

# THE ART OF AUTE

by Matahana Tikao Calman



Tapa cloth is made all across the Pacific, although it has many different names. Few people know that Māori once made tapa, too. They called it aute. Artist Nikau Hindin first heard about this when she was a student in Hawai'i. She wanted to know more.

Nikau (Ngāpuhi and Te Rarawa) is from Motukaraka in the far north. In 2013, she was living in Hawai'i, studying for a degree. She took a class in Hawaiian **kapa**. "Did you know that Māori once made this cloth?" her teacher asked. Nikau didn't know. She was surprised.

## FOLLOWING THE TRACES

In many Pacific countries, tapa making has a long tradition. Back in Aotearoa, Nikau found that little was known about our own history of making tapa. No pieces of the cloth remain, and there are few oral histories. All she could find, she says, "were traces about aute in our language, and some old stories".

Then Nikau made an important discovery: Auckland's museum had fifteen **patu aute**. The beaters, which are hundreds of years old, were found preserved in a swamp. They're the only physical evidence that Māori once made cloth. Nikau says the fifteen patu include some of the oldest bark-cloth beaters in the world.



Patu aute from the Auckland War Memorial Museum  
Tāmaki Paenga Hira

# TRADITION

Auckland museum's patu aute are unique. Some are thick, others thinner. One even has a pattern for putting texture on the cloth. Nikau says these differences provide useful clues about how the bark was processed. "They tell us there was no one way of making aute." (She was told by a kapa teacher in Hawai'i that there were seventeen different ways!) Nikau carefully studied each patu aute, then took the next obvious step. "You can't exactly buy patu aute in a shop," she says, "so I had to make my own."

Patu aute are made from hardwood. Nikau chose pōhutukawa, although she later worked with kauri, mānuka, and rimu. Like early Māori, she used a **toki** to cut her patu aute and pipi shells to shape the wood. Finally, she used **hōanga** to sand the beater down and shark teeth to form the grooves on the sides. Although this work "made my fingers numb for a week", Nikau says it was worth it to follow tradition. That first pōhutukawa beater is now her favourite.

## AUTE: WHAT WE KNOW

In te reo Māori, the word "aute" means both the aute plant and the cloth itself. The plant (which some people know as paper mulberry) is native to Asia, though it's also found in Europe, the United States, Africa, and the Pacific.

Aute was first brought to Aotearoa by our Polynesian ancestors over seven centuries ago. Like kūmara and taro,

it was a resource they didn't want to live without. However, the plant struggled to survive in New Zealand's colder, damp climate. It grew best in the Bay of Plenty and the East Coast, where it is warmer, although aute beaters have been found as far south as Taranaki. By the late 1700s, however, there were very few plants left.

An aute maker also needs something to beat their cloth on. For this, they use a specially shaped piece of wood called a kua (in **ke 'ōlelo Hawai'i**). Kua are hollow, which results in a drumming sound when the cloth is beaten, and like patu aute, they need to be strong. Nikau's kua is made from milo, a hardwood that's native to the Hawaiian Islands.



Women beating tapa in Tonga around 1900



Nikau harvests aute (paper mulberry)

We don't have a full list of the ways Māori used aute, but it includes kites (manu aute), clothing (especially loin cloths called maro aute), and rope. It's thought that only small pieces of aute cloth were ever made, and this was worn by rangatira. The aute plant was eventually replaced by flax as a source of fibre.

# LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

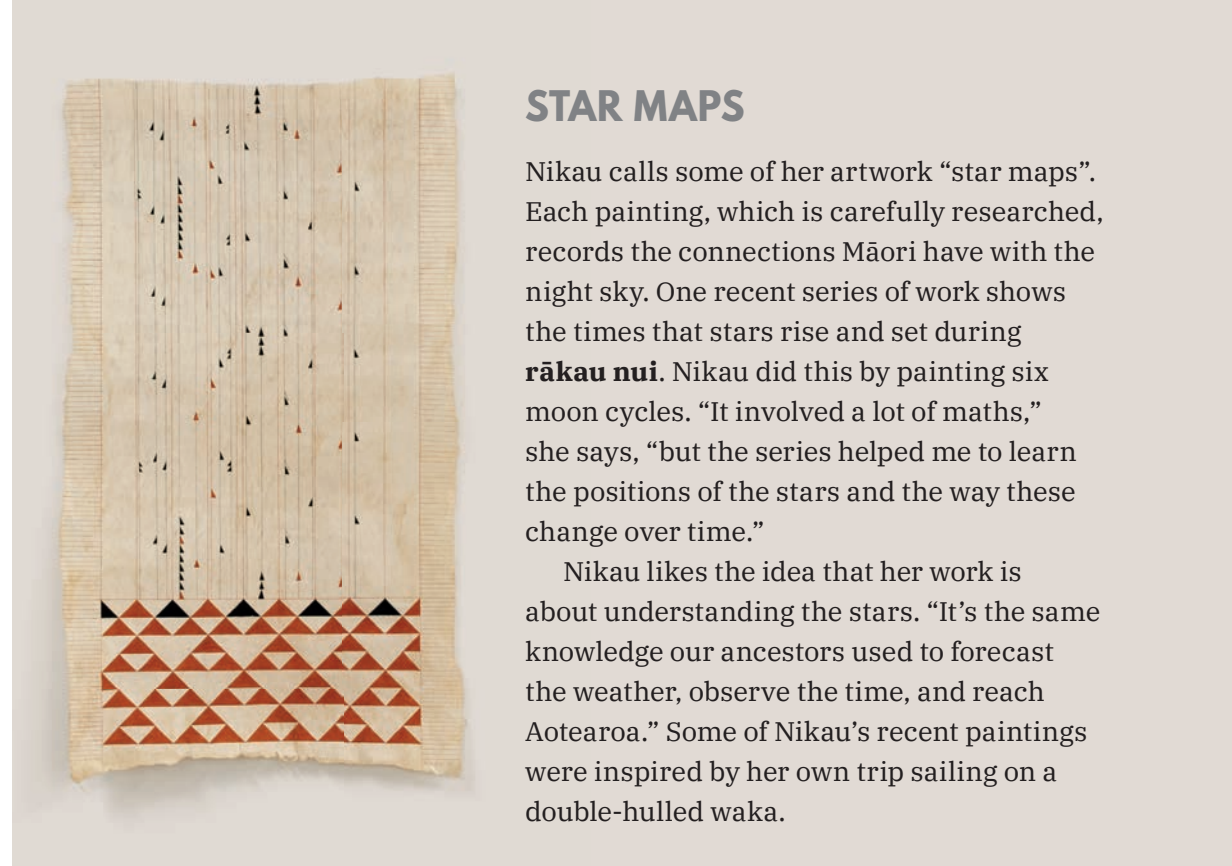
Nikau tried to teach herself how to beat aute through trial and error. She soon learnt it was delicate work and hard to get right. Because the cloth starts with the plant, Nikau decided she'd start there, too. She went back to Hawai'i, where master cloth maker Verna Takashima took Nikau under her wing. She began by showing Nikau how to connect with the aute plant. "In lots of ways," Nikau says, "it became my most important teacher."

Nikau learnt from many different teachers in Hawai'i, all of whom had their own ways of working. If it weren't for these people and their knowledge, Nikau says that learning how to make Māori aute would have been much more difficult.

# SIMPLE AND SUSTAINABLE

Making aute is very physical. The bark needs to be stripped from the tree, then scraped and beaten. But now that she has a good process, Nikau enjoys all the hard work. She also loves that most of the things she needs come from the natural world. "I don't need very much. Just an airtight bucket, my wooden tools, earth pigment, and lots of dried aute."

Nikau's hand-made aute, and the artwork she creates from it, relies on what Papatūānuku provides. It's important that this connection is sustainable. Nikau asks herself questions: Where have the materials come from? Am I using the best source? She respects the life cycle of the aute plant and takes the time to find natural pigment to use for paint.



## STAR MAPS

Nikau calls some of her artwork "star maps". Each painting, which is carefully researched, records the connections Māori have with the night sky. One recent series of work shows the times that stars rise and set during **rākau nui**. Nikau did this by painting six moon cycles. "It involved a lot of maths," she says, "but the series helped me to learn the positions of the stars and the way these change over time."

Nikau likes the idea that her work is about understanding the stars. "It's the same knowledge our ancestors used to forecast the weather, observe the time, and reach Aotearoa." Some of Nikau's recent paintings were inspired by her own trip sailing on a double-hulled waka.





# CONNECTION

Nikau feels connected to her **tūpuna** when she does what they did: beating aute, speaking te reo Māori, using the night sky to read **tohu**. She wants to share this knowledge with others, especially the knowledge of making aute. “I want to show people the incredible resources available in our environment, if only we knew how to unlock them. Eventually, as our climate changes, we’ll rely more on the plants around us.”

Nikau likes to imagine big patches of aute, growing all around the North Island. She also likes to imagine a new generation of cloth makers using this aute. But she says that plants need time to grow and people need time to learn. In the meantime, Nikau plans to keep learning herself.



## GLOSSARY

**hōanga:** sandstone

**kapa:** the Hawaiian word for tapa cloth or aute

**ke ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i:** the Hawaiian language

**patu aute:** a beater used for flattening aute

**rākau nui:** the full moon

**tohu:** signs

**toki:** a sharp stone used for cutting (also called an adze)

**tūpuna:** ancestors



# The Art of Aute

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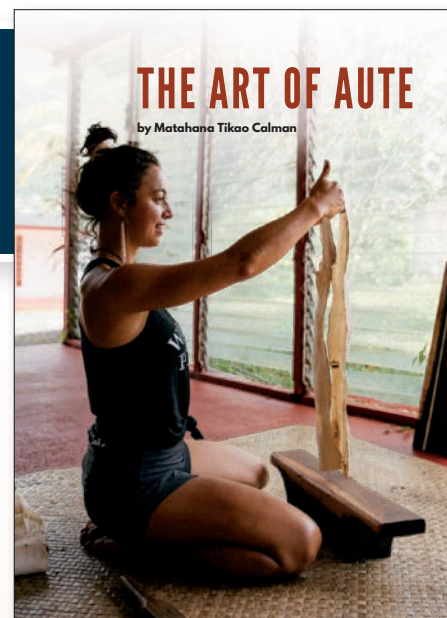
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