

SWISH

CARVED BELTS & FIBRE SKIRTS OF
PAPUA NEW GUINEA



Continuity & change

The things that we wear are one of the ways that we show other people who we are and where we fit in. They can be used to indicate that we hold a special office or have standing in our community, belong to a group, or how wealthy or well-connected we are, or to mark our passing from one time of life to another, such as entering into married life or becoming a widow or widower. In addition, the things that we make and wear reveal other, more personal qualities, such as artistry, skilfulness at craft, diligence at work, grace in movement, or an ability to carry oneself well and behave appropriately.

The fibre skirts and carved bark belts in Swish are from the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG). In this region fibre skirts are associated with women and girls, and bark belts with men and teenage boys. Today the people of Papua New Guinea wear Western styles for their day-to-day clothing, however in many areas traditional clothing, body decorations and dancing are used to mark special occasions. This can be at a local level, such as when the people of a village welcome a new pastor or other important person into their community, or on large public occasions, such as, the opening of an international sports competition or formally greeting a dignitary into the country, when traditional dance groups are engaged to perform.



Toaripi men & boys, Papuan Gulf, 1898, detail of N.34848.ACH2 MAA. Photographer thought to be Henry Moore Dauncey.

Traditional clothing and decorations worn today are both similar and different from those that can be seen in the historic photos in the exhibition. Life has changed for people in the places that are shown and much of what we can see in them are no longer made or practiced. Fibre skirts for dancing continue to be made but the kinds used as ordinary day clothes, for gardening or doing other work, aren't needed or wanted and therefore are not made anymore. Bark belts, on the other hand, have not been worn for a long time, perhaps since before the second world war.

Bark belts

The carved and painted belts in Swish show individual artistry and, viewed alongside historic photographs, are evocative of the people who wore them. Decorated belts were worn by men of standing in their community, undecorated bark belts could be worn by men who had passed through the necessary stages of initiation.

The government anthropologist Francis Edgar Williams (1893-1943), writing in 1939, observed that at around twelve years of age boys would enter seclusion with others of their age group for a period of six to twelve months. When they emerged, their old garments would be replaced by new ones that marked their new status, this included broad, stiff bark belts, worn tightly drawn around their waists. Earlier European observers also remarked upon the tight constriction and employed words such as 'dandy' to refer to the dressed-up young men they saw. Long-serving missionary Henry Moore Dauncey (1863-1931) wrote that:

"Many people are willing to be uncomfortable if they can be in the fashion, and the Papuan dandy is no exception. The tight-lacing he subjects himself to may be bearable while he is promenading about, but I have seen him suffer agony from it while trying to row in a boat, and yet all his suffering would not make him remove his belt."

Papuan Pictures, 1913, p.19

By the time Williams' wrote about it, the seclusion of boys was no longer practiced in the Papuan Gulf even though other ceremonies and practices continued. Part of the explanation for this, Williams suggests, is that young men, keen to earn income, were signing on for one or two-year labour contracts that took them to other districts. In fact, there were probably multiple factors for bark belts falling out of favour. What we do know is that people's circumstances and lifestyles changed rapidly between the 1870s and 1930s, and the belts ceased to have relevance for them.



Bark belts from the MAA collection.
Acquired by the MAA between the 1890s and 1918.

E 1908.276	E 1916.143.46
E 1916.143.261 B	1918.42 A
E 1916.143.47	Z 8309
E 1908.279	



*Membranes being peeled from immature sago leaflet.
Demonstrated by Are Kere. Pinu village, 2010.*

Fibre skirts

Fibre skirts are a traditional form of dress in many parts of Papua New Guinea and can be made of a great variety of materials. On the southeast coast the most frequently used plants are palms and pandanus species. Fibre from sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*) and nypa palm (*Nypa fruticans*) are derived from the immature leaves that grow in the centre of the trees' crown. In each case, the process is labour intensive however producing sago fibre is the most difficult as it involves peeling the membranes off each leaf. This must be done as soon as the immature leaves are harvested or it will be impossible to separate the membrane from the leaf. Sago palms are also covered in flexible but sharp spines up to 7.5cm long. It takes approximately 6 hours and the immature leaves of 25 trees to make enough sago fibre for a skirt. By contrast, it takes around 2.5 hours and the immature leaves of 20 trees to make a nypa fibre skirt. Pandanus is easier to process. The leaves are cut from the plant, the sharp edges trimmed off and the central rib is removed. The least mature leaves are boiled to make a lighter material that can be used for decorative elements on skirts and other objects.

Girl's skirt, Babaka village 1898

The historic pandanus and sago fibre skirt (Z 36632) in the case is one of three acquired by Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) in 1898 when visited the southeast coast of New Guinea as part of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait. He observed a dance performed by girls, to ensure good luck for the gardens, during a harvest festival. Haddon wrote a description of the dance, made sketches, collected the skirts and a bunch of thyme used to anoint the girls during the ceremony, and fellow expedition member Anthony Wilkin (1878-1901), took photographs.

Plant fibres can be difficult to take care of over a long period of time. The skirt was in poor condition and required

extensive conservation. This revealed that it is structurally intact but there are damaged and missing fibres in the body of the skirt. It also uncovered an unexpected detail. One pandanus strip at the back hangs below the hemline. A close inspection shows that the pandanus strip forms a loop, with each end stitched into the waistband and that a second strip has been tied to it. It is very unusual for the fibre to be looped in this way but Haddon's description suggests that it may have been used as an attachment point.



Haddon's sketch of Irupi dance, Babaka village P.2015.ACH1

Dancers at Babaka village festival, P.2010.ACH1

*(top right and right) Fibre skirt from Babaka village, 1898, Z 36632
Babaka village, P.2011.ACH1*

".....seven recently tattooed girls walked in a row up and down the broad open space in the village in front of the dubu*. The irupi or iropi dance was to be performed by them, and the pigs for the feast had been provided by their relatives. The girls walked in a somewhat stately manner, and gracefully swung a cord of about three feet in length, to which a small netted bag was attached; the other end of the cord was attached to the waist-belt of the petticoat at the back. They swung it with the right hand, causing it to make a graceful sweep behind the back round to the left side, where it was caught by the left hand. During this manoeuvre the whole body made a half turn. The action was then repeated with the left hand, the tassel being caught with the right hand. Up and down the little damsels walked, well pleased with themselves, and fully conscious that they were the centre of attraction; it was an elegant dance, and really quite charming. During the irupi dance some women sat on the dubu and beat the drums; this is the first time I have anywhere seen women beating drums, and it is only on this occasion that women may mount on a dubu. The movements of the girls were regulated by the staccato beats of the drums.



The same girls next ascended the dubu and stood in a row facing the village square. Two men then carried the pig, which was tied on to a pole, and stood in front of the girls. An old woman came and stood beside them; she was not ornamented in any way, whereas the girls wore numerous swagger petticoats; round their necks were as many necklaces and ornaments as they could muster, and some had wonderful shell head-dresses. The girls next took off all their petticoats and were anointed by the old woman, who dabbed each girl with a mixture of coconut oil and water by means of a bunch of wild thyme. As soon as the anointing was completed a drum was beaten, and the girls quickly dressed themselves and jumped down from the dubu. This ended one of the most interesting ceremonies it has been my lot to witness."

Haddon 1901, p.217-218

* A dubu is a ceremonial platform that is usually centrally located within a village.



Babagarubu village 2017

It is easy to think of traditional things, including clothing and decoration, as being fixed and unchanging. This perspective causes us to see change as a degradation or loss of 'authentic' forms. An alternative is to recognise that traditions are subject to continual alteration as people enact, embody, or re-present them over time. Viewed this way, the use of plastics instead of plant fibres or synthetic dyes instead of natural ones, in the production of fibre skirts actually shows the continuity of tradition. Fibre skirts are, after all, still made and they must still perform in the ways that are expected by those who will wear them. These days they are only worn for dancing on special occasions, so they should swish and move well, they should be eye-catching, the fibres should be bound to the waistband in a way that minimises tangles, the waistband must stay flat against the body and not twist up, the length of the skirt, its fullness and the amount of skin it reveals or conceals should be appropriate for the person and the context.

In Babagarubu village women and girls now wear red skirts with pandanus ribbons for dancing. The red component is mostly plastic, derived from plastic sacking, but sago fibres dyed in warm hues of red and purple are also used. In the exhibition is an example of a red skirt as well as one made only of pandanus. The pandanus skirt was made for Swish in May 2017 but it is an example of the clothing women and girls used to wear in Babagarubu village. Older women recall that they wore fibre skirts, of the pandanus kind, as day-to-day clothing in the village until the late 1950s.

References

Dauncey, H.M. 1913 Papuan pictures

Haddon, A.C. 1901 Head-hunters, black, white and brown

Williams, F.E. 1939 "Seclusion and age grouping in the Gulf of Papua", Oceania IX:4

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Dancers at Babagarubu village 2017

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Photograph by Kathleen Haddon, 1914,