



Tapa Cloth

Tapa cloth (or simply *tapa*) is a bark cloth made in the islands of the Pacific Ocean, primarily in Tonga, Samoa and Fiji. The cloth is known by a number of local names although the term *tapa* is international and understood throughout the islands that use the cloth. This particular piece was made in Fiji where the local name for it is *masi* meaning “mulberry” which is the tree it is made from.

Many hours and effort go into making Fijian *tapa* cloth. Made with traditional tools and the inner bark of the mulberry tree, the *tapa* cloth has been used throughout Fijian history. *Tapa* has many uses and was traditionally made for clothing and was the precursor to today's textiles.

Fijian *tapa* is generally of a heavier weight, stiffer and uses more natural starch pastes such as tapioca to reinforce its strength and durability. Fijian *tapa* is also distinctive for its finely detailed, skilfully stencilled geometric motifs (*masi kesa*) which are carefully printed from the outer edges of the cloth into the centre. At the centre there is usually a flower motif with a symbolic meaning.

The making of Fijian *tapa* has traditionally been the privilege of women, although some men practise this craft today. The preparation and beating of *masi* bark is also primarily a female occupation. Four mature trees are used to make one sheet of *tapa* measuring 183cm by 60cms. When a *masi* tree has been harvested and cut down, nature works its magic and the *masi* tree regenerates by sending out four new shoots the exact number of trees needed to create another *masi* cloth!

The women first use their teeth then a sharp knife to separate the layers of the bark. The outer layer is discarded and the soft pale core of the tree (the *lewena*) is revealed ready to be beaten into the fibrous *tapa*.

Beating the cloth takes hours of labour. Every woman has her own distinctive rhythm that she beats the bark to.

When the masi cloth has been beaten it is then felted. Several layers of bark, usually four, are beaten together to create the tapa. A single layer is very delicate, fine and soft and is used for the elegant turbans and garments worn by chiefs and priests as well as for soft scarves and sashes. When tapa is created with many layers like this one, it is thick, durable and very strong.

The dyes and pigments used for printing Fijian tapa all come from the natural environment. Brown dye comes from the inner bark of the mangrove tree. The bright terracotta layers of the tree are scraped away, soaked and then boiled, producing a thick rich brown dye. Soot mixed with juice of bark from the kesa tree is used to create black in the same way.

The patterns used for tapa stencils are beautifully intricate. Drawn from the natural environment and objects from Fijian every day life, each pattern has a special meaning. Though ancient in their origins Fijian tapa motifs have a very modern aesthetic and tell the stories of the Fijian people.

Not simply a decorative cloth, Fijian tapa is an important part of almost every aspect of traditional Fijian life. It is used to wrap a newborn baby collected from the hospital, and as bridal wear, while at the other end of the life cycle it decorates the room where the body lies before burial. It also covers the coffin and is spread over the grave.

