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Under the Tongan Ngatu

The aesthetic cloth. Its body a matrix of patterns, symmetry, designs, and culture. Every Tongan's tangible identity. Shying away beneath the mattress or the extra room of Koloa.

It is fitting that a ngatu is present at all stages of a Tongan's life. A cultural transmission gifted and honored by all. Folded within its synthetic wonders are rooms created for us to converse. To share. To fascinate. To connect. A physical manifestation of the bedtime stories of our people and history. Stories depicting only the visible symmetry which marks our uniqueness. Only.

As a Tongan, it lies before you at the centre of the family room. Listening to your family prayers, praises, and problems. It keeps your shadow company when walking down the hallway. Forever hanging with elegance. Yet constantly overlooked.

Dancing with you in a Tau'olunga, allowing you to gain admiration on the front, and listening to cries of ache within your hips and thighs. As we stride to the altar, it carries you with honor across the aisle. One day, it will follow you when your body no longer walks on land but is one with it. Hugging your bones. Hiding our problems.

Ngatu.

Always followed by a heightened sense of appreciation for the features on the surface, rather than what lies beneath. As Tongans, we implement this fine material in almost everything we do. In every step that our feet take us. It coexists within and without. Driving a focus on the past, reviving the history and connecting the people. The power it holds. The beauty it exemplifies. Allowing the connection to seem tangible...but only on the surface.

The recording of the passage of time on the ngatu does not seem to create an accurate frame of everything within the culture. Just as the hard labor which goes into making a ngatu does not receive much of the limelight compared to the end product. It's supple and fine texture serves as a second skin. An extension of us. Yet, it seems as there are two sides to every person. There are two sides to the ngatu.

The lingering motifs on its coconut skin cannot evade the voices of our children being tightly hushed. Another hidden bedtime story of a nation. Its symmetrical composition cannot deny rising statistics of mental health issues, which do not receive the privilege of being marked on brown cloth. Only on white sheets.

Its display in a warm light cannot overshadow the corruption behind our culture that spreads faster than gossip. The black ink markings mirror the black eyes of our leitis, whose cries for justice remain mute. Our truth won't grow on trees. It gathers up and hides under the ngatu. Sometimes, my voice seems to be nothing more than dust swept up under a ngatu.

But there are voices in this cloth. Echoing issues like patterns against the paper-skin which have been walked on. But it's ok if the Ngatu looks presentable. Right?

Koe kofu Masani, 'oku ne fakaha 'ae ngaahi kupesi 'iloa mo hono 'uhinga fakafu'ituitui, langanga moe teu 'o ha ngatu kae 'uma'a 'ae anga tuku-fakaholo 'o ho tau fonua. 'Oku ne tala mo fakaha 'a 'ete Tonga 'i ha fa'ahinga feitu'u pe 'oe kolope. 'I ha'ate fiema'u, 'oku te kumi 'ae koloa ni ki hono toka'anga 'a ia 'oku tata'o fakataha ia moe ngaahi koloa faka-Tonga 'o ha loto fale.

Koe koloa tu'upau 'oku faka'ilonga'i ma'u pe 'ihe ngaahi tu'unga kehekehe 'oe mo'ui 'ae tangata moe fefine Tonga. Ko ha me'a'ofa 'oku faka'apa'pa'i, tali loto fiefia pea manakoa 'e he Tonga kotoa pe. Ko hono fa'u 'oku hoko ia koe funga ke fai ai e fevahevahe'aki, ofofofo, fiefia pea moe fetaulaki. 'Oku ne tala 'ae hisitolia 'oe kakai moe fonua mei he ngaahi tukutuku laumea 'oku fai mei he kaliloa. Ko ono lau'olunga 'oku ne tohoaki'i e tokanga 'oe tokolahi ka 'oku puli ngofua 'ae ngaahi palopalema loloto 'oe nofo moe famili 'i hono uho.

Ki he Tonga, 'oku toka 'ae koloa ni 'ihe lotolotonga 'oe famili 'o ne fanongoa 'ae ngaahi lotu, hikisia 'o ha ngaue moe palopalema 'oe nofo. 'Oku tauhi ofi kiate koe 'i ho'o fononga. Pea 'oku kei 'iloa ai pe 'ene faka'ofa'ofa 'i ha'ane toka, kae taimi lahi 'oka fa'a mo'ungalao 'e he tokolahi. 'Oku ne kau 'ihe ma'alali 'i ha'o tau'olunga, pea 'oku ne tohoaki'i mai 'ae tokanga kiho fotunga pea 'oku ne mea'i lelei 'ae fakamamate 'a ho'o sino lolotonga e faiva. 'I he aho mali, koe ngatu ai pe 'oku ne fofola ho'o lue'anga kie 'olita. Ka 'iai ha mavae, koe koloa ni ai pe 'oku ne fakateunga ho sino 'o teuaki ai pe 'a ho'o fakamavae. Pea ne fufu 'a ho tau takitaha 'ilo loloto moe palopalema.

Ngatu.

'Oku fe'ao ma'u pe 'a hono mahu'inga mo fakafeta'ia 'ae ngaue 'o fakatefito 'i he faka'ofa'ofa 'oe lau'olunga kae 'ikai fai ha lave kihe laulalo mo hono ngaahi koloa fufu. 'Oku ha ma'u pe 'ae koloa ni 'i ha ouau fakafonua pe fakatu'apule'anga pea 'i ha ngaue 'oku tau fakahoko. 'Oku ongo'i ehe Tonga 'oku 'i hono loto 'ae 'uhinga mahu'inga 'oe koloa ni pea moe to'onga mo'ui 'oku ha sino ki tu'a. Koe koloa ni 'oku 'ikai hano tatau pea ta'efehu'ia 'a hono mahu'inga. 'Oku ne hokosi 'ae lolotonga kihe hisitolia 'oe kakai, moe Tonga 'oe kuokili. Koe ivi ia moe faka'ofa'ofa 'oku fakaha 'ehe koloa ni. 'Oku ne fakangofua 'ae fehokotaki kihe kuohili ke hoko ka 'oku ngata ma'u pe 'ae talanoa 'i hono lau'olunga.

'I he ngaahi ta moe 'au 'oe taimi, 'oku 'ikai malava ai e koloa ni ke ne kai tala mo fakaha ha 'imisi kakato 'o 'e tau faka-Tonga. Ko hono fakatata 'oku ha ia 'i hono fakamamafa 'ae vikia 'oe ngatu 'i he 'ene 'osi pea 'ikai fu'u fakamamafa'i 'ae koka'anga kuo lava. Koe natula moe naunau 'oe koloa ni 'oku hoko ia koe fakalahi 'oe tokotaha 'oku ne teunga'aki. 'Koe natula 'oe tangata 'oku ua ma'u pe 'a, pea hange pe koia, 'oku tapa ma'u pe 'e ua 'ae ngatu.

Ko e ngaahi kupesi 'oe feta'aki 'oku 'ikai ke ne lava 'o uesia 'ae le'o 'oe fanau 'oku longosi 'ihe anga 'oe nofo. Koe talanoa eni fufu mo 'ikai lave 'ilo kiai 'e he tokolahi. Ko hono ngaahi fa'u 'oku 'ikai ke ne faka'ikai'i 'ae tupu 'ihe ngaahi fika fekau'aki moe palopalema 'oe tu'unga faka'atamai 'ihe anga 'o'e nofo. Ko ono siteisitika 'oku ma'u pe ia kihe ngaahi pepa hinehina 'oe kautaha lalahi ka 'oku 'ikai

talanoa'i 'i hono fofola 'oe fala.

'Oku 'ikai lava 'e hono faka'ofa'ofa 'o kofukofu'i 'ae palopalema 'oe ta'e fai totonu 'aia 'oku lavea kotoa ai 'ae siasi, lotu moe fonua mei he 'ene mafola. Ko hono koka 'uli 'oku ne fakaha sino mai 'ae tangi 'a ha'a leiti ke tatau ka 'oku 'ikai ke si'i fakatokanga'i. Ko e mo'oni koia 'oe nofo 'oku 'ikai tupu mo ha ki tu'a ka 'oku tanaki pea fufu 'a hono 'ilo 'ihe laulalo 'oe ngatu. Ko hoku le'o 'oku 'ikai ke 'iai hano mahu'inga pea taimi lahi 'oku mole atu pe.

Koe koloa ni 'oku 'iai 'a e ngaahi le'o 'oku fufu 'i hono laulalo. Koe le'o 'oe ngaahi palopalema 'oku lolotonga mo'ua ai 'ae fonua. Koe ngaahi le'o oku takoto fakataha moe kupesi 'oe ngatu pea te moloki 'ikai lava ke 'ilo'i, fanongoa mo tokoni'i. Ka 'oku mahu'inga ange 'a 'ene ha matamata lelei ki tu'a, koia kooa?