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 conversate. 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 fakahā ‘ae ngaahi kupesi ‘iloa mo hono ‘ühinga fafafo’ituitui, langanga moe teu ʻo ha ngatu kae ‘uma’a ‘ae anga tuku-fakaholo ‘o ho tau fonua. ʻOke ne tala mo fakahā ‘a ‘ete Tonga ‘i ha faʻahinga feitu’u pe ʻoe kolope. ‘I haʻate fiema’a, ‘oku te kumi ‘ae koloa ni ki hono toka’anga ‘a ia ʻoku tata’o fakataha ia moe ngaahi koloa faka-Tonga ‘o ha loto fale.


Ngatu.

ʻOke feʻao ma’u pe ‘a hono mahu’inga mo fakafeta’ia ‘ae ngaue ‘o fakafetito ‘i he fakaʻofoʻofa ‘oe lauʻolunga kao ʻikai fai ha lave kihe laulalo mo hono ngaahi koloa fufu. ʻOke ha maʻu pe ‘ae koloa ni ‘i ha ouau fakafonua pe fakatu’apule’anga pea ‘i ha ngaue ʻoku tau fakahoko. ʻOke ongo‘i ehe Tonga ʻoku ‘i hono loto ‘ae ʻühinga mahu’inga ‘oe koloa ni pea moe toʻonga moʻui ʻoku ha sino ki tu’a. Koe koloa ni ʻoku ʻikai hano tatau pea taʻefehuaʻia ‘a hono mahu’inga. ʻOke ne hokosi ‘ae lolotonga kihe hisitolia ‘oe kakai, moe Tonga ‘oe kuokili. Koe ivi ia moe fakaʻafoʻofa ‘o fakahā ‘ehe koloa ni. ʻOke ne fakangofua ‘ae fehokotaki kihe kuohili ke hoko ka ‘oku ngata maʻu pe ‘ae talanoa ‘i hono lauʻolunga.

ʻI he ngaahi ta moe ‘au ‘oe taimi, ʻoku ʻikai malava ai e koloa ni ke ne kai tala mo fakahā ha ʻimisi kakato ʻo ‘e tau faka-Tonga. Ko hono fakatata ʻoku ha ia ʻi hono fakamamafa ‘ae vikia ‘oe ngatu ʻi he ʻene ‘osi pea ʻikai fuʻu fakamamafa’i ʻae koko’anga kuo lava. Koe natula moe naunau ‘oe koloa ni ʻoku hoko ia koe fakalahi ‘o tokotaha ʻoku ne teunga’aki. ʻKoe natula ‘oe tangata ʻoku ua maʻu pe ‘a, pea hange pe koia, ʻoku tapa maʻu pe ʻe ua ‘ae ngatu.

talanoa'i 'i hono fofola 'oe fala.


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 koaa?