



NGATU

Keeping the Tradition Alive

by Iona McNaughton

A group of women and girls are sitting around a long, wooden table. They all speak **lea faka-Tonga** (the Tongan language), and they laugh a lot. They sing traditional Tongan songs as they put their hands into gooey, white paste and then spread the paste over a sheet of material on the table.



The group is learning about Tongan culture and how to make **ngatu**, a cloth made from bark. (Ngatu is known as tapa in many Pacific countries.) The group meets on Saturdays in a school hall in Taita, near Wellington. It's a long way from the Kingdom of Tonga, which is about 2,000 kilometres north of New Zealand.

There are grandmothers, mothers, and daughters in the group. Megan and Lita are cousins. They love taking part in the ngatu workshops. They get to spend the day with their grandmother, Uoleva, their mothers, and other women and girls from the Tongan community in Wellington.



Growing up in Tonga

Uoleva and her sister Mele are the elders (the **taukei**) of the group. They sit at each end of the table and guide the women as they work.

Uoleva and Mele remember growing up in Tonga in the 1950s and 1960s. They lived in a village called Tatakamotonga. There were fifteen children in the family – seven girls and eight boys. The boys worked in the fields with their father and went fishing. The girls worked with their mother making ngatu.



Ngatu is made from the bark (**tutu**) of the paper mulberry tree (**hiapo**). Making ngatu is called **koka'anga**. Ngatu is very important in Tonga. It is used for blankets, mats, clothes – and even kites.

“Our mother started teaching us to make ngatu when we were five or six years old. Now we are passing on what we learnt to our daughters and granddaughters,” says Uoleva. “Megan and Lita were born in New Zealand, so it's very important they learn our traditional Tongan ways.”



A treasure in Tonga

Mele says that in Tonga, ngatu is a treasure. “When we're born, we are wrapped in ngatu, and when we die, we are also wrapped in it. Today it's used mainly for special occasions such as royal ceremonies, birthdays, weddings, and funerals.” The Tongan community in New Zealand also uses ngatu for special occasions.



Students wearing ngatu as they perform a me'etu'upaki – a traditional Tongan dance ✕

Koka'anga – making ngatu

There are many steps to make the ngatu.



In Tonga

1. After the hiapo is cut down, women and girls peel the bark from the tree.
2. They hang the bark in the sun to dry.
3. They soak the dried bark in water to make it soft.
4. They beat the bark with a wooden tool called an **ike** to make it thinner and wider.
5. They dry the bark in the sun again.

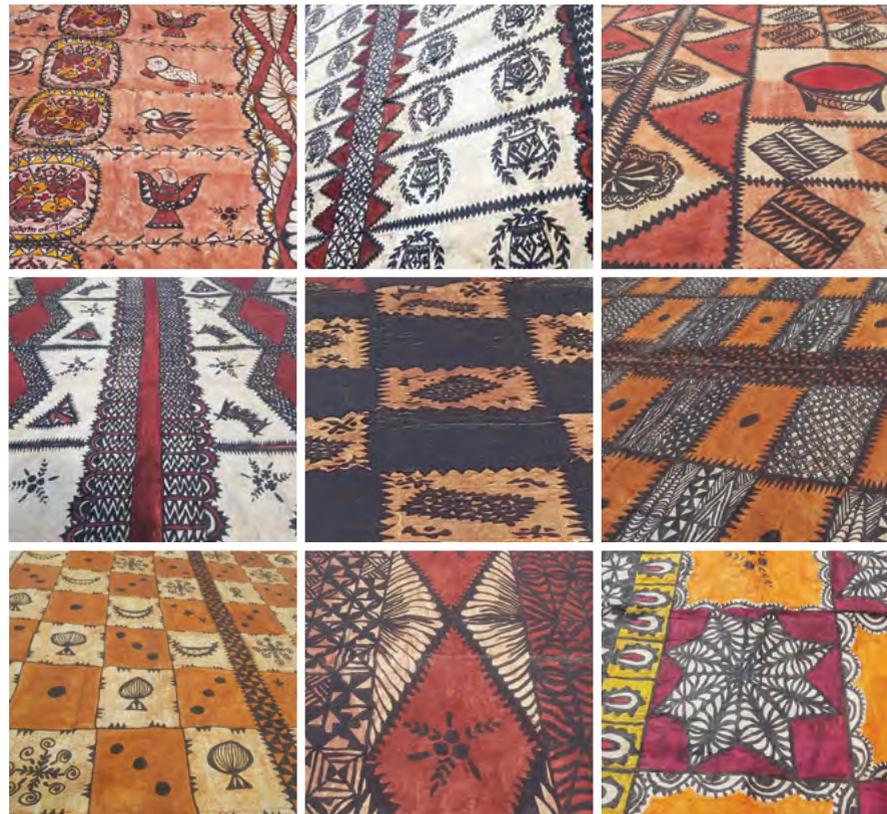
These strips of dry, flat bark are called **feta'aki**. The hiapo tree doesn't grow well in New Zealand, so feta'aki isn't made here – it's sent to the group from Tonga.



In New Zealand

6. In the school hall, the women and girls cover the table with material. This will be backing for the ngatu.
7. They line up feta'aki along the table on top of this backing material. Then they paste the edges of the feta'aki to the backing material.
8. They cover the backing material with paste.
9. They carefully lay the feta'aki over the top of the backing material. Then they press the two pieces together and slowly roll them up.
10. They carry the ngatu outside and roll it out on the concrete so it can dry in the sun. When it is dry, they will paint the ngatu with some brown dye, using a piece of feta'aki as a brush.

Over four months, the group has made twenty large pieces of ngatu. Each woman takes a piece home. At home, they plan the design and then paint the ngatu. They might use designs of turtles, fish, birds, and animals. They might include the Tongan flag. Each piece of ngatu tells a story.



Showing the ngatu

Once all the ngatu have been painted, they will be shown in an exhibition. Everyone from the community can come and admire the work.

For Lita, her favourite part is painting the ngatu with her mother and grandmother. "I like doing art and spending time with my nana and mum. I will be very proud and happy when my family sees the exhibition and what we have done."

Megan is excited about taking photos of the ngatu. She will send them to her godmother in Tonga. When her godmother sees the photos, she will know that Megan is learning about Tongan culture and helping to keep alive the tradition of making ngatu.

"One day, I want to teach my daughters and granddaughters how to make ngatu – just like my nana has," Megan says.



Tongan vocabulary

feta'aki: the dried pieces of the beaten bark

hiapo: the paper mulberry tree (known as "aute" to Māori)

ike: a wooden tool for beating the ngatu

koka'anga: the way of making ngatu

lea faka-Tonga: the Tongan language

ngatu: the Tongan word for tapa

taukei: the older women who are experienced in making ngatu

tutu: the bark used to make ngatu



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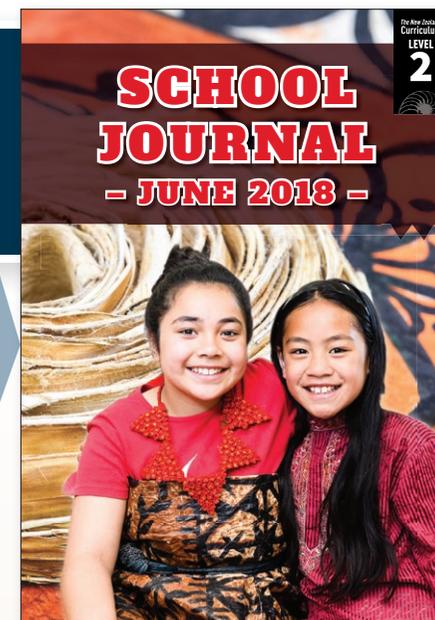
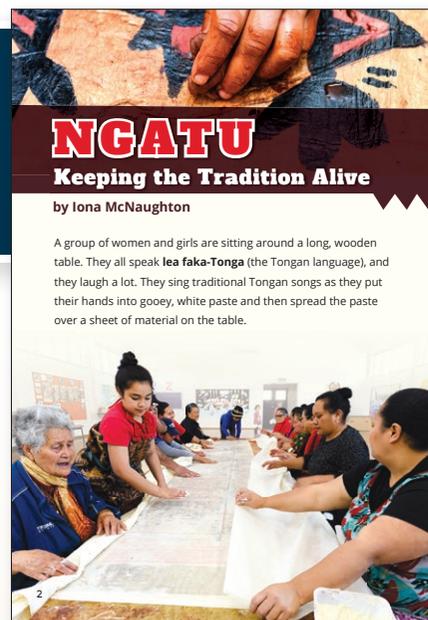
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