Tifaifai in Tahiti: Embracing Change

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Tifaifai are colorful appliqué and piecework textiles of French Polynesia which, like similar regional Pacific forms with different names, originated during the early- to mid-nineteenth century from the combined influence of indigenous barkcloth traditions and introduced Western quilts. Today, Polynesian women (and some men) continue to create these highly valued and culturally important textiles. Over the past thirty years, the tifaifai tradition has undergone efflorescence and significant transformation. This article begins with a history of tifaifai, demonstrating innovation as a guiding principle in the tradition’s inception and history. Next, underlying factors for change in tifaifai and their creation over the past thirty years are examined and a discussion of specific adaptations and innovations follows. In the conclusion, I argue that change is integral to the tifaifai tradition and welcomed so long as core values are retained. Research was conducted over a seven-month period in 2013, primarily on the island of Tahiti in the Society Islands.

Many people think of tradition as created in the past and carefully replicated in the present. While some traditions are passed on with few alterations, many are kept vital through alterations that reflect people’s changing circumstances, needs, and desires. In this article, I discuss change as integral within the tradition of tifaifai, the colorful appliqué and piecework (or patchwork) quilt-like textiles made in Tahiti and other islands of French Polynesia, located in the South Pacific (fig. 1).
Tifaifai creation and use constitute an ongoing tradition, originating from the combined influences of indigenous barkcloth and introduced Western fabric and Western quilts. As explained in my 1986 book, *Tifaifai and Quilts of Polynesia*, on many islands of eastern Polynesia, the syncretic form of piecework and appliquéd quilts and quilt-like textiles replaced barkcloth that was once used for ceremonial practices. Despite many similarities, the various regional traditions of eastern Polynesian quilts and quilt-like textiles, especially in the past, have exhibited differences in makers’ preferences for piecework or appliquéd styles, number of folds for contiguous appliquéd designs, individual motif sizes, and embroidered embellishment. Different names for the textiles are associated with different regions.2

My seven-month 2013 research of French Polynesian tifaifai, upon which this article is based, builds on my initial research, is informed by others’ recent studies in other regions, and is considerably enriched by scholarship specifically on French Polynesian tifaifai.3 In separate trips in 2010 and 2011, I met with members of Te Api Nui O Te Tifaifai, an organization founded in 1998 and the only association devoted exclusively to the “promotion, preservation and protection” of tifaifai as part of islanders’ cultural heritage. In order to learn about recent decades’ changes in tifaifai making and use, I
focused the 2013 research on Tahiti, the island in French Polynesia where a majority of the population lives. There, I observed tifaifai creation and use in a variety of contexts such as homes, flea markets, government buildings, and a stadium decorated for a religious holiday. I attended many events where tifaifai were sold or featured, including a Mahana Pae (Friday) event celebrating tifaifai, the 2013 Salon du Tifaifai, a ten-day event featuring twenty-seven tifaifai makers who competed for prizes and sold their work, and the Heiva Rima'i, a three-week traditional arts extravaganza that includes a tifaifai contest. Research included numerous conversations and interviews; archival research yielded information as well.

Tifaifai’s very origins are a testament to innovation since they were a response to profound changes accompanying Western contact. A documented tifaifai tradition reaches back at least 155 years, but tifaifai may have originated earlier in the 1800s or near the beginning of that century, when Protestant missionaries brought Western objects and ways of living to the islands.4

The seeds of innovation within tifaifai existed even before the textiles were created. Some of those seeds may be detected in the barkcloth (‘ahu) women made at the time when European explorers came to Tahiti in the 1760s and 1770s. Islanders presented Europeans with their labor-intensive and highly valued barkcloth, made from the inner bark of various trees through a beating and felting process. The felting of two or more layers presaged the layering in appliqué tifaifai, and the application of geometric and plant designs (some of which were copied from European cloth in the late eighteenth century) would later be echoed in geometric shapes in piecework tifaifai and plant motifs in appliqué tifaifai.5

Explorers and, later, traders and missionaries brought Western cloth to the islands. Islanders did not immediately abandon barkcloth in lieu of the manufactured fabric, despite the fact that it was appreciated for its durability, colors, and printed designs. With Western cloth, needles, and thread, indigenous women fashioned clothing and other domestic articles similar to those introduced by Christian missionaries. The Protestant missionaries from the London Missionary Society who arrived in Tahiti in 1797, and those Christian missionaries who joined their ranks in subsequent years, dressed in ways they wished islanders to emulate. Missionaries also considered needlework to be a productive means to deter “laziness” and instill industrious, Christian values.6
Quilts were likely among the articles of domesticity brought by missionaries to some islands. However, with one known exception, definitive dates and details of the earliest introduced quilts are facts seemingly lost to time. Island women began making their own versions with adaptive changes, most notably eliminating a batting layer and quilting, as warmer textiles were unsuitable to their climate.

A documentation of changes in the tifaifai tradition over its early period is extremely difficult; primary written sources referring to the textiles are scant and even photographic images from later periods are few. However, scholarship on tifaifai has uncovered some historical trends. There are more early written accounts that describe piecework tifaifai than appliqué tifaifai. There are also more early photographs of the piecework style. The likelihood of piecework being more widespread in the early tifaifai tradition can be argued on the basis of the availability of materials, as well as with the term tifaifai (often translated as “to patch repeatedly”). Over time, tifaifai became a generic term referring to both piecework, tifaifai pû (to assemble), and appliqué styles, tifaifai pâ’oti (scissors). Today, the English word “patchwork” is sometimes employed by people to refer to all kinds of tifaifai, although most tifaifai makers who use the term distinguish between patchwork (piecework) and appliqué styles.

The early appliqué style required two lengths of fabric sewn together in order to obtain sufficient width for a bedcovering. Consequently, it might have been more expensive to create a tifaifai pâ’oti than a tifaifai pû, if the latter were fashioned from remnants of fabric. Moreover, the piecework style could have fulfilled New England missionaries’ desires for islanders’ emulation of New England thrift and industriousness. Appliqué tifaifai, made by cutting a design from a square or rectangle of cloth (later a bed sheet) folded into fourths, then basting and sewing it to a white background cloth, may conceivably have appeared soon after the piecework style. One idea of appliqué origins is paper cutting, scherenschnitte, perhaps introduced by German sailors to Polynesians who transferred the technique to cloth. Some early album quilts and other appliqué motif quilts that missionaries may have taken to the islands had small appliqué designs; perhaps Polynesian women imagined them on a larger scale.

Whether considering early piecework or appliqué tifaifai, it seems unlikely that islanders were primarily motivated by norms of thrift. The prestige value of cloth (whether barkcloth or Western cloth) is a pan-
Polynesian phenomenon, strongly associated with women’s “kin work” in their families. New cloth could provide islanders with the strong solid colors used in tīfaifai pū which are described in travelers’ early accounts, and since appliqué style tīfaifai paired red, green or blue with white, new white fabric would have guaranteed a pristine look, wonderfully contrasted by a vibrantly colored new fabric. Both appliqué and piecework tīfaifai shared Polynesian aesthetics of strong color contrast, facilitated by the use of solid colors. Symmetry was also used in both types; design elements were repeated in the four quadrants of a tīfaifai.

Most importantly, tīfaifai fashioned from new cloth could reflect the prestige and wealth which tīfaifai have always communicated in their role as gifts. Today, most tīfaifai made by islanders continue to be given as gifts or sold to someone who will be giving the tīfaifai as a present.

Although Patrick O’Reilly’s work referred to some older tīfaifai pū designs that drew inspiration from French Second Empire (1850-1870) tapestry designs, and enumerated some tīfaifai pā‘oti designs of non-indigenous plants, he also asserted that 1950s tīfaifai of both genres exhibited personal adaptations and motifs inspired by the islands, a local style that clearly sets tīfaifai apart from Western fabric creations.

Within the tīfaifai tradition, innovation in piecework tīfaifai led to variations of Western piecework designs and names. For example, the American quilt pattern Drunkard’s Path was renamed Pā‘aro for the knife used to extract coconut meat, and hexagon patchwork designs became Pa‘a Honu (turtle’s carapace), or Honu (turtle). Color selection also reflected Polynesian aesthetics and sensibilities. Purple, red and orange might appear side by side.

Many piecework designs such as Feti‘a (stars), Pa‘apa‘a (crabs), and Pū (conch shell) celebrated island life, but other designs reflected islanders’ acquisition or appreciation of imported objects, stories, and plants, such as Mōri Tautau (chandeliers, used in churches) and Rōū (roses). Appliqué tīfaifai also featured nature motifs. Many flowers (sometimes depicted as garlands), leaves, and fruit were popular. Like the motifs of piecework style tīfaifai, appliqué tīfaifai also drew upon Western motifs such as crowns, peacocks, and eagles. Moemoea no Iosepha (Joseph’s Dream), a Bible-inspired design, reflected islanders’ embrace of Christianity.

As bedcovers, tīfaifai were not for everyday use; they adorned the house for special occasions and for guests’ arrivals. People gave tīfaifai to others to
celebrate a birth, a wedding, or other extraordinary event, or they bestowed a *tifaifai* on a person of importance.18 Today, *tifaifai* are still frequently wrapped around a notable person, such as a government official or someone who is honored for an outstanding accomplishment. *Tifaifai* were also used to decorate Christian gatherings on auspicious occasions; this, too, is an ongoing practice among some groups and has been extended to important gatherings of other kinds.

Since the varied indigenous uses of barkcloth—ranging from bedcovering, dividers in houses, clothing, and cloth for religious functions—were continued with imported cloth, it is not surprising that *tifaifai* replaced barkcloth made for special purposes.19 The prestige value of *tifaifai* as a replacement for barkcloth is even apparent in some early photographs, themselves items of prestige (fig. 2).

By transferring their collective work organization for making barkcloth to *tifaifai*, women fashioned another adaptation to extend a significant aspect of barkcloth tradition. Their communal work with barkcloth was easily transferred to piecework *tifaifai*, sections of which could be assigned among several women and later assembled. Accustomed as they were to working in kin and friendship groups, island women easily transmitted their work model to church-based groups.
While this paper contends that innovation and adaptation in creation and use have always been integral to the tifaifai tradition, the rapid and numerous changes of the past thirty years are unprecedented. It is the ever-creative, innovative, and adaptive aspects of the tradition that give tifaifai contemporary vitality. Though seemingly paradoxical, changes of the past three decades have also nurtured the preservation and perpetuation of older forms of tifaifai. The tradition plays an important role in the current discourse and actions related to cultural heritage.

**Economic Shifts and Their Impact on the Tifaifai Tradition**

The introduction of Western values and objects were among the elements precipitating profound changes in Tahiti. Early Western impacts led to both intended and unintended consequences, including population decimation through introduced diseases. Indigenous religious beliefs and practices were destroyed or abandoned in favor of Christianity. Indigenous clothing was replaced with Western style dress; indigenous dance was prohibited.

Despite its existence as a response to European monarchies, the Pōmare Regime was dissolved when France claimed Tahiti and other islands as a colony in 1880. About eighty years later, France began testing nuclear bombs in the region. Tahiti’s 1961 international airport accommodated the influx of materials and personnel. Transfers of capital, necessary to sustain the infrastructure erected in Tahiti, resulted in a huge influx of money from France.

Transformed from a primarily subsistence-based economy to one dependent upon money and wage labor, Tahiti expanded in population as people from other islands in French Polynesia arrived in search of jobs. Augmenting this growth was the influx of French military personnel, their families, and others connected to the Atomic Testing Program (1962–1992; 1995–1996). A denser population in Tahiti meant a denser population of artisans. With or without a part-time or full-time job, artisans could sell their work to people from France and tourists to supplement household earnings. As early as the 1970s, some women began part-time or full-time businesses of making machine-sewn appliqué style tifaifai for others. However, in that era, most tifaifai continued to be made by hand.
Two major changes that have occurred in the tifaifai tradition over the past three decades are the explosion in sales of appliqué tifaifai, with related changes in people’s approaches to making the textiles, and an enormous expansion of appliqué tifaifai variety in terms of sizes, shapes, colors and color combinations, designs and motifs. These changes largely reflect the economic shift of an island population increasingly affected by a cash economy and opportunities for selling tifaifai. The emphasis on appliqué-style or tifaifai pāʻoti stems from a combination of factors: a more individualized approach of making tifaifai than was associated with piecework tifaifai; a decreased emphasis on the amount of cloth within a tifaifai as indicative of its value; less time, in general, devoted to creating tifaifai among the general populace; and simple stylistic preference. Even in the 1970s, most tifaifai made in the Society Islands were appliqué style.

A cash economy and consumerism in Tahiti’s increasingly urbanized environment underlie both the creation and sale of tifaifai. Creators of tifaifai must purchase materials—cloth, scissors, pins, needles, and paper (if patterns are used rather than drawing directly on cloth), irons, sewing machines, and tables. The necessity to use cash for other kinds of goods and services, combined with more women contributing income to their households, has led to increased sales of tifaifai. Some single mothers, especially, have relied heavily on sales. Tifaifai consumers include French citizens from mainland France who live in the islands temporarily on work assignments, as well as those who are now permanent residents. Together, both groups purchase much of the tifaifai sold, although locals of other ethnicities and Polynesians also buy. French clientele preferences have induced some changes in tifaifai in terms of color combinations and motifs, as explained later.

In addition to consumerism, change is associated with the recovery and validation of indigenous cultural values and forms. The creation and use of tifaifai celebrates and builds on a unique cultural heritage, increasingly understood as vital to islanders’ identity, pride and well-being. The government plays a strong role in the ongoing sanctioning of tifaifai as a cultural practice and product. Government support for indigenous arts includes subsidizing artisan expositions and travel, sponsoring training and workshops, and supporting organizations and events that publicize and help artisans sell their work. With an estimated 14,000 artisans in French Polynesia, the arts play a crucial role in the economy and image of the country. Pan Pacific exchanges,
islanders' experiences abroad, tourism trends, and digital communication also figure in changes of the ongoing tradition.

In the 1980s, as more people moved from other islands to Tahiti in search of paid employment, the opportunity for creating tifaifai businesses increased, not only because employed island women had less time to make tifaifai for family members, but also in response to those French stationed in Tahiti for a few years who wanted to give tifaifai to friends and relatives or keep tifaifai as a remembrance of their stay. Some teachers and French military wives wanted to sew their own tifaifai and purchased basted tifaifai.

Today, as before, most tifaifai businesses are based out of families’ homes. Sometimes friends or neighbors are hired to help. Organized as artisanal associations, tifaifai businesses receive some government support. A handful of businesses, some of which have been in existence for twenty to thirty years, sell basted or machine-sewn tifaifai at Tahiti’s frequent fairs and expositions. In addition to having tifaifai on hand for customers, businesses also take orders to create tifaifai that incorporate motifs and colors specified by clientele. A photo album displaying finished tifaifai helps customers select a design; cloth swatches provide color choices.

Other important selling venues occur within the annual ten-day Salon du Tifaifai and the annual month-long Heiva Rima’i. Some tifaifai makers display their work in a Fare Artisanal (a craft building) run by one or more artisans’ associations. Still others sell tifaifai primarily to clientele outside of public arenas.

Depending on her interests and other responsibilities, a woman may make tifaifai on a full- or part-time basis. Many women who sell privately or with only occasional public appearances offer handsewn tifaifai, considered by most islanders and mainland French as the most desirable and most beautifully made tifaifai. A number of women who exhibit in the annual Salon du Tifaifai, for example, bring ten or more handsewn tifaifai to sell; in addition they bring many basted tifaifai and sometimes machine-sewn tifaifai. Women who sell tifaifai also typically have a constellation of family members aiding them with tasks such as basting, running errands, and communicating with clients. Several women who make and sell tifaifai have husbands who design the tifaifai.

Tifaifai sellers may form an association registered with the government, an advantageous arrangement that defrays expenses. Government support can be accessed to mitigate costs of traveling, as well as displaying, transporting
and insuring tifaifai. Since the rules for organizing an association specify a membership of as few as three people, an association arrangement preserves and accommodates the time-honored nature of collaborative work.

The upswing in tifaifai sales over the past thirty years has played a large role in sustaining tifaifai creation and has, at least for now, averted the gradual demise of tifaifai making that many women predicted in the 1970s when younger women sought salaried jobs and seemed uninterested in learning to create tifaifai (fig. 3). In the past, most women learned to make tifaifai from older female relatives. While this continues to be the most prevalent teaching method, the government has also facilitated transmitting tifaifai skills through the SEFI program, a program that prepares people for self or other employment.29 In addition, some women volunteer at schools to teach tifaifai skills, and during the annual school week devoted to cultural heritage, tifaifai creation is among the heritage arts honored, demonstrated, and taught.

A major component contributing to the increase in sales may be connected to greater tifaifai visibility. Historically, tifaifai were made primarily as gifts for family members’ weddings, birthdays, births, and sometimes deaths. As treasured objects, tifaifai were usually displayed only at the time of gift-giving, religious holidays or during a guest’s visit. More visibly, they were also presented to high government officials and to honored
"outsiders" such as missionaries and visiting dignitaries. An increased visibility of tifaifai in the recent era results from their presence at numerous events where tifaifai creation may be demonstrated and tifaifai sold. Media coverage of events with tifaifai, tifaifai contests, and internet postings and new books about tifaifai all add visibility.

Another factor contributing to increased awareness and visibility is associated with imported tifaifai from Asia. As purchases of tifaifai increased in the 1980s and 1990s, some merchants in Pape’ete began importing machine-sewn tifaifai. Available today in a half dozen shops in Pape’ete, the assembly-line tifaifai are much less expensive than most locally made tifaifai, owing to the lower cost of labor and less expensive materials. While tourists and mainland French sometimes purchase them, some Polynesians, seeking to cut expenses, do as well. There are also companies outside the islands that make bed sheets with imprinted tifaifai-like designs. These too are sometimes purchased by locals for more everyday use. The imprinted sheets may be substituted for tifaifai (or sometimes hung alongside tifaifai) to decorate public venues where textiles may be subject to damage or soiling.

As a response to imported tifaifai, there have been efforts to seek government commitment in preventing their entry. Local women argue that even with the tax imposed on such inexpensively made products, vendors selling imported tifaifai continue to have an unfair advantage. The cost of fabric in Tahiti is high and local makers need to be fairly compensated. Some local tifaifai businesses have challenged the imported tifaifai by creating less expensive machine-sewn tifaifai, simplifying motifs, and providing color combinations that appeal especially to mainland French tastes.

Tifaifai and Cultural Heritage

Uniquely Polynesian, tifaifai have always been valued as one of the foremost arts of French Polynesia and cherished for expressing love and honored recognition. It is not surprising, therefore, that over the past thirty years, tifaifai have played a role in the discourse of cultural heritage—expressed as fa`au’a tupuna in the Mā’ohi language and as le patrimoine in French.10

In the 1970s, a cultural revival movement emerged in French Polynesia, fueled by growing resentment of French policies vis-à-vis the overseas territory of French Polynesia and a complex political climate of debate surrounding
the pros and cons of autonomy and independence. New initiatives in the 1970s brought cultural heritage into clear public view. Among the most notable was a cultural center, an organization to conserve and promote the indigenous Mā’ohi language, the arrival of the outrigger Hokulea from Hawai’i, and a museum to preserve and promulgate knowledge of Polynesian heritage. In the 1980s many other cultural revival actions included the reintroduction of tattooing and fire-walking. Mā’ohi language classes were offered in schools, and the Service de l’Artisanat Traditionnel (Service of Traditional Artisans) was established.

One of the most significant changes for the tifaifai tradition was the creation of competitions centered on a theme, an approach that has elicited many appliqué designs deviating from the traditional folding and cutting method for contiguous appliqué designs and has led to an arrangement of motifs to create a picture or scene. Many competitions set a challenge for teams of two to four people to complete a basted tifaifai in a time-limited period. Offered as public spectacles, the contests provide both education and entertainment. Sometimes teams are allowed to decide their subject matter, even as other criteria are imposed. For other competitions, contestants create something for a specified theme. In 2010, for example, a tifaifai competition with the theme of Pape’ete’s waters honored the capital’s 120th anniversary, name ("water basket"), and stories associated with Pape’ete’s springs, pools and rivers (fig. 4).

Although tifaifai expositions and competitions existed before the 1980s, the month-long Heiva Rima’i (Heiva for Artisans), held in Pape’ete since

Figure 4: 
Bain de la Reine (The Queen’s Bath), a tableau-style basted tifaifai designed by Irene Atu and created by her nieces Emilienn Wohler, Sheila Wohler, Veronika Lafon and Bernadette Tavanae for the 120th Anniversary of Pape’ete, Tahiti. 2010. Courtesy of the Mairie de Pape’ete.
1987, provides artisans throughout French Polynesia with an expansive arena to display and sell their work. It is one of the most important venues for tifaifai competition and display. Prizes are sometimes given for artisans’ decorated booths that may include tifaifai. Tifaifai team competitions are also featured. In 2013, six teams created bastet tifaifai with a coconut theme; upon completion, judges heard teams’ explications of their designs.

The combination of higher visibility for tifaifai, buyers’ continued interest in purchasing tifaifai, and the display of imported tifaifai in shops set the stage in the late 1990s for a unique occurrence. In 1997 an exhibition entitled Un Siecle du Tifaifai (“A Century of Tifaifai”) proved a turning point for widespread recognition of tifaifai as part of island cultural heritage. Unlike former artisan shows that solely featured contemporary tifaifai, the 1997 exhibition also presented many old tifaifai of both the appliqué and piecwork styles, including one dating to 1896. Soon after the exposition, Tifaifai, The Tahitian Patchwork was published with explanations in French, English and Japanese. Recognition and cultivation of varied populations’ interest in tifaifai was apparent, not only in the languages used, but also in listing contacts for buying tifaifai.

Drawing upon the momentum generated from the 1997 exposition and catalog, a new organization dedicated solely to tifaifai emerged in 1997–1998. Te Api Nui O Te Tifaifai took as its mission the role of “promoting, preserving and protecting” tifaifai, thus furthering a recognition of the textiles as part of islanders’ cultural heritage. The organization was especially interested in undermining the increasing influx of imported, machine-sewn tifaifai.

In 1998 Te Api Nui O Te Tifaifai organized their first annual exposition and contest for locally made tifaifai in the Salon du Tifaifai. To be included in the Salon, an entrant must submit a handsewn tifaifai conforming to a given year’s theme. With one year’s exception, the themes have elicited appliqué-style tifaifai (tifaifai pā’oti). Every year, almost all of the other tifaifai that participants bring to the exposition to sell have also been tifaifai pā’oti.

Over the past fifteen years, the Salon has increased public awareness, generated much media coverage and political support, and provided a venue for anyone from anywhere in French Polynesia to show and sell tifaifai. Most participants live on Tahiti. Only two men have participated in the history of the Salon, while typically, twenty to thirty women participate. Pape’ete’s town hall has always hosted the ten-day exposition, a strong statement of political support and significance.
Every year, cash prizes are given to five outstanding themed *tifaifai*, selected by a jury. The quality and beauty of the work are judged, as is originality (except in years when reproductions of older-style *tifaifai* are elicited). Among the most important criteria for competition is that the *tifaifai* clearly address the year’s theme, be handsewn, made from cotton cloth, and exhibit specified stitching methods. Most past themes of the Salon have emphasized the islands’ environment, thus reflecting a long-held emphasis of depicting beloved aspects of the islands. Past themes have honored the pandanus plant, valleys, island birds, fragrant flowers, and the riches of the sea. Other themes have referenced the past. The theme for the inaugural year, for example, was Gauguin. In 2011, the theme “*Tifaifai* of Yesteryear” required a reproduction of a *tifaifai* with motifs of fans, crowns or chandeliers (or some combination thereof).

Entry to the Salon allows participants to sell their themed *tifaifai*, as well as any number of other *tifaifai* (of any motifs) they wish to bring. Typically, participants bring both completed handsewn (and/or machine sewn) *tifaifai* to sell, as well as a number of basted *tifaifai* that customers can purchase at lower prices and complete themselves. Machine-sewn *tifaifai* are also allowed. Prices vary by the size and type of *tifaifai* (e.g., king-size *tifaifai* and small *tifaifai* for babies) and the complexity of designs. A full-size, completed *tifaifai* may be priced anywhere from $800 to $2,000; basted-only *tifaifai* are less expensive.

Through its rules and high visibility, *Te Api Nui O Te Tifaifai* plays a strong role in defining the contemporary *tifaifai* tradition. The organization also seeks to honor the past and provide for the future. Each year, the organization purchases one of the thematic *tifaifai* for their “patrimoine” or heritage collection. One or more of these exceptional *tifaifai* may be displayed at special occasions.

Although decorating a meeting place with *tifaifai* to honor guests and provide an ambiance of Polynesian culture is not new, fresh contexts for *tifaifai* displayed as symbols of cultural heritage have emerged. In 2013, for example, *tifaifai* were hung in a hall where discussions centered on projected jobs attached to a new prison facility (fig. 5). *Tifaifai* hang in some of the reception rooms in the residence of the French High Commissioner in Pape’ete, as well as in the University of South Pacific’s library. Cultural pride is also expressed when *tifaifai* figure on the international stage. A number of celebrated *tifaifai* makers have exhibited in various countries, and a few *tifaifai* have been acquired by museums around the world.\(^{11}\)
Tourism is yet another context for promoting tifaifai as part of islanders’ cultural heritage. Some pensions feature tifaifai on beds (although some bedcovers are of the imported variety), or hang tifaifai to create a Polynesian atmosphere. In-flight publications have showcased tifaifai, and Tahiti Tourisme includes a few photos of tifaifai on their international web sites. However, tourists are equally likely to learn about tifaifai through reading other travelers’ blogs or looking at friends’ photos on Facebook. The most notable use of tifaifai in tourism is one that clearly demonstrates an innovative use of tifaifai, borrowing from the historical local practice of wrapping a tifaifai around a marrying couple to symbolize their unity and bonds with family members who bestow the tifaifai. Beginning in the mid-1980s, tourists could purchase a “traditional” Tahitian wedding that could include the couple wrapped in a tifaifai (fig. 6).

Changes in Tifaifai

With some exceptions, the changes in tifaifai forms, motifs, and designs over the past thirty years seem to be an intertwined combination of responses to both increased sales of tifaifai and the conscious embrace of tifaifai as part of a cherished cultural heritage. As the early history of tifaifai demonstrates, an attitude of innovation and creative adaptation prevailed.
A long-held ethical principle that one should not copy another's *tifaifai* without permission is embedded in the belief that change is positive. Even if granted permission to use another’s design, it has always been customary to make it one’s own by modifying some aspect(s) either through a change in color scheme, motif rendition, scale of design, or some combination of diverse elements. This widely held opinion is one reason invoked for why patterns are not sold. Within families, some designs have been preserved by passing down *tifaifai* as heirloom gifts or copying an elder female relative’s designs. However, given the general decline of *tifaifai* making among younger generations who are not selling *tifaifai* and the overriding emphasis on innovation and creativity, many older designs have all but disappeared.

*Te Api Nui O Te Tifaifai* encourages reproduction of older designs in their recently instituted “every other year strategy” of thematically emphasizing past *tifaifai* traditions. However, *tifaifai* makers have always creatively incorporated what they perceived as desirable: for appliqué *tifaifai*, bed sheets replaced cloth that had to be sewn together, and, for both types of *tifaifai*, makers drew from an increasing palette of colors and better quality fabric. Even the reproduction *tifaifai* displayed at the Salon du *Tifaifai* do not have lengths of fabric sewn together as was necessary in the past; nor is fabric from a former era sought.
Over the past thirty years, there has been a continued predominance of the appliqué style of *tifaifai*, a trend which seems to have been established by the 1950s, but perhaps even earlier. However, there are *tifaifai* now that combine piecework (patchwork) with appliqué designs in what is sometimes referred to as “mosaic” (fig. 7). In this style, a small appliqué design is centered within a square or rectangle of cloth that is joined to other such geometric pieces containing small appliqué motifs. A variation is a pieced *tifaifai* made from squares or rectangles of fabric with printed “island-style” designs, sometimes alternating with solid color pieces.

Another trend has been the enormous increase in appliqué designs with a few or many separate motifs, often arranged in a manner reminiscent of the four-part appliqué design cut from a single piece of cloth (fig. 8). While *tifaifai* of this style were made as early as the 1960s (and perhaps earlier), they were far less popular than appliquéd contiguous designs made from cloth folded in fourths. Today, the separate motifs are often cut from a variety of colors, a strong deviation from the older style of appliqué *tifaifai* that employed one color for the design layer overlaying a contrasting background cloth color. In some cases the individual motifs and spectrum of colors are employed for more realistic depiction of particular kinds of
flowers, fish, and fruit. Embroidery, rare on older appliqué tīfaifai, is now sometimes used to embellish motifs.

The creation of a design that emerges from behind the top layer of fabric existed before the 1980s, but has become more popular. By cutting away cloth to reveal a flower, leaves, or a butterfly, for example, a tīfaifai maker creates a kind of reverse appliqué design. Some tīfaifai incorporate both positive and negative appliqué designs. A few have fabric of a color that contrasts with both the top and bottom layers, which is inserted under areas cut away.

Almost all appliqué tīfaifai that adhere to a symmetrical principle of cutting designs in fourths or arranging motifs in quadrants incorporate a border design. Sometimes the border is contiguous with the central design. In other tīfaifai it may be a separate element, sometimes very simple, but in other cases very elaborate, with reflected or similar motifs in the central design. Although there are appliqué tīfaifai from the 1950s and 1960s with simple borders, borders are rare on older tīfaifai, a fact that can be attributed to the availability of cloth of lesser widths.

In the past three decades, partially owing to non-islander buyers’ preferences for iconic symbols of the Pacific, there has been an increase in the depiction of animals and birds created as single motifs, as well as in symmetrical, contiguous designs. (In the past, many tīfaifai makers
avoided birds, regarded as bad luck on *tifai*fa'i. Mermaid and tiki motifs are also avoided by some people.) Women identify whales, sharks, rays, and other fish as appropriate for *tifai*fa'i for males (along with the colors red, blue, green and brown). Dolphins are sometimes made with females in mind, although marine life seems to be considered by many *tifai*fa'i makers as more appropriate for males since the realm of marine resources is strongly associated with men. Some *tifai*fa'i makers create small *tifai*fa'i for babies and children, using a single animal motif such as a rabbit, a cat, or a dog.

In 1997, a new kind of appliqué *tifai*fa'i design inspired by Marquesan carving patterns was introduced by a couple originally from the Marquesas Islands. Jean Teiki Tamarri created a *tifai*fa'i design based on patterns he used in carving wood and stone. Emma Tahiaheeta Tamarri cut and sewed the intricate design (fig. 9). Soon, other *tifai*fa'i makers created their own versions of *tifai*fa'i *nana'o*, a term meaning “sculpted *tifai*fa'i.” Tiki designs that draw inspiration from ancient Polynesian carvings of human form (often with *nana'o* cuttings) have also appeared, and other *tifai*fa'i designs now incorporate motifs based on such Polynesian artifacts and symbols as *penu* (pounders), ‘umete (wooden bowls), and tattoo designs. These motifs and the *nana'o* style serve as confirmations of a cultural heritage that Polynesians and others value for their symbolic evocation of islander heritage.

Though rare, a few people who make *tifai*fa'i now experiment with designs created by folding cloth in eighths (similar to most Hawaiian appliqué quilt designs). Other less conventional approaches to designs also include part of a design made from abstract motifs or a combination of four-folded design with one or more motifs not made in that manner. The scale of motifs has

![Figure 9: A section of a *nana'o* *tifai*fa'i, created by Emma Tamarri. Photo by the author.](image-url)
also been subject to innovation; one large motif is favored for tifaifai that can be machine-sewn and sold less expensively.

As a handful of artists whose work is included in the book Le Tifaifai demonstrate, there is a younger generation of people who may be “on the cutting edge” with their experiments in designs. They break many conventions in their use and combination of various fabrics in the same work, in borrowing from other art styles, in using serigraphy, and in altering the use of design space. The work of these artists, which is not considered to be tifaifai by some people, is less visible to the public since it is typically not included in various expositions.38

A major widespread development in appliqué tifaifai is that of the “tableau” or “creation,” a picture or scene made with individual motifs. Tableaux tifaifai typically depict Polynesian life, environment or island history. Although there is at least one photograph of narrow tifaifai wall-hangings from the 1960s, the style was rare before the 1980s.19 As discussed previously, tifaifai competitions often center on a theme. A famous example of a tableau tifaifai is Aline Amaru’s 1991 The Pōmare Family, a representation of monarchs of the Society Islands from 1743 to 1891, now owned by the Queensland Art Gallery.40

In some cases, a tableau tifaifai will reflect the conventional four-part design of tifaifai made from a contiguous piece of cloth folded and cut in fourths. More often, bi-symmetrical pieces are created, but it is common for tifaifai makers to break the symmetry principle altogether. One highly innovative designer, Emilienne Wohler, creates asymmetrical designs that play with the symmetry principle by incorporating mirroring facets in the design (fig. 10). A tableau scene may also be combined with more conventional designs.

The larger choice of cloth colors available over the past thirty years in local fabric stores give tifaifai makers a much greater range of color combinations than formerly. The historical combinations of red, green or blue appliqué designs on a white background are still created, but now a color such as lime green may underlie a design layer in dark green. One fabric store carries fifty-three different colors for tifaifai makers. Striking color contrasts are possible. Subtle color differences such as the “tone on tone” approach are also used. The use of gray on white (or white on gray) and tan on white (or the reverse) are often preferred by Westerners.
Those who sell tifaifai often cater to a clientele that increasingly embraces varied uses for tifaifai-inspired fabrications: table and bed runners, tablecloths, and small tifaifai, alongside more conventional “bedcover” tifaifai. Pillowcases with tifaifai designs have long been made in abundance and continue to be sold.

**Embracing Change, Honoring the Past**

Catalysts of change in the tifaifai tradition of the past few decades stem largely from economic shifts in ways islanders work and live, political actions and their consequences, and factors of globalization, such as international commerce and consumerism. The revitalization of Polynesian culture is also a significant factor. Most people with whom I spoke about changes in the tifaifai tradition of the past thirty years were clear that tifaifai, like other island arts, are—and should be—evolving. Making something new provides an outlet for creativity. As the daughter of one famous tifaifai maker explained, evolution is important because it continues and reinforces the tradition. It also gives others the incentive and desire to create: “Son évolution reinforce et donne l’envie aux autres personnes.” She also explained that tifaifai of the past form a base from which new tifaifai can emerge. Many people, when describing the ongoing changes in the tifaifai tradition and projecting its future, use the French words for “invent,” “evolve,” and “reinforce.”
Some tifaifai artists assert that they always endeavor to create anew and will not, themselves, repeat the same tifaifai twice. Others will replicate something for a client, but in many instances, the agreement of what colors and elements are incorporated results in a new creation. Many tifaifai makers emphasize the personal quality of relationships between themselves and those who commission their work. They feel the input of the buyer is preferable since it makes the tifaifai more meaningful. Basted tifaifai are purchased not only to reduce expenses but also, according to tifaifai sellers, because many women wish to participate in their completion.

The competition between tifaifai makers in contests is an important impetus for change. At the same time, it extends contexts of Polynesian competition from the past. For example, tifaifai makers often say that designing a tableau-style tifaifai necessitates the action of “réfléchir”—to really think about what they would do. As one man stated, “C’est la tête qui fait travailler les motifs pour aujourd’hui” (“It is the head that must do the work of [creating] motifs today.”).43

The past few decades of the tifaifai tradition in Tahiti have encompassed many changes in tifaifai themselves, as well as in the organization of work accompanying the expansion of sales. In both public and private contexts, tifaifai increasingly figure as foregrounded symbols of Polynesian culture and heritage. The larger context of economic and social circumstances clarify a number of factors underlying the extensive changes in the tradition. This essay argues that the heightened consumerism of tifaifai and a growing emphasis on tifaifai as cultural heritage have powerfully shaped recent tifaifai creation and use.

Much innovation in tifaifai motifs and forms has sprung from the expanded demand for tifaifai by a Western clientele in and outside of the islands whose tastes in color combinations and uses for tifaifai have led to some adaptations. New forms of household items with tifaifai motifs have been added to the longtime creation of bedcovers and pillow cushions. Competitions and numerous expositions in the islands heighten the visibility of tifaifai and inspire new creations. Especially significant has been the emergence and sustained interest in the tifaifai that depict scenes.

Over the past three decades, some tifaifai makers have taken their work abroad for display. The acclamation they and their work receive has led to wider recognition of tifaifai both within and beyond the islands. The imported replicas of tifaifai, while detrimental to the sale of locally-made tifaifai, are,
ironically, a testament to the significance of *tifai* as an important cultural form. Although I have concentrated on changes in the *tifai* tradition over the past three decades, it is imperative to note, as expressed by many *tifai* makers, that changes have not negated the tradition's long-held purpose of expressing love, honoring others, and celebrating the islands and their history.

Today, *tifai* continue to be given as gifts that celebrate bonds among people and honor others. When one gives a handmade *tifai* to someone, especially if it has been made expressly for that person with particular choices regarding design and the colors used, it is thought to carry the deeply felt emotions of the giver to the recipient(s). As Jerry Biret explained, to give a handsewn *tifai* with such feeling is "*un beau geste*" (a beautiful gesture).\(^{44}\) A handmade, beautiful *tifai* is a "*produit de luxe comme un bijou*" (a deluxe product like a jewel), according to Béatrice Le Gayic, the President of Te Api Nui O Te Tifai.\(^{45}\)

A majority of *tifai* motifs and designs express appreciation for nature and embody islanders' stories and associations with the environment. Some motifs and designs celebrate the past, and some of the earliest innovations in *tifai* creation and aesthetics are still used, now regarded as historical tradition and conscientiously preserved for future generations. Some older ways of working collaboratively on *tifai* have been translated into arrangements of working with clientele as partners in the creative process. In many ways, therefore, the past continues into the present, even as changes in work patterns, designs, and display contexts are largely welcomed as necessary for the *tifai* tradition to evolve into its future.

**Acknowledgements**

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Notes and References

1 Tifaifai lack batting and quilting. Society Islands tifaifai share some features in common with other Polynesian quilt-like and quilt textiles. See Joyce D. Hammond, Tifaifai and Quilts of Polynesia (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986). Outside of French Polynesia, “Tahiti” is often used to refer to all the Society Islands.


4 In 1858 Cuzent wrote of piecework tifaifai decorating a Tahitian feast house. See M.G. Cuzent, Îles de la Société (Rochefort: Imprimerie chez Thèze 1860), 58–59. The earliest recorded date for a Western quilt made in French Polynesia is 1852. Louisa Barnes Pratt, an American Mormon missionary, wrote in her journal of assisting in the creation of a quilt with the Rising Sun design that was intended for the “queen” of Tubuai (Austral Islands). See Kate B. Carter, compiler, Heart Throbs of the West (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Vol. 8, 1947), 287. Western quilts may have been directly introduced to Tahiti by Christian missionaries, but it is also possible that Polynesians visiting from
other islands in the region or further away may have disseminated elements of Western quilting traditions. Certainly, borrowing inspiration from other islands' traditions played a role through the years.

5 For discussions on barkcloth creation, decoration, and presentation to Europeans, see Roger G. Rose, The Material Culture of Ancient Tahiti (Boston: Harvard University, 1972), and Simon Kooijman, Tapa in Polynesia (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1972).

6 Patrick O'Reilly, Tahiti au temps de la reine Pomaré (Pape'ete: Publication de La Société des Océanistes, 37 (1975), 46.

7 See note 4.

8 Cuzent's account of a decorated feast house includes a reference to what may have been an appliquéd tifaifai.

9 See photographs in Hammond, 36, 54, 77, 86, and Moorea d'Autrefois, Moorea i te Matamua (L'Association Te Ati Matahiapo Nui No Aimeho Nei, Editions Le Motu, 2006), 108. Figure 54 on page 77 in Hammond has a caption and a date of 1895 based on information from Patrick O'Reilly's Tahiti au Temps des Cartes Postales (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1975), 108, where O'Reilly identifies the photographer of the image as Eugène Hänni who (he explains on page 104) visited the islands for several months in 1895–1896. In de Chazeaux and Frémy, page 35, the same photograph with the two piecework tifaifai appears, but the date indicated is in the 1930s.

10 Tifaifai, when translated as "to patch repeatedly," originally may have expressed adjoining small pieces of cloth perhaps otherwise used to repair clothing. A better translation might be "to place patches repeatedly," since repairing something is not involved.

11 The earliest clear reference to an appliquéd tifaifai is in Constance F. Cumming, A Lady's Cruise in a French Man-of-War. 2 vols. (London: Blackwood and Sons, 1877), 2: 3–4.


13 Hammond, 43–45.


15 See de Chazeaux and Frémy, 33-39, for an overview compilation of early accounts and descriptions of tifaifai.

16 O'Reilly, 1959, 172–73. To my knowledge there are no extant tifaifai pū with the tapestry-like designs he mentions. However, the appliquéd designs of pineapple, peacocks, and roses were still extant in the 1970s and have now become part of the repertoire of older designs that contemporary tifaifai makers may draw upon as part of the tifaifai heritage.

17 For Ma'ohi names for piecework design blocks see Hammond, 38.


20 O’Reilly, 176, writes of a *tifaifai* competition held on Bora Bora in 1940 that required that all the *tifaifai* had to be new and that, as far as possible, they were to have original motifs. Among some of the motifs were a kerosene lamp, a compass, and a steering wheel.


22 According to de Chazeaux and Frémy (with whom I spoke on February 20, 2013), during the 1970s many women from France who accompanied their military husbands to French Polynesia bought basted *tifaifai* to sew themselves or asked for instructions on making *tifaifai*. Their interest should be factored into a general revitalization of interest in *tifaifai* among locals. Their color preferences (such as pastels) and color combination preferences (such as two tones of the same color) also became incorporated into a wider palette for *tifaifai*.

23 A cash economy is widespread, yet many islanders say that subsistence strategies are possible, even in Tahiti.

24 Most handsewn *tifaifai* have a machine-sewn border. Instead of working on the floor, most *tifaifai* makers today use a large table to prepare their work.

25 Indigenous islanders of French Polynesia are also French citizens.


27 In the late 1970s Blanche Belais was one of the few women who sold *tifaifai* in Pape’ete. She and members of her extended family still have a business of selling *tifaifai*, supplemented with other products.

28 As the cost of living increases and men have fewer job opportunities, they may assist their wives or female relatives in creating *tifaifai*.

29 SEFI stands for *Service de l’Emploi de la Formation et de l’Insertion Professionnelles* (Employment Service of the Formation and Placement of Professionals).

30 Following the precedent of Fare Va’ana (the indigenous language academy), I use *má’ohi* to refer to the indigenous language spoken in the Society Islands.

31 In 2013, two of Emma Tamarii’s *tifaifai* were among the local artisan products donated by President Gaston Floss to the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Aline Amaru’s *tifaifai* depicting the Pōmare family is owned by the Queensland Art Gallery. Elza Tahi and Emma Tamarii each have a *tifaifai* in the British Museum’s collections. Tamarii, Amaru and Virginie Biret are among the *tifaifai* makers who have exhibited their *tifaifai* in international expositions in such varied locations as the Cook Islands, Australia, Japan, Samoa, Belize, Canada, France, and the United States.
33 In 2013, many people, including Miri Vidal, Patricia Tsing, and Moeata Tapu, told me that while tifaifai are still preeminent wedding gifts, wrapping a wedding couple is something no longer practiced in the Society Islands. However, they were quick to point out, it is a custom still practiced in the Austral Islands and by people with Austral Island ancestry who live in Tahiti and other islands of French Polynesia.
34 Piecework has historically dominated in Runutu in the Austral Islands, but there are increasing numbers of appliqué tifaifai being created now.
35 These are not to be confused with the piecework imipiti of Runutu which are sometimes referred to as mosaic.
36 Some people do not consider this a tifaifai, whereas others do; patchwork is a term often applied to this style.
37 Two earlier tifaifai from the 1960s and 1970s with separate motifs appear in de Chazeaux and Frémy, 36 and 38. Another from 1978 appears as Plate 4 in Hammond 1986. Many Cook Islands tivaevae and some Hawaiian quilts had separate motifs; it seems likely that regional variations were sometimes borrowed.
38 See, for example, the work of Luc Taata, Laure Tomé, and Laurence Toutou in de Chazeaux and Frémy, 191–197, 203–205.
42 Remarks by Leilani Amaru, April 23, 2013.
43 Remarks by Rosiani Manutahi, April 19, 2013.
45 Remarks by Bénute Legayic, May 14, 2013.
"One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts": Expressions of Cross-Cultural Communication

Marin F. Hanson

This paper examines the phenomenon of "One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts" (OHGWQ), early 21st-century quilts made by American families to commemorate their adoption of a Chinese child. Since 1994, the single largest source for international adoptions in the United States has been the People’s Republic of China. Indeed, between 1999 and 2012, nearly 70,000 children of ethnic Chinese descent joined thousands of American families. During that same period, however, adoption from China, which began as a relatively quick and easy process, became progressively longer and more difficult. To cope with this lengthening, unpredictable, and sometimes emotionally turbulent process, parents began to make OHGWQ, which have roots in a northern Chinese patchwork practice and spread rapidly through the China adoption community via the Internet. This paper traces the development of the OHGWQ, examines the Chinese and American antecedents that served as sources for the new practice, and assesses the meanings that parents and others have assigned to the quilts and the process of making them. At the same time, the paper is intended to serve as a model for how we can use quilts as metaphors for socio-cultural phenomena—in particular, changing attitudes about how adopted children should be integrated into American society and how Americans view Chinese culture in general.

Quilt scholars can successfully pursue research on a number of strata. Single-quilt, quiltmaker, or artist studies provide a micro-level view of quiltmaking. Larger studies of single groups, whether geographical,
Plate 1. (text reference page 53)
_Bain de la Reine_ (The Queen’s Bath), a tableau-style basted _tifaifai_ designed by Irene Atu and created by her nieces Emilienne Wohler, Sheila Wohler, Veronika Lafon and Bernadette Tavanae for the 120th Anniversary of Pape’ete, Tahiti, 2010.

Courtesy of the Mairie de Pape’ete.
Plate 2. (text reference page 58)

A *tifafai* made by combining piecework (patchwork) and appliqué designs, created by Joseline Ly.

Photo by the author.
Plate 3. (text reference page 60)
A section of a *nana'a* tīfai, created by Emma Tamarii.
Photo by the author.
Plate 4. (text reference page 62)
Appliqué tifaifai with asymmetrical 'ape design, created by Emilienne Wohler.
Photo by the author.
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