Women of the Cloth

In the hands of today’s practitioners, the ancient craft of kapa making becomes modern art

Lisa Schattenburg-Raymond takes a twelve-foot-long swath of kapa (bark cloth), scrunches it together lengthwise, twists it into a rope and yanks forcefully on both ends. Anyone who knows what it takes to transform wauke, or paper mulberry, into pliant fabric would cringe at such an unapologetic act of destruction.

To produce a piece of cloth this size, the length of a single malo (loincloth) worn in old Hawaiʻi, can take a skilled kapa maker days: wrist-cramping hours of scraping the bark from trees, removing the bast (woody fiber), beating the moist fiber into sheets and felting in additional strips. And that’s not counting the year and a half it took to grow the wauke.

Remarkably, the kapa doesn’t tear. “You have to be able to do that,” Schattenburg-Raymond protests in response to my gasp of horror. “It has to be wearable. It has to be strong. It has to be washable. That’s what we’re going for.” We stand in her dining room in Kula, Maui, where she and fellow kapa artist Lei Ishikawa fill me in on their latest projects. They’re two of roughly a dozen skilled kapa makers in the Islands who dedicate most of their waking hours to reviving the Hawaiian tradition, which became obsolete in the late 1800s after Hawaiians adopted Western textiles.

Kapa (bark cloth) makers use round hohoa beaters to flatten and expand the fabric and grooved iʻe kuku (four-sided beaters) to imprint watermarks on the fabric.

Until that point kapa was one of the most refined art forms in Hawaiʻi, undertaken almost exclusively by women. Men made the necessary implements, including the round, wooden hohoa beaters and grooved iʻe kuku (four-sided beaters), that imprinted a watermark on the fabric. While

commoners typically wore plain, rough-hewn malo and pāʻū (skirts), kapa makers also produced more elaborate textiles and moe (blankets) that were soft and supple, colored with natural plant dyes and stamped with geometric designs. These were given as hoʻokupu (gifts) or used in ceremonial rites. The finest kapa belonged to the aliʻi (chiefs), beaten so thin it was almost transparent—"clearer than moonlight," wrote historian Samuel Kamakau.

While several museums have ancient kapa in their collections, many details of the kapa-making process—beyond the general steps of pounding, fermenting, beating, drying and decorating—remain a mystery. Modern practitioners, who picked up the art again in the 1960s, rely on written notes and trial and error to figure out how their kūpuna (elders) made kapa. Many have come to realize that the process delineated in the old texts—often written by third parties or men who did not pound kapa—are poorly described or just plain wrong. So a lot of today's "discoveries" involve revisiting ancient techniques.

"Hundreds of thousands of women across the Pacific were doing this daily for thousands of years," says Schattenburg-Raymond. "There must have been a standardized, simple way." She's a curious ethnobotanist who became a natural-dye expert. As the former director of the Maui Nui Botanical Gardens, she had the rare opportunity to grow dozens of Hawaiian plants with leaves, bark, roots, flowers, berries and seeds that she crushed, boiled, simmered and strained into a full spectrum of vibrant colors. Schattenburg-Raymond has spent the past two decades at the intersection of kapa and dyes, reproducing some of the finest cloth from Hawaiʻi's past and creating new kapa stories of her own.

In recent years Schattenburg-Raymond has been growing wauke nui in her yard, a rare and robust variety of wauke with coarse fibers that grows to fifteen-feet tall. Using this particular wauke, she's able to beat out the entirety of a twelve-foot malo in an hour. This kind of efficiency makes much more sense for women who wouldn't have had time to sit around and

tirelessly pound kapa.

“When you read the research, it seems like they’re all talking about one kind of wauke,” Schattenburg-Raymond says. Past observers didn’t distinguish among different varieties of wauke, so figuring out which type they were referring to is often a guessing game. “Just realizing, wow, there are different kinds, they do different things, and you use them in different ways—teasing out these little bits of information has been exciting for us.”

Schattenburg-Raymond and Ishikawa both teach kapa and dye making at Maui Nui Botanical Gardens. Their observations about wauke leaf lobes or the level of tannin saturation in bark, or their thrill at stumbling upon a random reference to kapa in the *Hawaiian Dictionary* reflect their deep desire to understand the tradition. Ishikawa, who’s pursuing a PhD relating kapa to cultural identity, keeps detailed handwritten journals with photos to document her experiments and findings.

Sometimes serendipity steps up to answer Ishikawa’s questions. To make ink, she collected the soot from the smoke rendered by roasting kukui nuts as old texts described, but she struggled to crack the shell open without splitting the kernel in half. The whole kernel is most desirable, she explains, because it produces an irregular flame that creates smoke. “We were trying to use the hammer to ‘pek, pek, pek’ it open,” she describes. But the kernel kept breaking. “By accident I dropped one in a bucket that had a rock on the bottom, and it just goes ‘pok’ and opened!”

Ishikawa, who’s pursuing a PhD relating kapa to cultural identity, keeps handwritten journals to document her experiments with natural dyes. Schattenburg-Raymond’s favorite is a silver dye derived from koa. “Sometimes it just looks iridescent,” she says.

Ishikawa burns the kernels, captures the smoke in a stainless steel pot and scrapes out the sooty residue with a credit card. It takes thirty-five kukui nuts to produce one precious baby food jar full of soot. “It’s like gold. That’s pure carbon. You can’t even breathe on it,” Schattenburg-Raymond says. “If

you sneezed, it would be gone. But it’s the best ink ever.”

Last fall the students in Schattenburg-Raymond’s maʻawe (fiber arts) class at University of Hawaiʻi-Maui College harvested a patch of wauke nui to make thirteen malo—each for a specific purpose, including gardening, surfing and use in religious rites—which they presented to cultural practitioners. It was the first time in more than 150 years that this kind of wauke was made into malo for people to wear. Schattenburg-Raymond knows it’s not the last time. “In ten years,” she says half jokingly, “everyone’s going to be walking around wearing kapa.”

Roen Hufford learned to make kapa from her mom, Marie McDonald, a matriarch of lei making and kapa making honored in 2017 as a Living Treasure of Hawaiʻi. “All along the way, she never told me, ‘You cannot do this’ or, ‘You have to do it this way,’” Hufford says. “She encouraged my creative spirit.” Hufford lives and teaches fine art in Waimea on Hawaiʻi Island. She points out that good kapa has certain attributes, and good kapa makers learn how to manipulate the fibers to achieve them: “The goal has been set. You want big pieces, you want long pieces, you want white pieces and you want soft pieces.” She believes that these goals can be accomplished by understanding the materials and building on tradition rather than being constrained by it. These days kapa makers might use a pressure cooker or a steamer to hasten the process. Soda ash provides an alternative to fermenting the fiber. Non-native plants can offer a fresh palette of dyes. Acrylic paints won’t fade.

“One of my students had a big ironwood tree go down. He noticed under the bark of the ironwood, it was magenta, so my students said, ‘Heck, let’s try this out.’ So we processed it the same way as kukui root and got a wonderful pinkish-blue,” she shares. “If we have that material available to us, we try it out. Why not? That’s what makes the practice contemporary and interesting.”

In February, Hufford curated a kapa show at the Kahilu Theatre in Waimea

that demonstrated how progressive kapa making has become. Among the eighty-six exhibits by established artists and new students were leather bags with kapa panels, prayer flags comprised of small pieces of kapa, a book binding made of kapa and dried wauke threads woven with silk and cotton. The show also included pieces that honor tradition, like a kapa-enshrouded statue of the god Lono. In an annual Makahiki event organized by the Hawaiian Cultural Center of Hāmākua, runners carry the sacred figure all the way around Hawaiʻi Island—just as they did in ancient times.

Under the thatch hale (house) adjacent to the organic garden at the University of Hawaiʻi's West Oʻahu campus, Dalani Tanahy's students pound inch-wide strips of wauke against kua pōhaku (stone anvils)."I'm literally letting it drop and catching it on the way up," the professor says, demonstrating how to manipulate the hohoa beater without exerting brute force. The students imitate her motion, creating a cadenced conversation of pleasing taps. The sound harks back to centuries ago when women used their iʻe kuku to tap out messages to each other in a kind of Morse code of strikes and pauses. This "kapa talk," incomprehensible to men, carried over long distances.

"What do we actually revive kapa for? What is its highest use?" Tanahy asks, then answers: "Art." She created an ancient pāʻū replica for the British Museum, and her framed strips of kapa adorn the walls of hotels and businesses throughout Hawaiʻi. Art commissioned for display sustains her full-time mission, which is to perpetuate the Hawaiian kapa tradition—foremost by reinforcing its identity as distinct from its cousins: Tahitian tapa, Samoan siapo, Tongan ngatu and Fijian masi. Of all the bark cloth in the Pacific, Hawaiian kapa is regarded as the finest—soft to the touch and featuring watermarks and a diversity of color not found elsewhere. "We want people to look at it and say, 'Oh, that's totally Hawaiian kapa,'" says Tanahy. "Even if artists want to put a spin on it—which many do—first they learn, 'What did our kūpuna do?'"

Kapa makers use hala fruits to apply dye freehand or ʻohe kāpala (bamboo stamps) to print geometric designs. The finest kapa is soft and sheer, almost transparent. In the past, it was either plain, basic and functional — or elaborate, embossed and dyed.

Kapa is a time-consuming and resource-heavy art. "I tell people this class is not 'run-down-to-Ben-Franklin-on-the-way-home-and-buy-all-your-supplies,'" says Tanahy. She's neither trying to create nor discourage more kapa makers. The reality is that existing resources naturally limit production and the number of practitioners. "Can we really use all the kauila and ʻōhiʻa and precious woods we had before? No, we cannot. Do we have fields and groves and plains of wauke? No, don't have that either. Do we have all this free time to sit and pound and pound? Uh-uh."

Tanahy splits her time between teaching kids and adults, making kapa for display and making kapa for traditional uses: covers for ʻawa (kava) bowls, wedding kapa, "catch-the-baby-when-it's-born" kapa, swaddling kapa, funeral kapa. Her commissioned work ends up paying for the pieces she gives away. Kapa making comes with kuleana—both a privilege and responsibility. "Everyone accepts that when they enter this world," Tanahy says, sharing a story of how twenty practitioners were called upon to make kapa to wrap the iwi (bones) of two hundred Hawaiians that were unearthed and needed to be properly reinterred. "You can be a painter, you paint—you don't owe anybody anything. You're a sculptor, you sculpt. You don't owe anybody anything. You get into kapa—you owe. You owe back to your culture. You owe back to your kūpuna."

Mākaha kapa maker Dalani Tanahy is the master kumu (teacher) of the Hawaiian-Pacific Studies program at the University of Hawaiʻi-West Oʻahu. She has been growing wauke, beating kapa and teaching students for over twenty years.

Tanahy is as fierce in her enthusiasm for creative modern applications of kapa as she is in defending its tradition. Her pieces have claimed space in high fashion as well as onstage. When a Kauaʻi lawyer wanted a kapa piece

he could wear, she made him a kapa vest and cravat. He took them to a tailor on Savile Row, who lined them with silk and hung them in the window.

She also created the centerpiece for Pōhaku, a show written, directed and performed at twelve venues across the country by Native Hawaiian choreographer Christopher Morgan. He suspended two four-by-eight-foot flowing sheets of kapa with conspicuous watermarks from the ceiling to use as a projection screen. "When I gave it to him, he said, 'We have to cut a piece to check if they can fireproof it. Is that bad? Is it like breaking protocol?'" she recalls, chuckling at how it had to be sprayed and set on fire. "I told him, 'That's super-awesome, 'cause now we'll know we can use it like that.' And when he did that show, people went up to him and—never mind the play, never mind the dancing, never mind the story—they asked, 'What is that thing you have hanging up there with all the stuff going on in it?'"

Kapa makers often spend days pounding and felting pieces of wauke together. In recent years Schattenburg-Raymond has been growing wauke nui in her yard – a rare and robust variety with coarse fibers that can be pounded out completely in just hours.

"The educator in me appreciates that it makes people ask questions," Tanahy says, recognizing the value of keeping kapa alive in ways that inspire curiosity. Her students are also dreaming up new roles for kapa: Blake Marshall, who is studying to be a child psychiatrist, believes kapa making can be effective therapy. Jasmine Soliven, an early childhood education major, wants to incorporate dye making into her pre-school teachings.

"It's so cool to be able to go back to the past. We might not have a direct connection, but we can feel what the old kapa makers were feeling," says 68-year-old Tori Tualatamaleilagi, who is pursuing a degree in Hawaiian-Pacific studies. "I have a vision of women beating kapa by the ocean as their kids play in the water nearby. And all they can hear is this." She pauses to admire the syncopated tapping of the beaters. "When the sound stops, they'll know, 'Oh! Ma's coming.'" HH