

John Pule and Nicholas Thomas, *Hiapo: Past and Present in Niuean Barkcloth*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005. Pp. 159, illus., bib. US\$59.95.

By Ping-Ann Addo, University of Massachusetts Boston

THIS STUNNING BOOK, presented in hardcover and muted colors, is a challenging and enlightening encounter with the history, and present, of *hiapo*, Niuean barkcloth. It presents personal and analytical accounts of the authors' quest, over the course of a decade, to locate and connect physically with *hiapo* in museums in North America, Britain, Australia, and Niue. The book juxtaposes their distinct analyses of how history sits in *hiapo* and of how the textile has (necessarily) been routed to and through the world of Western colonial and missionary interactions and their temples—museums and churches. Thomas's and Pule's project is not a categorization but a sensitive, interdisciplinary recontextualization of *hiapo* from museum-mummified objects to life-giving and life-given entities. *Hiapo* are given a subject position, and become "key characters" that tell their own tales. As anthropologists of art and objects have long been telling us, things have varied meanings in different sociopolitical contexts and are made to speak through people: tales of missionary conversion, colonization, academic research, and object fetishization. Pule's poetic prose speaks from within the pieces and Thomas's more formal tone seems to weave a historical anthropological tendency towards categorization around them; both voices are direct and critical. Folio pictures are iconic images of ships, fronds, and radial and floral designs from certain *hiapo* discussed throughout. Figures include shots of the authors in storage rooms, of *hiapo* in situ, colonial depictions of the island, the contemporary Niuean Parliament house, and a *hiapo* worn by a trader's wife in the form of a *tiputa*. Included are 35 full-color plates of *hiapo*, 15 of *tiputa*, 6 etchings by Pule, and a helpful map detailing locales in Niue as well as the island's location in the Pacific Ocean.

Thomas has penned the introduction, which discusses various identities that people have given *hiapo*: intentional works of art, missionary projects, embodiment of the globalizing forces of colonialism, and the localized

complexity of identities, both native Niuean and missionary—where “missionary” could also mean Native Pacific. Those who find Pule challenging to read as a poet and a novelist may find his prose in this book easier to grasp in this chapter for it is clear *what* he is talking about from the context created by the images and histories presented in this book. Just as Pule helps share the life within hiapo, so too he gives life to new words. A particularly interesting one is “dominative” (domin/native?). Like “alter/native” (used by Teresia Teaiwa, among other authors of Pacific Islander ancestry), it highlights indigenous agency in power struggles over, and by, Pacific lands and people. Pule states: “Black is the dominative pigment in hiapo.” And so it is. The book’s cover and most of the plates have a black background, a design feature that makes the yellow, tan, brown, and orange of hiapo more vibrant and in keeping with Pule’s earthly metaphors.

Pule’s “Desire Lives in Hiapo” chapter gifts us with his honest delivery of his interactions with the hiapo presented, pictured, remembered, and dreamed. Reading this chapter is like reading (Pule’s) poetry; it is truly a watershed between Thomas’s more academically toned, yet sincerely questioning chapters. Herein we get what no museum catalog or church record can give us: a Niuean’s trek home from abroad, encounters with the gardens from whence he and hiapo both came, snapshots of Pule’s notebook sketches during these encounters, and photographs taken in his parents’ house yard in Liku village. We learn that hiapo is a living thing and that it can do remarkable things: it grows from soil, needs soil, and becomes soil for artistry. It possesses, or perhaps constitutes, skin; it has been darkened with heat, by smoking; and it toughens, stiffens, and dries (46). It is capable of, and is remembered in, death: “it must be exhumed” (38) from museum storage, memory, and Western history. The politics of museum collecting, categorization, and policing Pacific valuables is poignantly felt when Pule makes statements like museum lights “are designed to further disfigure indigenous treasures” (34) and hiapo is “admired so much by other cultures that they are kept in storage” (26).

If Pule provides insight into *what* hiapo is, Thomas’s second chapter “‘Savage Island’ Hiapo” suggests *why* hiapo is. Like Polynesian barkcloth in general, hiapo were not created simply in order to be decorated; objects were animated by *mana*, for recording the lushness of forests and the strangeness of Europeans, and were produced for ceremony, sale, or the London Missionary Society’s promotion of their spiritual project’s success among a people who had resisted them “savagely” until well into the 1800s. Ambivalence colors the encounters that Niueans on the island have with a couple of the works: Tamakautoga—a place name written prominently on one particularly striking hiapo (pictured: 118)—is a village where Pule and Thomas meet

an old couple. The wife becomes alert and remembers kin whose names are written on the hiapo in words and the husband becomes thoughtful and emotional as he studies an image of the piece. The old man copies a portion of the script down, keeping this aspect of family history for himself. Thomas states: "the written names constitute their and our point of engagement with the work and nothing was said, about the future of the European man, or about the plants of the fist for the matter." Neither elderly one mentions the obviously Western connections of the image of a white man seated on a backed chair or of the compass depicted next to him" (68).

I welcome Thomas's criticality and even his correcting of the long-accepted, but possibly speculative art historicization of tiputa as distinctly Tahitian cloths. Tiputa, the painted ponchos, are, today, widely attributed to a Tahitian style, if not invention. Thomas critiques Simon Kooijman's "path-breaking and valuable survey of Polynesian tapa" (151, n) for being too ready to attribute authorship of tiputa entirely to Tahiti, where they have been most abundantly found and most frequently attributed. Indeed, the book's first photograph is of a Western trader's wife in a tiputa from Niue. This is poignant indeed as the context in which Thomas seems to want readers to appreciate hiapo is as a material manifestation of pasts that we construct today.

Pule's six etchings (featured in plates that constitute the book's final chapter) do not resemble hiapo, but they do benefit from being presented alongside them, for we are reminded that all creativity is linked to some convention. These and other paintings by the passionate Pule have been re-contextualized together in the "Savage Island Hiapo" Exhibit, which Thomas curated at the Djamu Gallery, Sydney (December 1998–January 1999) to bring people together in pointed social interaction around objects. Thomas talks of the process of "retroactive signification" that constitutes their project—indeed, any project—about Niuean hiapo. Indeed, there is recognizable consistency in methodological and technical execution of the project: sharing images of objects and recording and analyzing subjects' interactions with them. The methods parallel each other, whether applied in a village in Niue or in a gallery in Sydney.

This book is well worth the read and the time to look, and relook, at the exquisitely photographed hiapo and tiputa throughout. The authors' interlocking chapters and interdisciplinary word play are a delight to reflect on. This is probably not the book for readers who are looking for process or textile production information, but all readers will come away touched and enlightened. As a text it is far more an interpretive and critical analysis of Niuean history—constructed, denied; written, spoken; gendered, spiritual. It encapsulates a probing journey through the storerooms of museums

as reflected upon by two men whose professional and political stances about art and nationalism are clearly transmitted through a deep and intellectual friendship. It serves many purposes for readers: a beautifully pictured and specialized work that goes far beyond the coffee table book form to be an analytical text—and a teachable text—about powerful works of art. It is a testament to the strength of interdisciplinarity in Pacific Islands research. We need more art books and anthropology texts like this one.