This article describes briefly and traces the 20th-century history of two *tapa* acquired by the Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94) during his residence in Samoa from late 1889 until his death there on 3 December 1894. Neither has been known previously to scholars of Polynesian material culture, chiefly because the *tapa* have been valued for their associations with the famous author, not for their interest as artefacts of 19th-century Polynesia. As a result, they were collected and have been preserved and displayed by institutions with no special links to anthropology or the display of cultural artefacts: the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, and Monterey State Historic Park, California. In addition, legends have developed about both *tapa*, telling how Stevenson himself got them and what their history has been since then. These legends not only reflect a natural human desire to enhance the value and interest of one’s possessions, mere ownership of an object by a famous person being less interesting, and less nourishing to one’s self-esteem, than ownership with a splendid and characteristic tale of its history as well. They also make the objects themselves available as symbols of 19th-century cross-cultural gestures of mutual respect: between Polynesians and non-Polynesians, between chiefs in one realm and the world’s famous in another and, finally, in the transfers during the 20th century from private to institutional ownership, between the world of wealth and the world of learning.

Both *tapa* are beautiful works of art, and they are also characteristic examples of their kind and places of origin. But they have been valued most for their association with Stevenson—in particular, and especially, as symbols of his special relationship with the Polynesians among whom he chose to live and, in turn, of our own admiration for his outlook and socio-political role. As Nicholas Thomas has written, in valuing and preserving (and telling stories about) objects such as these “we take the ‘concrete and palpable’ presence of a thing to attest to the reality of that which we have made it signify; our fantasies find confirmation in the materiality of things that are composed more of objectified fantasy than physical stuff” (Thomas 1991: 176). It is, generally, a benign and un-deceitful human habit—and it is very widespread.
There cannot be many visitors to the reading room of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University who have failed to notice—and marvel at—the large decorative *tapa* cloth that hangs on the wall to the west of the main desk (Fig. 1). It had been on display more than 40 years ago, in 1967, when as a graduate student at Yale I began my work on Robert Louis Stevenson. And as far as I can discover, it has been there even longer, possibly from the day that the Library opened, on 14 October 1963, or very soon thereafter.

A wonderful story goes along with this *tapa*. It is told partly in the descriptive label:

> Tapa cloth made from the bark of the mulberry trees at Vailima [Stevenson’s estate] by Samoan natives for presentation to Robert Louis Stevenson in 1890; the motif of the tapa cloth represents Stevenson’s western-style house and its windows, the first to be seen in that part of the island. Gift of Mrs. Statter Day.

But it really comes alive in the longer and more colourful narration that has been handed down by generations of librarians, guides and scholars, myself included, as they have paused to show visitors one of the finest non-book treasures in the Beinecke Library. Vincent Giroud summarises this story well, in an article telling the story of the Edwin J. Beinecke Robert Louis Stevenson Collection at Yale, the largest and most inclusive Stevenson collection in the world.

One important item entered the collection in 1964 not through the intermediary of E.J. Beinecke but that of his brother Fritz: the large tapa cloth which once hung in a special room at Vailima and now adorns the west side of the lobby in the library. It was made from Paper Mulberry bark in 1890 by the Samoan natives in the backyard of the first cottage built by Stevenson on the island, and presented to him in honor of the house. Since the natives had never seen a house with windows, these are the principal decorative motif of the tapa. Stevenson later gave it to a Sea Captain in gratitude for some favour and the Captain, in turn, presented it to the father of Dr Gregory Stragnell, who in 1947 gave it to Mrs. Statter Day of Short Hills, New Jersey, from whom it eventually came to Yale at Fritz Beinecke’s urging. (Giroud 2004: 57)

Although the recent ownership of the *tapa* is fairly clear, its history, at least as it is recounted here, has more than a few elements of the legendary.

It turns out that there are two *tapa*, not one; that the *tapa* in the Beinecke Library is from Tonga, not Samoa; that the descriptive label (which itself
Figure 1. Stevenson tapa at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 422 cm x 180 cm.
has more legend than fact) actually derives in part from a description of
the other tapa, which is now in the Stevenson House Collection, Monterey
State Historic Park, California; and that only this second tapa can be shown
definitely to have belonged to Stevenson. As will be seen, one or two loose
ends and a few mysteries remain, but the essential story now seems clear—and
it is clearly not the story that we have treasured over many years.

MONTEREY STATE HISTORIC PARK, CALIFORNIA

My own discovery of all this began in October 2004 when I had the privilege
of a month’s uninterrupted work in the Beinecke Library as the holder of
the John D. and Rose H. Jackson Fellowship. Among the many items that I
had not been able to study before were Edwin J. Beinecke’s own “collector
files”, a collection mostly of correspondence with book dealers and others as
the collection developed. One of these items was a photograph, about which I
made the following notes:

Beinecke Collector Files - Uncat. MS. Vault 805 - Box 6. File Folder: RLS
Scrapbook.

Loose photo, image size 6-9/16 in wide x 7-7/16 in high, with the number
190 part of the photo, showing a square tapa with concentric circles 3, 5,
and 7 feet in diameter (tapa would thus be approx. 7 ft x 7 ft), with legend
in lower right-hand corner.

Information on back says that this was Anderson 1914, 581, and was
bought by Mrs. W.G. Walker—who gave it to Mr. Beinecke. Also on back
is an inscription by her giving a translation done by high chief Tagoilelagi,
Columbia University, November 1938: “The gift of remembrance to Robert
Louis Stevenson on Aug 7, 1890 from all the high chiefs of Samoa as a
friendship token.” Tapa has patterns in individual sections representing each
of the (six? seven?) chiefs. First item in folder.

I was struck by two things: (i) the similarity of the supposed translation
done in 1938 to the information in the descriptive label of the Beinecke
Library tapa; and (ii) the complete dissimilarity of the tapa in the picture to
the tapa in the Library. Whatever might be said of it in the label, the tapa in
the photograph was definitely not the tapa on the wall.

Some time later, in April 2007, I was fortunate enough to spend a day
photographing a remarkable collection of eight tapa (plus a damaged one
and some unpainted cloth) in the Robert Louis Stevenson House Collection
at Monterey State Historic Park, California. The collection had been formed
by Mrs William Greig Walker of New York City, and in 1956 it was given
to the Monterey History and Art Association in her memory by her sister
Mrs Ripley Hitchcock of Greenwich, Connecticut. It was then loaned to the Stevenson House collection by the Monterey History and Art Association and the loan was converted to a gift in 1962. The *tapa* have been exhibited only rarely, most memorably perhaps for a dinner held at Stevenson House in 1994 honouring the 100th anniversary of Stevenson’s death.

Only one of the Monterey *tapa* has any connection with Stevenson, but of course it is the very *tapa* in the photograph in the Beinecke collector files. It was indeed sold as Lot 581 in Part I of the Stevenson sale by his stepdaughter Isobel Strong (later Mrs Field but always known in the family as Belle) at the Anderson Galleries, New York, in 1914-15, where it was purchased by Mrs W.G. Walker (Anderson Auction Company, 1914-15 [I]: 89). This was the first general sale of Stevenson’s possessions, and the original numbered sticker is still attached. One could not ask for a more solid provenance. The Stevenson *tapa* in Monterey (Fig. 2) is 198cm x 196cm, it is painted in brown on a cream-coloured ground, and the design is characteristic of *tapa*- *hiapo*, in Niuean—done on the island of Niue during the late 1880s and early 1890s. It is made up of intricate botanical designs arranged in three concentric circles. There is carefully-lettered text in one corner, another common feature of Niuean *hiapo*.

Almost certainly the cloth in Monterey is one of the three “tappa (native bark-cloth) table-cloths” that Fanny Stevenson in a diary entry of 28 April 1890 mentions that the trader at Niue sold to them “at an exorbitant price” (Stevenson 1914: 24-25). Their other two purchases may be a *hiapo* now in the Australian Museum, Sydney, said to have been owned by the Stevensons, and a *hiapo* (present location unknown) on which the word *soifua* (“welcome” or “may you live”) appears. This last cloth was hung in Stevenson’s mother’s room at Vailima. Another possibility is a slightly fire-damaged cloth that was first sold as Lot 149 in Part II the Isobel Field sale. Like the *hiapo* now in Monterey, these examples also employ intricate botanical designs, although seemingly in rectangular rather than circular compartments.

The *tapa* now in the Beinecke Library is just as characteristically Tongan, where the term used for the cloths is *ngatu*. It is rectangular rather than square, 422cm x 180cm and various of the design motifs are common in Tongan. Text and possibly contemporary realistic details are used, not just the natural or abstract geometrical shapes that are conventionally applied to *tapa* in Samoa and most other islands. The piece seems never to have appeared at auction or in association with other Stevenson artefacts and, as will be seen in a moment, the stories of how it came to Stevenson and where it went after that are not entirely convincing. Although Stevenson and his wife Fanny touched briefly at Tonga returning from Sydney in September 1890, and there was good communication generally between Tonga and Samoa throughout
their time in Samoa, there is no mention in letters or diaries of purchases or gifts of tapa. In a letter to the Samoan chief Mata‘afa, 19 August 1894, RLS mentioned that a Mr Mackay of Tonga will buy some tobacco for him there. Annotating the letter in the Yale edition of Stevenson’s letters, Ernest Mehwé identified Mackay as Dr A.W. Mackay of Tonga, and remarked that Stevenson’s mother had a note of a visit from him on 13 August (Stevenson 1994-95: Letter 2277 and n. 2). (Further quotations from Stevenson’s letters are identified in parentheses in the main text by recipient, date, and letter number in this edition.) This seems to be the extent of our present knowledge of Mackay, however.

Figure 2. Stevenson tapa in the Stevenson House Collection, Monterey State Historic Park, California. 198cm x 196cm.
LEGENDS AND STEVENSON ASSOCIATIONS

How the Beinecke Library tapa came to be owned by Stevenson—indeed, whether it ever was owned by him—may be impossible to determine. But the story itself has many weaknesses. If there was a “Sea Captain” to whom “in gratitude for some favor” RLS gave such a valuable and important gift, which itself supposedly had been given to him by his own workers and was intimately associated with his own house, it is odd that there is no other mention of it—in Stevenson’s letters, for example, or indeed any other reminiscences of Samoa—and that the sea captain’s name has not come down to us. With an origin so full of personal associations, it is also surprising that Stevenson would have given this tapa to anyone at all, ever.

Neither of the two tapa is Samoan, and given its obviously Niuean origin and Fanny Stevenson’s mention of purchasing three tapa in Niue, there is no reason to think that the hiapo in Monterey—the only one of the two with a date or text other than (perhaps) single words—was not merely a purchase made there in April 1890. Not only is neither one of the tapa Samoan—as the story of a ceremonial gift created “in the backyard of the first cottage built by Stevenson on the island, and presented to him in honor of the house” would seem to require—neither of them can have been given to Stevenson in August 1890 by the Samoan chiefs or anyone else. Stevenson was then a newcomer to Samoa. Except for two months in December and January 1889-90, he had spent almost no time there; his first house was not even finished. In August 1890 he was in Noumea, early in the month, and then in Sydney, and the Stevensons did not arrive back in Samoa to take up residence until mid-September 1890.

In late September 1890, seeking a way to brighten their sitting room, Fanny Stevenson recorded in her diary that they “looked over our boxes and unearthed several pieces of tapa”, which they then put up. There is no mention of any tapa presented to them, and Fanny called the tapa that they did put up “very dark, the ground work being a rich maroon black, and the figures rising through all shades of reddish brown to the lightest coffee-and-milk” (Stevenson 1956: 31-32). Stevenson too commented on these tapa, on 4 November 1890, in remarks to E.L. Burlingame about their new house: “Here the showers only patter on the iron roof, and sometimes roar; and within, the lamp burns steady on the tapa covered walls, with their dusky tartan patterns, and the book shelves with their thin array of books” (Letter 2269). And on 12 January 1891, commenting on the pleasure that he has had in a visit in London from Stevenson’s stepson Lloyd Osbourne, Henry James thanked Stevenson for his present of tapa cloth and a sketch: “I have covered a blank wall of my bedroom with an acre of painted cloth and feel as if I lived in a Samoan...
tent—and I have placed the sad sepia drawing just where, fifty times a day, it most transports and reminds me” (James 1974-84 [III]: 325).

None of these descriptions of dark, tartan-like *tapa* (*siapo*, in Samoan) brings to mind either of the *tapa* under consideration, both of which consist of designs on a light ground rather than the black or dark rust-colored background common in Samoa. Still less do they support the idea, in the often-told story of the Beinecke *tapa*, that it was on display in a room expressly dedicated to this purpose.

When the Stevensons began what RLS called their “laborious, destitute and delightful existence in the woods” (RLS to Lloyd Osbourne, 10 October 1890, Letter 2258), the dwelling that had then been completed was not the grand house known as Vailima that we know today. It was a small two-story building, later called Pineapple Cottage. When Vailima itself was completed this Cottage was first occupied by Stevenson’s married stepdaughter Belle and her then-husband Joe Strong and their son Austin, and later by Stevenson’s stepson Lloyd Osbourne. It was here, in October and November 1890, that Henry Adams and John LaFarge stayed when they visited the Stevensons. The two Americans made much of the primitive conditions and the strange appearance of both RLS and Fanny, but they made no mention of a *tapa*, or a *tapa* room, or even of the *tapa*-covered walls in the sitting room. It was not until May 1891 that the Stevensons first occupied the house that we know today as Vailima, which itself was twice expanded later, in 1892-93 and again after Stevenson’s death at the end of 1894.

It is true that in this larger house one room had *tapa* hung in it, at least initially. When they were moving in, on 17 May 1891, Stevenson’s mother wrote to her sister Jane Whyte Balfour (Letter 2320A):

> The house really looks very nice indeed. The outside is painted a sort of peacock blue, and the roof and verandahs a red, that goes very well with it; the dining-room is very pretty and comfortable, the walls hung with *tapa*, the native cloth, which gives the effect of tapestry.

On one wall of her room upstairs, she continued, are the British and American flags that were flown on the *Casco* and, between them, Kalakaua’s royal standard.

Above the standard there is a fine piece of *tapa* from Savage Island, painted with an elaborate pattern and in the centre the word *soifau* [i.e., *soifua*], which means *welcome*. The floor is covered with beautiful white Samoan mats.

Savage Island was another name for Niue, and this *tapa* was probably another of the three *tapa* that the Stevensons bought there in April 1890.
Like the tapa now in Monterey, it too was sold (as Lot 582) in Part I of the Stevenson sale at the Anderson Galleries, New York, in 1914-15 (Anderson Auction Company 1914-15 [I]: 89-90). Fanny’s own description of the tapa in the dining room appears in her diary, 1 July 1891:

The furniture is now all in the house, the piano, the last piece, coming today. The dining room we have hung with a yellowish terracotta tapa, the window casings and door being a strong peacock blue, and the ceiling a sort of cream colour. (Stevenson 1956: 115)

Chiefly at the urging of his mother, who shared the expense, Stevenson greatly expanded this house by adding a new wing 18 months later. The English-born Australian painter Arthur Daplyn stayed there for the first time in May 1893 and the following year published a long article, “Robert Louis Stevenson: A Visit to His Home in Samoa”, in which he described the house, inside and out, and said of the new wing that “[on] the ground floor a small reception room has been decorated and arranged by Mrs Stevenson. The woodwork and ceiling are of a bluish green tint, harmonising with the walls which are covered with the native ‘tappa’ of terra cotta hue” (Daplyn 1894).

This is no doubt the room with the fireplace of which a photograph with the caption “Making Ava in the Smoking Room at Vailima” first appeared in Isobel Strong’s “Vailima Table-Talk: Robert Louis Stevenson in His Home Life” published after Stevenson’s death in Scribner’s Magazine. It shows Fanny Stevenson seated in a chair and a native girl seated on the floor beside her (Fig. 3) (Strong 1894: 537, Strong and Osbourne 1902: facing 156). The tapa that covers the walls is of Samoan design and when Vailima was restored during the 1990s it was reproduced by following the original pattern visible in the photograph (Fig. 4). According to the artisans who created the reproduction, it is a design from the Samoan island of Savai‘i that was popular in the late 19th century (Winegar 1995 and pers. comm.). Not surprisingly given its Samoan origin, the wall coverings bear no resemblance to the tapa in the Beinecke Library and in Monterey. A “special room at Vailima” dedicated to the display of the Beinecke tapa, or to any other tapa, simply never existed. Tapa were used as wall coverings in the sitting room of the house that was later known as Pineapple Cottage, and at Vailima both in the original dining room and in the reception or smoking room of the wing added later. Only the hiapo from Niue that was in Stevenson’s mother’s room seems to have had any special treatment or display, and this was by no means a public area. It is conceivable that the tapa of Tongan origin now in the Beinecke Library could be described as a “yellowish terracotta tapa” and was used for a time as a wall covering in the first dining room at Vailima. But “yellowish” may
Figure 3. Room in Stevenson’s house (Vailima) papered with Samoan tapa (Strong and Osbourne 1902: facing 156).

Figure 4. Room at Vailima as restored in 1994. The furnishings and decorations are not Stevenson’s own but are based on authentic items visible in contemporary photographs (Winegar 1995: 7).
refer to the colour of the cloth, the decorative pattern being in the familiar red-brown terra cotta colour characteristic of Samoan work. In any event, by the time of Daplyn’s visit in 1893 meals were taken in the so-called Great Hall and he says that the decorations then were furniture, paintings and sculpture, “walls, floor, and ceiling being built of a dark red wood polished”.

**SUPPOSED TRANSLATION OF NIUEAN TEXT**

It is in the light of all of this merely factual information—dates, places, *tapa* styles, photographs, descriptions—that I think we must evaluate the supposed translation of the text on the Monterey *hiapo* (Fig. 5), details of which also made their way into the descriptive label of the *tapa* in the Beinecke Library.

This so-called translation is the key element, the cornerstone, of the legends of acquisition that are now associated with both *tapa*, and it is known to us in three sources. The earliest and most inclusive is the note on the back of the photograph in the Beinecke collector files. According to this note, a translation was made, in November 1938, by a person no more completely identified than as the high chief Tagoilelagi, Columbia University. As recorded on the back of the photograph, this translation is: “The gift of remembrance to Robert Louis Stevenson on Aug 7, 1890 from all the high chiefs of Samoa as a friendship token.” The photograph itself has the number 190 in it, and my speculation (taking these two facts together) is that Mrs Walker, who according to a business card of hers at Monterey seems to have been a dealer or specialist in American pattern glass, may have been preparing a catalogue or inventory of her *tapa* collection at that time, and was directed to a Samoan at Columbia for help translating the text. A chiefly title Tagoilelagi is associated with the village of Vatia in the island of Tutuila, American Samoa. But no one of this name was associated officially with Columbia University on staff or as a student during 1938 (Wilk 2009). He might have been a visitor.

A second source is the collection ledger at Monterey, where in a summary of “donor’s notes” the identical translation is given but without a date or the translator’s name. In the same ledger is listed another item, a framed cutting from an article on Samoa by Charmian London published in November 1915. This consists of a reproduction of a commercial photograph of Mata‘afa and other Samoans, and on the back of the framed item is a note signed by Helen Sargent Hitchcock, Mrs Walker’s sister and the donor of the item: “These are the High Chiefs who wove the beautiful Tapa with their ‘Coats of Arms’. ” This idea—that it is “coats of arms” that are represented in the Monterey *hiapo* rather than, as is actually the case, botanical forms such as seeds and leaves—also appears in the annotation of the photograph in the Beinecke collector files. Possibly this detail too originated with the person whom Mrs Walker consulted at Columbia in 1938, or was worked out in collaboration.
Figure 5. Detail of the text on the Stevenson *tapa* in the Stevenson House Collection, Monterey State Historic Park, California.
But whatever was the origin of the idea, Mrs Walker herself is no doubt the ultimate source of the annotations of the photograph in the Beinecke collector files and of the magazine cutting in Monterey.

The third source is an advertisement in the *Antiquarian Bookman*, New York, 2 June 1951, where the Monterey hiapo is offered for sale and described, inaccurately as to dimensions and origin, as “A superior Samoan Tapa, 9 x 9 feet, beautifully decorated with coats-of-arms of all the high chieftains in black on white tapa cloth and inscribed to R.L.S.” (*Antiquarian Bookman* 1951). A fine mat from RLS’s bed was offered in the same advertisement, but neither item seems to have been sold. Both were among the items given to the Monterey History and Art Association five years later in memory of Mrs Walker.

My suggestion, given all this, is that the supposed translation done in 1938 is not a translation at all, only a well-meaning effort to make out what the text might say, assuming—and this is the key point—assuming that the occasion was, or was similar to, the feast celebrating the “Road of Gratitude” (or “Road of Loving Hearts”) that the Samoan chiefs did build for Stevenson in gratitude for his support of them when they were unjustly imprisoned. The date is wrong, of course, the road having been built in September 1894 and the feast held the following month, but the sentiment is much the same as appeared on the signboard erected by the chiefs themselves.

The affair of the road was well known, all the more so in that Stevenson died only a little less than two months later. Stevenson himself wrote it all up at the time, in a letter to Sidney Colvin, 6 October 1894, translating the chiefs’ inscription on the signboard as follows: “The Road of Gratitude. Considering the great love of Tusitala [‘Teller of tales’, Stevenson’s name among the Samoans] in loving care of us in our distress in the prison, we have therefore prepared a splendid gift. It shall never be muddy, it shall endure forever, this road that we have dug” (Letter 2789). Stevenson had his own speech in response translated into Samoan; it was published in English shortly after his death, first separately and then as an appendix in his published letters. The letter to Sidney Colvin was in every edition of Stevenson’s letters beginning with the *Vailima Letters* in 1895.

Another reason to think that the translation—and, with it, the details of occasion and dedication to which it supposedly refers—is concocted rather than accurate or correct is that hiapo-making died out in Niue towards the end of the 19th century. As a result, except for what seem to be year dates and personal and place names, the meaning of the text on Niuean hiapo is simply unknown today, even to native speakers. The most reasonable guess seems to be that these texts explain who made the hiapo, where, when, and possibly why. But even this is unknown. Since the person who was asked for the translation was Samoan, not Niuean, the possibility of him making
sense of the inscription is remote, even if the craft itself had not died out more than a generation earlier. The languages are related but they are not mutually intelligible and a Samoan would certainly not be acquainted with Niuean place-names. Faced with such a mystery, the options then would be to admit defeat or to come up with something that might fit the facts somehow. Mrs Walker herself might have been appealed to for guesses or suggestions.

The Stevenson association with the piece was known—a given—and in trying to discover the meaning of the text, the well-known sentiment of the Road of Gratitude was brought to mind. This was moved back four years, modified to make the chiefs’ gift the *tapa* rather than the road, and the occasion made the completion of the Stevensons’ first house in 1890—all of this to accommodate the appearance of 1890 in the text and to make the inscription consistent with the already-determined importance of the *tapa* itself. The so-called translation is what the text ought to have said, supposing that the also-imaginary events of the house and the chiefs and the presentation had, themselves, taken place, and in a manner similar to the real ceremony of the Road of Gratitude. No-one involved with the *tapa* then knew that the piece was in fact Niuean, not Samoan, that it almost certainly had been purchased, not presented, and that the supposed date of the presentation was six weeks earlier than the Stevensons’ return to Samoa in mid-September 1890. It was a plausible and good story, it had been obtained by consulting a supposed “expert”, and it stuck.

The history of the Tongan *tapa* in the Beinecke Library is harder to make out. As I have mentioned already, to whichever *tapa* it is applied, the idea that either *tapa* was a gift to Stevenson from the Samoan chiefs is untenable, and for very many reasons, not the least of which is that neither *tapa* is Samoan. That he personally gave the Tongan *tapa* now in the Beinecke Library to an unknown sea captain for some unknown favour seems equally far-fetched, if only due to its lack of corroboration or detail.

My own guess is that there probably is a Stevenson connection somewhere. When Fanny and Belle gave up Vailima in 1897, they sold or gave away locally in Samoa and later at home in California and elsewhere, a great many Stevenson-related possessions. Possibly the Beinecke *tapa* was one of them: itself a gift perhaps from Dr A.W. Mackay of Tonga on the occasion of his visit to Samoa in August 1894. A once-treasured possession, possibly displayed prominently at Vailima for a time, that when Stevenson died a few months later in December 1894 simply got lost or put in storage and was later sold or given away with no particular knowledge of its history or origin. Later generations of owners, each the more remote from whomever acquired it originally, simply embellished whatever tale they had been told, perhaps a tale that originally had said no more than that the *tapa* had been
obtained in Samoa and had once belonged to Robert Louis Stevenson. That it had hung in a special room at Vailima and was a gift by Stevenson to a sea captain for some special service is an embellishment of, but does not contradict, the original story.

In the same way, the idea that windows (if that is what they are) are among the design elements in the *tapa*, and that they appear because, until Stevenson built Vailima, the Samoan natives “had never seen a house with windows” is, of course, nonsense. Stevenson did not bring windows to Samoa. By the time he arrived on 7 December 1889, Samoa had been the site of active German plantation life for more than 20 years. There were missions, consulates, shops and churches—all of which had windows. But it is a plausible amateur embellishment not incompatible visually with what is there. It makes a good story and, still more important, it fits nicely with the idea that Stevenson was a great and positive (and civilising) influence in Samoa. The words themselves are simply a mystery, however, as none seems to be used in modern Tongan and none seems to have much relation to the design elements that they accompany.9

Finally, we have the note on the back of the photograph in the Beinecke collector files that Mrs Walker gave the *tapa* in the photograph (the *hiapo* from Niue now in Monterey, not the cloth from Tonga now on display) to Edwin J. Beinecke. I can only think that this is a mere error, possibly by Beinecke’s personal librarian Gertrude Hills, possibly reflecting an intention or plan that was never carried out. Or the gift may indeed have been given but returned in 1951, when Beinecke gave the bulk of his Stevenson collection to Yale. If this occurred, it may not be a coincidence that it was in 1951 that two pieces now in Monterey, including the *hiapo* from Niue, were offered for sale in the *Antiquarian Bookman*, however inexplicable it may seem that either Mrs Walker or Mr Beinecke would want to part with them.

INTER–CULTURAL DIALOGUES

Perhaps the most remarkable feature in the story of these *tapa* is the attaching to the Tongan *tapa* now in the Beinecke Library of the tale created originally about the *hiapo* from Niue now in Monterey—a tale that, as we have seen, is not supported by the facts and may simply have been invented in a well-meaning “translation” of the text in 1938. By the time that the Beinecke Library was ready to open, in 1963, the *hiapo* to which the story had originally been attached had already been in Monterey for almost a decade. Almost certainly it was never owned by Edwin J. Beinecke and possibly was never even seen by him except in the photograph now in his collector’s files. When the Tongan *tapa* that we know today became available through the good offices (and probably the personal friendships) of Fritz Beinecke, the story
may have been recalled or even found in the Beinecke collector files and was used in the library’s descriptive label on the mistaken assumption that the tapa in the photograph and the tapa coming to Yale were one and the same. If the Beinecke tapa had yet to arrive, or was not known to the writer of the label, the error of associating the text on the back of the photograph with that tapa would not have been apparent. Nor is there anything intrinsic to either tapa that disproves the story of its being a gift to Stevenson from the Samoan chiefs. That disproof requires other evidence—evidence which, too, was probably unknown to writer of the label. The tale was plausible, uplifting, and picturesque—just the kind of story that should go with such a piece. And so it stuck, validated again and again in the 50 years since then by the Library’s own label, and the telling and re-telling of the story by generations of Stevensonians, scholars and librarians.

This, I think, is the key to the popularity and the durability of the story: it is what ought to be true, given the value that we wish to attach to these tapa intrinsically and as memorials of Stevenson’s behaviour in the South Seas. The same desires support, or supported, the supposed translation in 1938 and the story of the sea captain that is associated with the Beinecke tapa. As Nicholas Thomas (1991), Tobias Sperlich (2006) and others have shown, by means of the stories that are told about them objects are made into symbols, witnesses to inter-cultural interactions of the sort that, in this instance, it pleases us to believe occurred—and that did occur—between Stevenson and the Samoan chiefs, between Stevenson and visiting Europeans, and among those who later became the owners and the keepers of these objects. To the Stevensons, as their own uses of them show, these and other tapa were purchases, souvenirs of their travels that were also useful and appropriate—and beautiful—interior decorations for their own household, and pleasant reminders of their friendship when sent to others such as Henry James. Sold at auction after Fanny Stevenson’s death, they became, at least, objects collectible as art, as the auction-house annotations “beautiful piece” and “beautiful specimen” perhaps remind us (Anderson Auction Company, 1914-15 [I]: 89, [II]: 18).

The hiapo now at Monterey is one of a collection of eight tapa from various locales put together by Mrs Walker, and given in her memory to the Stevenson House collection in Monterey, a family dimension and an instance of benefaction that is found in the history of the Beinecke tapa as well. The supposed translation in 1938 created an additional form of value. It made the Stevenson tapa a memorial of, indeed the central object in, a ceremonial expression of friendship, esteem and love crossing the inter-cultural divide between Polynesians and Europeans in the same way that the building of the Road of Gratitude did in reality in 1894. According to the story told about
it, the *tapa* in the Beinecke Library was likewise a ceremonial gift, initially from the Samoan chiefs to Stevenson and later from Stevenson to the sea captain and, in turn, from him to and among friends and then, crossing the divide from private to public or institutional, to Yale. The stories were created and embellished, and they have endured, because of the ways in which we like to think about these objects and the people with whom they have been associated: as part of a rich inter-cultural tapestry of nobility, high-mindedness, generosity, wealth and mutual respect.

What, then, should the descriptive label for the *tapa* in the Beinecke Library now say? What story should we now be telling, knowing so much more than was known before? I would suggest something like this:

Bark–cloth *tapa* (*ngatu*) from Tonga, late 19th century. Details unknown, but possibly a gift from an acquaintance in Tonga who visited Robert Louis Stevenson in Samoa in 1894 or a purchase made earlier. The style and decorative motifs are characteristically Tongan, although the meaning, purpose, and even the language of the lettering all remain unknown.

A second paragraph might open out the context:

*Tapa* purchased by Stevenson during his South Seas travels are in the Stevenson House Collection, Monterey State Historic Park, California; in the Australian Museum, Sydney; and no doubt in other public and private collections. One of the rooms at Vailima, Stevenson’s house in Samoa, was used as a reception and smoking room. It was papered in Samoan *tapa* (*siapo*) and has recently been restored to its original appearance using a photograph taken at the time.

Of the *tapa* in Monterey, we might now say:

Bark-cloth *tapa* (*hiapo*) from Niue, late 19th century. Almost certainly one of the three “tappa (native bark-cloths)” that Fanny Stevenson, in a diary entry of 28 April 1890, mentions that the trader at Niue (Savage Island) sold to them “at an exorbitant price” when they visited there during the cruise of the *Janet Nichol*. The intricate botanical designs and text are characteristic of a new style that emerged in Niue during the late 1880s and early 1890s. What the text says is not known, but it is probably a list of places and personal names referring to the maker, probably with the date that it was made, 1890.
True, the romance is mostly gone. There are no more grateful Samoan chiefs loyally honouring Tusitala, no more sea captains or dedicated rooms for display. But instead there is something better, a new excitement that comes from seeing these tapa, as it were, for the first time: as compelling, remote, and, to some degree, mysterious works of art, still alive with all of the fascination that sparked Robert Louis Stevenson’s interest in them more than a hundred years ago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authoritative current sources of information on Pacific islands tapa are Roger Neich and Mick Pendergrast, Pacific Tapa (1997), and John Pule and Nicholas Thomas, Hiapo: Past and Present in Niuean Barkcloth (2005). Both books are detailed and beautifully illustrated and produced, and as I am a literary scholar, not a tapa specialist, my debts to both books are all-pervasive. I am also grateful to Professors Neich and Thomas personally for their generosity and guidance throughout my quest, answering questions and offering their deeply well-informed opinions on both of these tapa. Professor Richard Dury was kind enough to verify the wording of the descriptive label on the tapa in the Beinecke Library. Kris Nelson Quist, State Parks Historian, gave me access to and helped with the photographing of the whole collection of tapa now in Monterey. James S. Winegar, President of the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum/Preservation Foundation, gave me details about the restoration of Vailima and was the first to suggest that the Beinecke tapa was actually from Tonga. Jocelyn K. Wilk, Public Services Archivist at Columbia University, looked into the details of Columbia staff and students for me, in hopes of finding the supposed translator of the text on the Niuean tapa.

NOTES

1. The auction catalogue description is as follows: “TAPA CLOTH BLANKET. Samoan Islands. Creamy white, with an elaborate design in black, consisting of three circles, one within the other, diameters, 3, 5, and 7 feet respectively; entirely covered, between and within circles with a floral spray and variegated pattern; one corner bearing inscription in the native language, with date, 1890. Size 7 by 7 feet. Beautiful piece” (Anderson Auction Company, 1914-15 [I]: 89).

2. “In the 1880s a striking new indigenous style [in Niue] suddenly appeared, developing and refining the patterns which had already appeared on tiputa [ponchos]. Contained within a rectangular or circular format, the patterns are very distinctive; abstract shapes and plant forms delicately drawn with fine black lines and usually set on a grid. The motifs are usually small, carefully arranged to fill planned spaces, and meticulously painted. Occasionally, naive naturalistic paintings of men or women in western dress appear. Small stars, leaves and
naturalistic representations of fish may be used to fill small gaps, and often personal names and place-names are painted on the border…. The texture of the cloth is also quite different from Samoan tapa, being thicker, stiffer, and felted together into a single sheet rather than pasted in the west Polynesian manner…. Apart from being so stiff, their large size and shape make them inappropriate for clothing, and the purpose for which they were made remains a mystery” (Neich and Pendergrast 1997: 69-70).

3. A photograph of the *hiapo* in the Australian Museum appears in Pule and Thomas 2005: 106. The *hiapo* is 220cm x 160cm and the design consists of eight rectangular groups made up of from two to five smaller rectangles, all decorated with intricate floral patterns. On the *hiapo* that hung in Stevenson’s mother’s room see my comments later in this essay and in note 5. The fire-damaged *hiapo*, present location unknown, is described as Part II, Lot 149 in the auction catalogue as follows: “TAPA CLOTH BLANKET. Samoan Islands. Light brown, with elaborate design in black, consisting of 20 rectangles with variegated pattern, floral spray, with checkered borders. Size 6 ft. 2 inch. by 7 ft. [188 cm x 231 cm]. This piece was in the fire which occurred on board the ‘Janet Nicoll,’ soon after leaving Sydney; three holes were burned in it” (Anderson Auction Company 1914-15 [II]: 18).

4. For a concise account of the visits of John LaFarge and Henry Adams see Ernest Mehew’s annotation of RLS’s letter to E.L. Burlingame, 4 November 1890, Letter 2269, and his introduction to section XXVI of the Yale Letters ([VII] 2-3). LaFarge and Adams arrived at Tutuila on 5 October 1890 and at Apia 8 October 1890. They took a house at Vaiala, where they stayed until late January 1891. A good selection from LaFarge’s paintings and recollections of the visit is in Yarnall (1998).

5. “TAPA CLOTH BLANKET. Samoan Islands. Creamy white, with an elaborately decorated geometrical design, consisting of two large circles and a checkered rectangular border, 4 inch. Wide. Diameter of circles, 6 ft. 2 inch. and 7 ft. respectively. In center a small circle, with motto ‘Soifau’ [i.e., ‘Soifua’], meaning ‘May you Live.’ The whole surface from center to border being covered with a floral, checkered and variegated [sic] pattern. Size of blanket 6 ft. 2 inch. by 7 ft. Beautiful specimen” (Anderson Auction Company, 1914-15 [I]: 89-90).

6. As reprinted in Strong and Osbourne 1902: facing 156, the caption is “The Smoking Room at Vailima”. The photograph was taken by the commercial photographer James Tattersall (1865-1951).

7. London (1915), describing hers and Jack London’s visit in 1908. The photo faces 417 and shows Mata‘afa, seated, a European or mixed-race man with a moustache, in Western clothes wearing a sash and a straw hat, standing behind his right shoulder and holding a fly-whisk (*fue*), the emblem of a talking chief, and nine or ten natives, without shirts, standing and seated, holding rifles. The printed caption in the magazine says that “many of the chiefs here pictured were friends and companions of the great Scottish author”. There is no mention, in the article or in the caption, of a *tapa*, with or without the chiefs’ “coats of arms”. In the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, an un-cropped version of this photograph (CLS
103,556) shows five more natives behind Mata‘afa, three more in front of him, and the whole of the *fale* that is behind them all. It is identified by the museum as “Samoan Group, ca. 1880’s”—before the Stevensons even arrived.

8. In response to my questions about the inscription, Nicholas Thomas commented: “With respect to the text, I can’t translate it, but your suspicion is basically correct—it’s certainly not equivalent to the so-called translation—but looks rather like a list of place/personal names which are what the texts on other hiapo mainly consist of. The first word is Hakupu which is the name of the village the hiapo (and others that are similar (cf. Neich and Pendergrast, p. 70) originate from” (Thomas, pers. comm. 2008).

9. The Beinecke *tapa* has three main design elements, each used several times, all seemingly made up of pictures of objects with words in capital letters below them. The pictures might be interpreted as windows (*SIOATAO*), a pillar (*MAKA SOLIA*), and a building that might be a church (*TUUOA*). Churchward (1959) glosses *sio* as ‘to look, look at, or see’; *ata* as ‘twilight, especially the morning twilight, early dawn’; *maka* as ‘stone’; *soli* as a transitive verb (-‘i, -a) meaning ‘to chip, chip a piece off’; *tu‘u* as ‘to stand’; *tu‘oua* as ‘a mat made by Samoans’. The English word window, in Tongan, is *matuapä*, pillar is *pou*, church is *fale lotu*. As can be seen, none of this takes us very far in interpreting the pictures or text on this *tapa*.

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