

# Getting pounded in the Garden

by Jon Letman, Associate Editor

Prior to Western contact, for at least one thousand years, the Hawaiian people had been using the islands' unique flora and more than two dozen Polynesian-introduced "canoe plants" to provide everything from food, shelter, and clothing to medicine, tools, and dyes which made life easier, more comfortable, and more meaningful.

Highly stylized crafts such as weaving mats, sails, and baskets or making cordage, storage containers, and musical instruments are still commonly practiced throughout the Pacific region. However, in the last century, one very important Polynesian cultural use of plants had, until recently, virtually disappeared from Hawai'i. This was the practice of making kapa, or bark cloth from the pounded bark of the wauke tree.

Thought to be native to China and Japan, humans spread wauke (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) throughout Polynesia and Melanesia<sup>1</sup>. Like taro, breadfruit, coconut, and banana, wauke was introduced to Hawai'i as a canoe plant, but it is not as well-known or easily recognized. It is, however, highly prized as the preferred source for kapa in Hawai'i as well as Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa<sup>2</sup> where the most advanced kapa cultures evolved.

Maintained as a low- to medium-size tree for easy harvesting, wauke (also called paper mulberry) is a thin, shrubby tree with scabrous bright green three- or five-lobed leaves. As it grows taller, new buds are removed to keep the plant straight and branch-free. Wauke can be propagated by cuttings, but today is rarely found growing wild in Hawai'i as a result of competition with invasive plants, grazing

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1 Wauke is largely absent in Micronesia.

2 Kapa is called tapa in Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, and other parts of Polynesia.



▲ Cultural practitioner and teacher Sabra Kauka describes a piece of kapa crafted from wauke (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) growing in McBryde's Canoe Garden. The piece was dyed using natural materials — green from ma'ō (*Gossypium tomentosum*), yellow from 'ōlena (*Curcuma longa*), black from kukui (*Aleurites moluccana*) and wauke, and red from 'alaea (ocherous earth). Kauka fashioned a contemporary design depicting the alignment of the stars and moon at the time the piece was made. *Photo by author*



ungulates, floods, landslides, and the near-total abandonment of human cultivation.

Today however, kapa making is experiencing a revival under Hawaiian cultural practitioners and kumu (teachers) like Sabra Kauka who, since the mid-1990s, has cooperated with NTBG as it enhanced its collections of wauke in McBryde Garden, Limahuli Garden, and Kahanu Garden. Kauka, who teaches hula and Hawaiian cultural studies in public and private schools on Kaua‘i, has helped spread knowledge of kapa along with cuttings of the plant itself for cultivation on local campuses.

Kauka remembers a time in the recent past when there was virtually no wauke to be found.

“In 1993 or '94, I couldn't find the plant. Almost no one was cultivating it on Kaua‘i because it had fallen out of use,” Kauka recalls. NTBG biologist Ken Wood and noted naturalist, the late-David Boynton, had found forgotten wauke patches on expeditions into remote areas of the Waimea and Koai‘e Valleys.

On one hiking trip, Kauka and Boynton found the plant growing in an abandoned lo‘i (irrigated terrace). “It probably hadn’t been tended in over a hundred years, but there it was growing wild.”

As NTBG began to add new wauke to its canoe plants collection, it forged a working partnership with Kauka and other teachers and cultural practitioners, granting access to its Polynesian-introduced plants for cultural and educational uses. “And boy, have we made use of them,” Kauka says.

She says the role of kapa in Hawaiian culture is enormous, explaining it has traditionally accompanied Hawaiians literally from cradle to grave. In old Hawai‘i, at birth a child was swaddled in a kapa. Upon marriage, couples stood together cloaked under a single sheet of kapa, a symbol of two lives interwoven. Because wauke makes the softest of bark-based cloths (breadfruit is another commonly used plant), it was favored for making men’s malo (loincloth), the skirt-like pā‘ū worn by women for hula, and in blankets for the chiefly ali‘i class.

At the end of life, kapa serves as a burial shroud and for wrapping the iwi (bones) of the departed before placing them to rest in a woven lau hala (pandanus leaf) basket. Using kapa is considered one of the most respectful ways of handling ancestral remains.

Kauka started making kapa for her own use in hula, but has also played a major role in providing kapa for repatriation and reinterment of iwi from the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, which has since spurred the advance of kapa classes, retreats, and workshops.

In the past, the making of kapa brought together young and old when the pounding of large pieces was a multi-generational endeavor that took considerable time and support of the entire community.

Kauka says, “With kapa making, from the youngest to the eldest,



▲ Gathered together on a lau hala mat with traditional tools, children participating in the Keiki o ka 'Āina program at the McBryde Garden learn to strip and pound wauke.

▼ A hard wooden beater called i'e kuku is used to pound and soften the plant's bark. *Photos by author*



there's work to be done. We say alu like kākou, which means everyone work together.”

These days, because of the scarcity of wauke in Hawai'i and lack of skilled artisans, kapa use is usually limited to ceremonies and expressions of Hawaiian fine art displayed in museums as an example of the beauty and functionality of plant-based cultural practices.

When Kauka brings her hula hālau (hula school) or other students into the Garden to make kapa, they follow the time-honored traditions of gathering wauke stems, cutting them into lengths, and stripping the bark in long, single ribbons using limpet shell scrapers. The bark is then laid flat on a kua (hard wooden anvil) where it is pounded thoroughly with wooden beaters until soft.

“First you use the hohoa (round beater) to wake up the fibers,” Kauka says. “Then you use the i'e kuku (four-sided beater) after the first couple of poundings.” The dull, steady pounding of wood on wood can be heard reverberating once again as Kauka and her students make kapa.

“When I pound kapa in the garden I feel so fortunate because it's so quiet and beautiful and I can work without distraction,” she says.

Kauka is happy to see kapa undergoing a revival, due mainly she says, to access to the plants. “It is such a joy to once again find the plants, to cultivate them, and to forge partnerships with people, some of whom are ahead of me on this trail of learning.”

“My focus is cultural preservation,” Kauka says. “The preservation of that culture is dependent on the availability and viability of our plants.”

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