Museum Tapa Collection Conservation and Research into Special Problems," *Bishop Museum Occasional Papers* 28 (1988): 16; Kapa Curious, "Natural Dyes, Paints, & Colors," accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.kapacurious.com/dye>; "Masi (Barkcloth) Workshop at the Fiji Museum," International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://incca.org/masi-bark-cloth-workshop-fiji-museum>.

<sup>24</sup> This siapo was inadvertently doubled in the photographic replica featured in the exhibition, as seen in Fig 1.

<sup>25</sup> The exhibition's introductory wall text read as follows:

Motifs are the elemental building blocks of Sāmoan material culture and can be infinitely configured to lend aesthetic beauty while also imbuing deep and nuanced significance. Each motif carries its own special meaning, and whether applied as text or decoration, enhances the material wealth of Sāmoan families and communities.

In this celebration of motifs, we highlight their prominence in various genres of Sāmoan material culture, some well-known, and others less so. Through these genres, we are able to witness the mastery of specialists' knowledge that are reflected in the creative pieces that unite these symbols, adding greater value to the treasured heirlooms and indigenous infrastructure that make Sāmoan culture unique.

<sup>26</sup> "D07896 Tapa Cloth/Siapo," Übersee Museum-Bremen, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://bremen.museum-digital.de/pdf/object/1775.pdf?lang=en>; "D00356 Tapa Cloth/Siapo," Übersee Museum-Bremen, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://bremen.museum-digital.de/pdf/object/1802.pdf?lang=en>. The

notations in the data sheet for each read “Created 1900–1890 (probably).” Schauinsland was a German zoologist who conducted research in the Pacific from April 1896 to May 1897. He visited Sāmoa, Hawai’i, New Zealand, Stephens Islands, and the Chatham Islands.

<sup>27</sup> These were donated by Franz Emil Hellwig, a German merchant who accumulated two large collections mostly of Melanesian artifacts between 1895 and 1910. Hellwig is not believed to have actually travelled to Sāmoa but he may have acquired the siapo through his close association to Emma Coe, a Sāmoan hotelier who he worked for in German New Guinea in 1900.

<sup>28</sup> The oldest documented siapo still in existence outside Sāmoa are held in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. These were collected during the United States Exploring Expedition led by Commander Charles Wilkes. Wilkes visited Sāmoa between 1838 and 1842.

<sup>29</sup> Hawaii Public Television, “Mary Pritchard.”

<sup>30</sup> Tatiana V. Poddubnykh, “Heritage as a Concept Through the Prism of Time,” *Social Evolution & History* 14, no. 2 (2015): 116.