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The Traditional Method of Masi Making on the Island of Taveuni, Fiji

by
Daniel Roy Hildenbrandt

Masi or tapa is a traditional material which is made by the inhabitants of many of the islands in the Pacific region. This material is made from the bark of the young mulberry tree, which is soaked in water, beaten with mallets and formed into sheets. After drying, the Masi is decorated with traditional designs created by stencils, patterns and/or free-hand drawing. This documentary shows the process of Masi making as it is practiced on the "Garden Island" of Taveuni, Fiji. Each step is identified and explained in an English translation. The masi is made by the women of the Vanua of Bouma. (The Vanua is a group of landowners from 5 different villages within the region of Bouma.) Traditionally, masi was worn for ceremonial purposes by the Chiefs of the different villages. Masi is still used within the home as a blanket or mattress, and the accumulation of Masi is seen as a sign of wealth. Masi is also used for ceremonial purposes, and it is presented to dignitaries during special functions or celebrations. In the Kingdom of Tonga, the King often walks on masi carpets during official ceremonies. Masi is also used for funereal purposes.

As so often happens after contact with developed countries, this traditional "cloth" is being comoditized. Tapa is now being used for a variety of tourist souvenirs from postal cards to wall hangings. Some "entrepreneurs" are even applying traditional designs to stained cardboard creating quick, cheap, tapa imitations.

Daniel Hildenbrandt is a Professor in the Communication Department at the University of Guam. He has worked as a folklorist/documentary producer in many cultures primarily in the Pacific. This video tape on the making of masi was produced in 1990, when he was conducting documentary research as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Professor Hildenbrandt holds a Masters Degree in Anthropology/Folklore from the University of Texas at Austin, and a Masters in Public Visual Communication from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. His documentary "Zydeco Gumbo" was produced in 1987 at the University of Southwest Louisiana in Lafayette. "Zydeco Gumbo" is available through Rhapsody Films of New York.