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MICRONESIAN TEXTILES IN TRANSITION: THE WOVEN TOL OF KOSRAE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings on the major steps in the transition of the Kosraen tol from traditional clothing, to tourist souvenir, to the end of tol manufacture. An extensive study of the German, French, and English literature of the 19th and 20th centuries was done to piece together the history of the Kosraen tol.

The island of Kosrae, located in the Pacific (4-10° N latitude, 140-163° E longitude), is part of the Federated States of Micronesia. Since earliest European contact it has seen numerous changes in its traditional culture. One of its most beautiful and complex traditional crafts is the woven tol--the only clothing used on Kosrae prior to European contact (Figure 1). It is this tol that will be traced through various periods of European contact Kosrae.

An expanded presentation of tol construction can be found in Deegan and Cordy (1994). A short summary of tol technology, based on that research, is contained in this paragraph. Tol was woven by women. It was made of fiber split from banana leaves. Yarn was made by twisting 3 to 6 of these leaf fibers together and knotting them end-to-end. Traditional tol fabric ranged in size from 13-25 cm wide and 92-183 cm long. Tol was worn by women as a wrapping around their hips (Figure 2) while men wore tol as a loin cloth (Figure 2). In addition to natural tan these tol often contained black, red, and yellow dyed fibers. Tol were predominantly woven in warp-faced plain weave. The most complex were cross-banded by changing colored warps down their length (Figure 1). Each change in color required knotting-on of a different colored warp yarn; some complex tol may have contained as many as 4,000 knots (Riesenberg and Gayton 1952:359). A warping bench was used for measuring warp color changes. Warp yarns encircled the warping bench pegs in a ring warp until the desired tol width was reached. The finished ring warp was slid off the warping bench onto a backstrap loom. After weaving completion the ring warp was cut leaving fringe at both ends of the tol.

Four time periods of Kosraen history will be examined in this paper: 1) the European Contact Era, 1824-mid 1850s; 2) the Transition to the Christian Era,

mid 1850s-1869; 3) the Christian Era, 1869-1914; and 4) the Post-Tol Era, 1914-to present (Cordy 1993:11).

EUROPEAN CONTACT ERA: 1824-mid 1850s

The European Contact Era still represented traditional times for the Kosraen peoples. The Kosraen stratified society and traditional use of tol as clothing continued from the pre-European contact era. However, European culture was being introduced through whalers and missionaries and the Kosraen population was starting to drop due to disease.

A complex feudal system of land ownership existed in Kosrae with stratification of society into four levels: 1) the King, 2) the High Chiefs, 3) the Low Chiefs, and 4) the Commoners (Cordy 1993:12). The King and High Chiefs owned the land. They lived in leisure in immense stone-walled residential compounds in the ruling center located on the small island of Leluh, off the coast of Kosrae (Cordy 1993:12). Many Low Chiefs were land managers for their overlord chiefs and lived in the communities that they managed on Kosrae. Commoners worked the land and supplied food and other items, including tol, to those of higher social rank (Cordy 1993:12,45). The Kosraen population is estimated to have been 3,000 to 5,000 ca. 1824, prior to European contact (Cordy 1993:11).

Although used as clothing by all, colors of and designs on tol reflected status differences. Tol in black and red were worn by chiefs (Lesson 1839, II:502). Black tol apparently were worn by commoners (Lesson 1839, II:502). This may be the Menkof tol (Figure 1) described by Sarfert (1919:196) as being "...the everyday wear and work belt for both sexes."

Additionally, some tol had religious uses. Solid white tol were worn by some men, apparently "exclusively for ritual purposes" (Jones 1861:131; Sarfert 1919:195). This white tol has been called Nosrunsrup after a deity associated with thunder, lightning, and the turtle (Sarfert 1919:195).

First European contact with Kosrae occurred with French explorers in 1824. Kosrae soon became a favorite whaler leisure port from 1840 to 1860 (Cordy 1993:19). Cordy (1993:19) points out that "High chiefs supplied the crews with commoner women, food, wood, and water and in return received trade items (beads, cloth, tobacco, rum, and muskets)." European style clothing and fabric were viewed as status symbols and were acquired in small amounts in the 1840s and in increasing amounts in the 1850s by higher ranking Kosraens as gifts and through trade. Mention is made of the Kosraen King and High Chiefs wearing European shirts, such as red or checked shirts, with their tol (Jones 1861:123; Macy 1877:239; Haley 1948:169). High ranking women were variously described in "...a short small cotton cloth gown" (Gulick 1852) and as wearing a striped blouse with tol (Graviere 1854:297). Commoners may

have received some European clothing, such as shirts, as payment for special work for the Higher Chiefs and the King (Cordy 1993:45,87).

Introduced diseases caused death and sterility among the Kosraens during this period. The 1824 pre-contact population of 3,000 to 5,000, rapidly dropped to about 1,100 by 1855 (Cordy 1993:31).

In 1852 the first missionaries arrived in Kosrae, American Protestant Congregationalists. As was mentioned by Cordy (1993:25) "The whalers, population declines, and the arrival of the mission are not entirely unrelated. Whalers inadvertently brought the diseases that decimated the population, and their sexual and drinking habits brought the mission to save the islanders from sin."

TRANSITION TO THE CHRISTIAN ERA: mid 1850s-1869

The Transition to the Christian Era saw the end of whaling ship visits to Kosrae, a continued drop in population from disease, and an increase in the spread of Christianity on Kosrae with a change to European style clothing.

When the whaling era ended, in the early 1860s, Kosrae had fewer outside European-American visitors (Cordy 1993:20-21). However, diseases continued to reduce the population, to about 600 Kosraens by 1862 (Cordy 1993:90). This drop in population led to the decline of the traditional political structure on Kosrae.

Traditional Kosraen culture began to be influenced more by missionaries and other European-Americans during this period. By the 1860s-1870s European style clothing was adopted. Some men still wore tol as an undergarment and for work (Finsch 1900:27; Lewis 1949). Women adopted the full-length European style overdress as outerwear (Figure 3). It is possible that Kosraen women still wore their tol as underclothing. The women of Truk (also in Micronesia) wore their traditional dress beneath their European style outerwear as described by Matsumura in 1915 (1918:39) "Many of the women of Truk... who take pride in European style, wear fabric of their own weaving... as loin-cloth..."

Full-length European style outerwear for women required more fabric than the traditional Kosraen tol. With the complex warp-knotting of older style tol it would have been difficult to weave fast enough and in large enough quantities to satisfy the new clothing style needs.

CHRISTIAN ERA: 1869-1914

During the Christian Era, a theocratic democracy took the place of the traditional hereditary chief system on Kosrae. Toward the end of this period

early colonial rule appeared. It is during the Christian Era that a new use for tol developed.

As the population continued to drop, to about 200 by 1880 (Cordy 1993:90), the traditional stratified society of Kosrae could not be maintained. As Cordy states (1993:80) "Many chiefly families died out and titles fell vacant; the number of titleholders decreasing to seven by 1869." By 1879 the traditional political system was abandoned.

Due to the rapid drop in population on Kosrae, there may also have been a loss of knowledge of tol weaving patterns. Kramer-Bannow (1919:177) found that the Kosraen women "...have the [tol] pattern in their heads, and occasionally also follow a little old tattered swatch which they keep in the small basket; less frequently they invent something new. Thus they seem to be traditional, heirloom patterns which have their own fixed names." Loss of these weavers, with possible unrecorded tol patterns, would decrease the pool of tol patterns available and the number of skilled weavers who could train the next generation.

Large-scale conversions to Christianity occurred in the 1870s. In 1879 an American mission school was established on Kosrae (Cordy 1993:21). This school encouraged weaving of tol not, however, for traditional clothing but for souvenir sales. Tol shrank in size to hat bands, sashes, and belts. This souvenir weaving was shipped to Honolulu for sale (Christian 1899:398), while some was traded to visiting ships (Kramer-Bannow 1919:187). As late as 1915 a visitor was commenting on sales of souvenir tol: "In recent years, quantities of these bands [souvenir tol] came to be exported... perhaps on account of their quaint originality...." (Matsumura 1918:42).

Several visitors to Kosrae remarked on the differences between traditional and souvenir tol (Christian 1899:398; Sarfert 1919:197). Souvenir tol revealed changes in: 1) width (to narrower size); 2) technique (to non-cross band patterning); 3) increased use of warp-faced striped fabric (that did not require intricate warp knotted patterning)(Figure 4); and 4) colors (to a white background and "...European colors...")(Sarfert 1919:197). Thus souvenir tol was narrower and less technically complex, making it faster to make for sale. It was also altered in color and end-use to satisfy a different consumer. There may also have been addition of wool to tol (Riesenberg and Gayton 1952:351).

There was a decline in the weaving of traditional tol as clothing changed to European style, population decreased, and souvenir tol became popular. Kramer-Bannow, visiting in 1910 (1919:187), decried the decline in traditional tol weaving. In 1910 the German Sudsee Expedition, of which Kramer-Bannow was a part, could find no traditional tol for sale (Kramer-Bannow 1919:186-187). Kramer-Bannow (1919:187) encouraged the local women to weave traditional tol: "...I attempted to resuscitate this extinct branch of Kosraen weaving, which

among all the textile arts is indeed unique." With the aid of the "...female missionaries and the trader's wife..." she succeeded in purchasing 30 traditional tol after about one month (Kramer-Bannow 1919:187). These were made by more than one woman and "...in great variety and beautiful, precise work" (Kramer-Bannow 1919:187). Despite souvenir tol production, Kramer-Bannow (1919:187) felt that this was "...proof of how well this art [traditional tol] was still known among the people," even in 1910.

As whalers left, a few traders appeared on Kosrae, mainly Germans during the 1880s (Cordy 1993:90). Kosrae then passed into a colonial occupation period starting with the Spanish in the late 1880s. However, Spanish colonial influence on Kosrae was minimal (Cordy 1993:81). Germany colonized Kosrae next by buying it from Spain in 1898. Again outside influence was minor (Cordy 1993:81). Germany continued its ownership of Kosrae until 1914.

POST-TOL ERA: 1914 to Present

The Post-Tol Era witnessed the disappearance of any tol weaving, whether traditional or souvenir, and continued foreign domination until independence in the late 1980s.

Japan claimed Kosrae in 1914, during World War I (Cordy 1993:81). Unlike the Spanish and German colonial periods, the Japanese era brought changes to Kosrae. The Japanese "...started plantations and trading companies, ran the government, and opened a hospital and a school" (Cordy 1993:81). By the late 1930s Japan was using Micronesia, including Kosrae, for military purposes as preparation for World War II (Cordy 1993:81). By 1944 the United States occupied Kosrae and the island then became a United Nations Trust Territory (Cordy 1993:81). From 1914 to 1945 the Kosraen population stabilized. It has now grown to over 5,000 (Cordy 1993:81). In the late 1980s Kosrae became a state within the independent Federated States of Micronesia (which also includes Yap, Chuuk (Truk), and Pohnpei).

Although traditional tol weaving was remembered at least as late as 1910 and souvenir tol were still being woven about 1915, no tol of any kind were being produced by 1930. It is not known why tol weaving stopped. Perhaps the Japanese occupation led to changes in export markets (with Western markets like Honolulu no longer important) or perhaps the local economy became dominated by the Japanese. Today the Kosraen Historic Preservation Program wishes to record any remaining knowledge about tol weaving from the few elderly women who may remember this craft. The Kosraen Historic Preservation Program has also obtained a tol for their museum.

Future plans for research, by the authors of this paper, include identifying provenienced tol in museum collections to examine designs and colors associated with different ranks, genders, and uses. Additionally, these tol will

be studied for changes in technology and construction during the four historic eras described in this paper. It is hoped that this information will enhance the cultural heritage of Kosrae and allow tol weaving to be revived.

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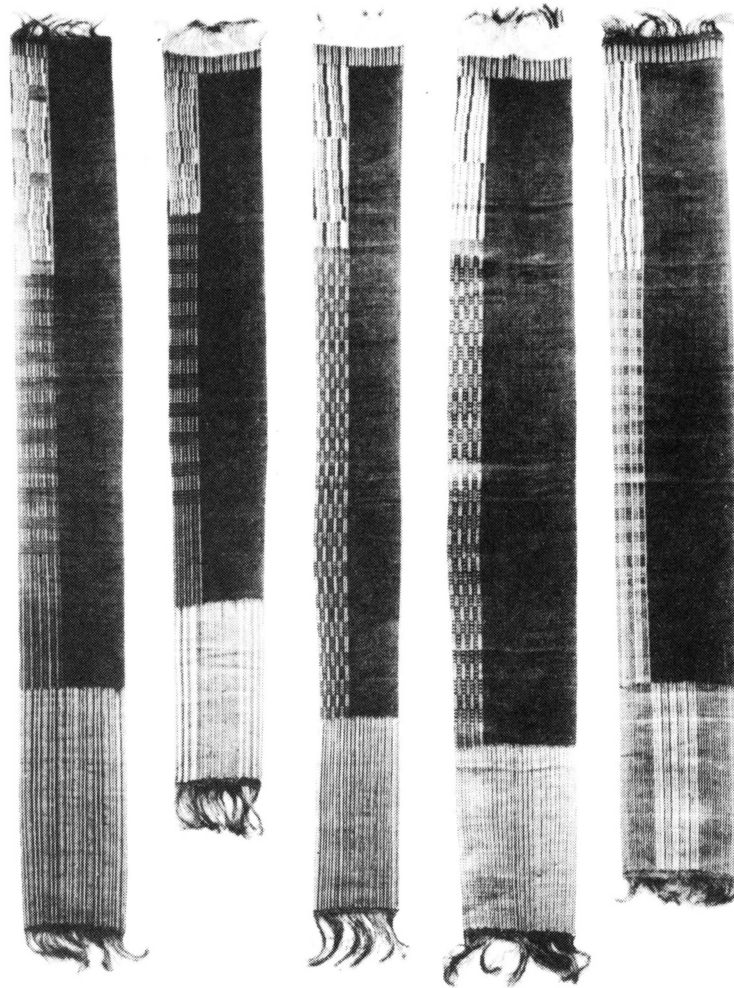


Figure 1. Menkof tol (Sarfert 1919:Plate 29).

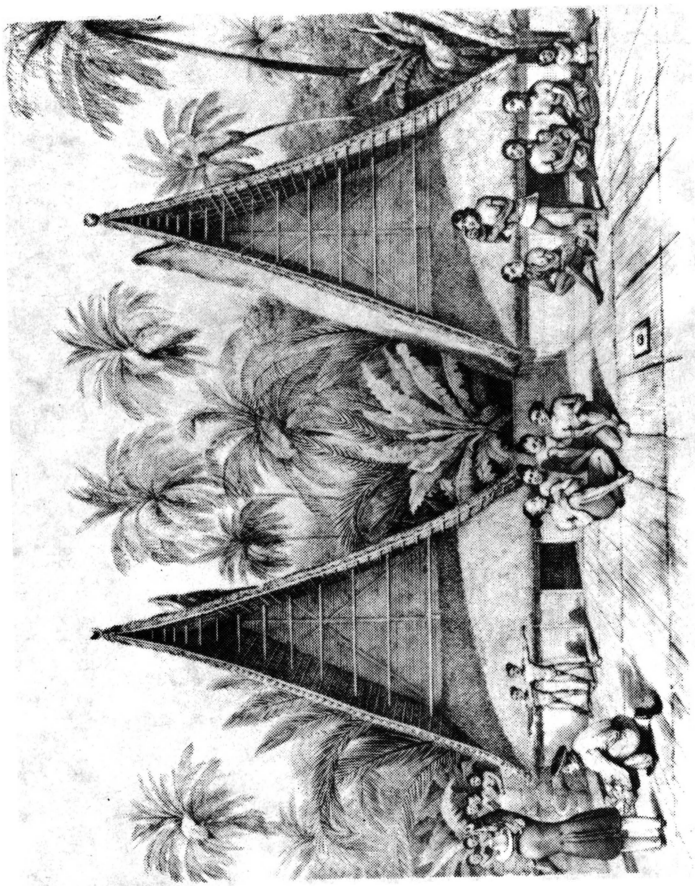
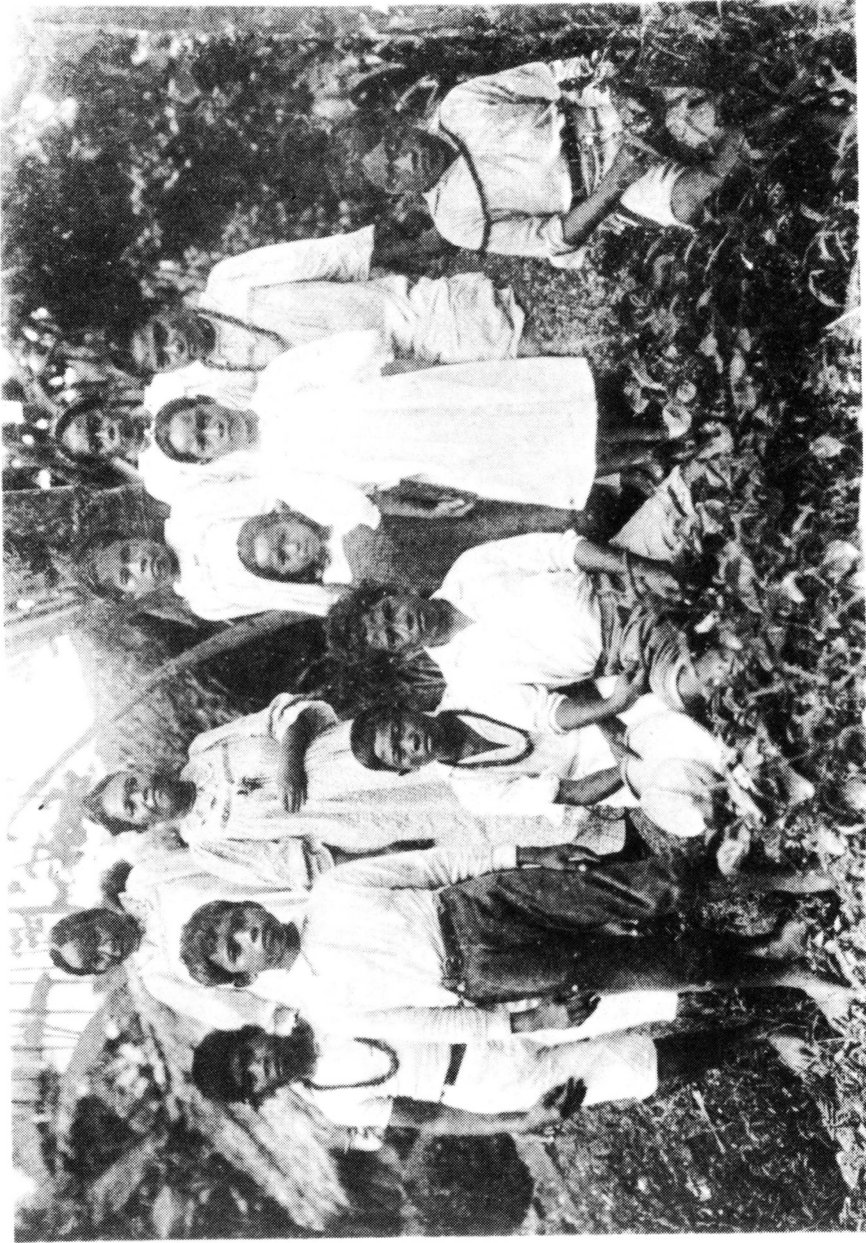


Figure 2. Men and women wearing tol (Lutke 1835, Atlas: Plate 18).



**Figure 3. European-American style dress (Sarfert 1919:
Plate 16-2)**

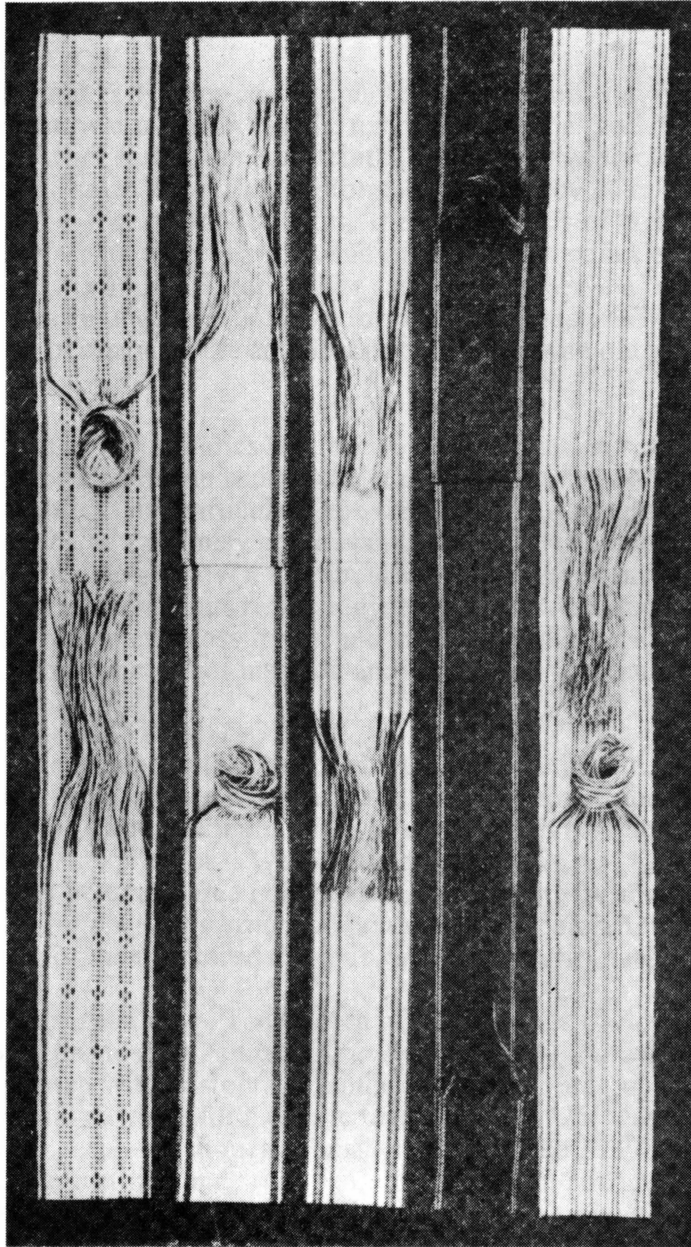


Figure 4. Souvenir tol (Matsumura 1918:41 Figure 14).