Recent Advances in Barkcloth Conservation and Technical Analysis

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Conservation of Fijian Masi

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Introduction

The Pacific Collection Access Project (PCAP) at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira was a three-year project to enhance knowledge and understanding of the museum's Pacific collections. It improved the safety of the collections and increased public access for Pacific source communities. The project focussed on 13 island nations. These were worked on in alphabetical order: Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Hawai'i, Kiribati, Niue, Pitcairn, Rapa Nui, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Wallis and Futuna (Pereira and Samu Tui 2020).

Objects were brought out of storage to be examined, cleaned, conserved, measured and photographed before being rehoused in safe and accessible storage. Improving information about each item in our museums' records was a crucial element of the project and, where possible, priority was given to languages and specific cultural knowledge for each island nation through the inclusion of appropriate names and terminologies. Knowledge holders from each island nation were involved in this project with advisory sessions, and with the planning for community days.

Fijian masi

The Auckland Museum Pacific Collection Access Project (PCAP) included in its work processes 74 examples of Fijian masi (barkcloth). Each was subjected to a condition assessment, followed by conservation treatment, cataloguing and high-resolution digital photography, a process which ended with appropriate and improved storage. The pieces comprised different types of typical Fijian masi: uncoloured and dyed pieces of one or two layers; fine, smoked masi coloured reddish brown; thick, and two or three layers of plain uncoloured laminated; printed with brown and black patterns. Of a less traditional nature was a single masi hand painted with an image of a reclining woman, and two newspapers printed on barkcloth. The condition of the collection is highly dependent on five factors: the level of processing; the extent to which is has been used; the manner in which it has been used; the environment it has been stored in; and the way it might have been displayed subsequent to it entering the collection. Some of this information was provided by the Fijian knowledge-holders. Although this did not directly influence the hands-on work I was undertaking, it was a welcome addition to my general understanding of the world of barkcloth making. For example, it was interesting to learn more about the varieties of bark used, and how in some Fijian island communities the manufacturing process is divided, one island making the barkcloth, another producing the colours, and the third printing the actual patterns on the 'imported' materials.

In our 74 examples I identified all five factors at work. Essentially the collection presented a range of challenges commonly experienced by conservators working with Pacific barkcloth. Looking specifically at the varieties of masi there were:

A) Finely made pieces of white barkcloth, often fringed at both ends. Some have a triangular patterning within the material, accomplished by regularly pulling small sections of cloth

sideways during manufacture. The fineness of this bark cloth easily results in tears from handling and use. The fringes are usually out of shape, squashed from rolled storage, and show losses from handling. The same also applies to the margins along the masi where two sheets have been glued to each other to extend the length. Most of these fine white pieces have been glued together from up to five separate, even-sized sheets and in some cases the sheets have separated.

B) Pieces of fine brown smoked masi, often fringed along the edges. The colour comes from treating the masi with coconut oil then smoking it (Barton and Weik 1994). These pieces are very thin, usually one layer only. Smoked masi is usually more fragile than the plain fabric, indicating that the application of oil and the smoking process weakens the cellulose fibres and initiates a process of disintegration. Such is the fragility of several smoked masi at Auckland Museum that they cannot be handled at all.

C) Fine reddish-brown dyed masi. Although of a similar hue to the above, this type is more stable than the smoked one.

D) Natural coloured masi of two to three layers laminated together and decorated with patterns in brown and black dye. The dyes come from a variety of sources, including the bark from the candlenut tree, mangrove trees, as well as soot from kerosene or burnt candlenuts. In eastern Fiji, a reddish-brown colour can be derived from a laterite soil, while on the central island of Viti Levu from a red alumina-silicate soil. The patterns are applied either by hand or by stencil. Typical damage for those masi comes from adhesive failure leading to delamination of layers, holes from use, and from incidents such as being too close to a fire. In some cases there is a noticeable deterioration of the masi in areas where black dye has been liberally applied, resulting in whole sections being fragile and literally falling apart as if rotting. In some cases, missing pieces follow the pattern. Nevertheless, in general this type of masi is the most robust of the three types.

E) One modern, hand painted masi in the collection decorated in a European style of a reclining young woman delineated in different shades of brown. There is no information about the artist and the dyes used. Dating from the 1960s, this piece of tourist art is in very good condition.

F) Two newspapers printed on natural bark cloth, copies of the *Suva Times*, one from 4 July 1908 and the other from 17 February 1909. They consist of a single sheet folded in half, making four pages to read. Both have been stored by folding at some time in the past, resulting in deep creases. The 1908 edition had been folded into a small package. This exposed only the top right-hand corner of page one to both light and dirt, and this quadrant consequently is discoloured markedly more than the rest of the page. These newspapers have long posed a mystery: why, every now and then, were they printed on barkcloth? They are not special editions celebrating a noteworthy event in Fiji but, to the contrary, have just ordinary, everyday news. The only explanation I can imagine is that the printer was short of paper, the company being dependent upon shipping. Perhaps the vessel bearing supplies was delayed and masi, the next best thing, was utilised.

Conservation treatment

Each masi was surface-cleaned with a light brush and vacuuming. The brown and black dyed masi (type D) were, if their condition permitted, cleaned with a smoke sponge. Most needed some sort of flattening, removing creases, and relaxing and reshaping their fringes.

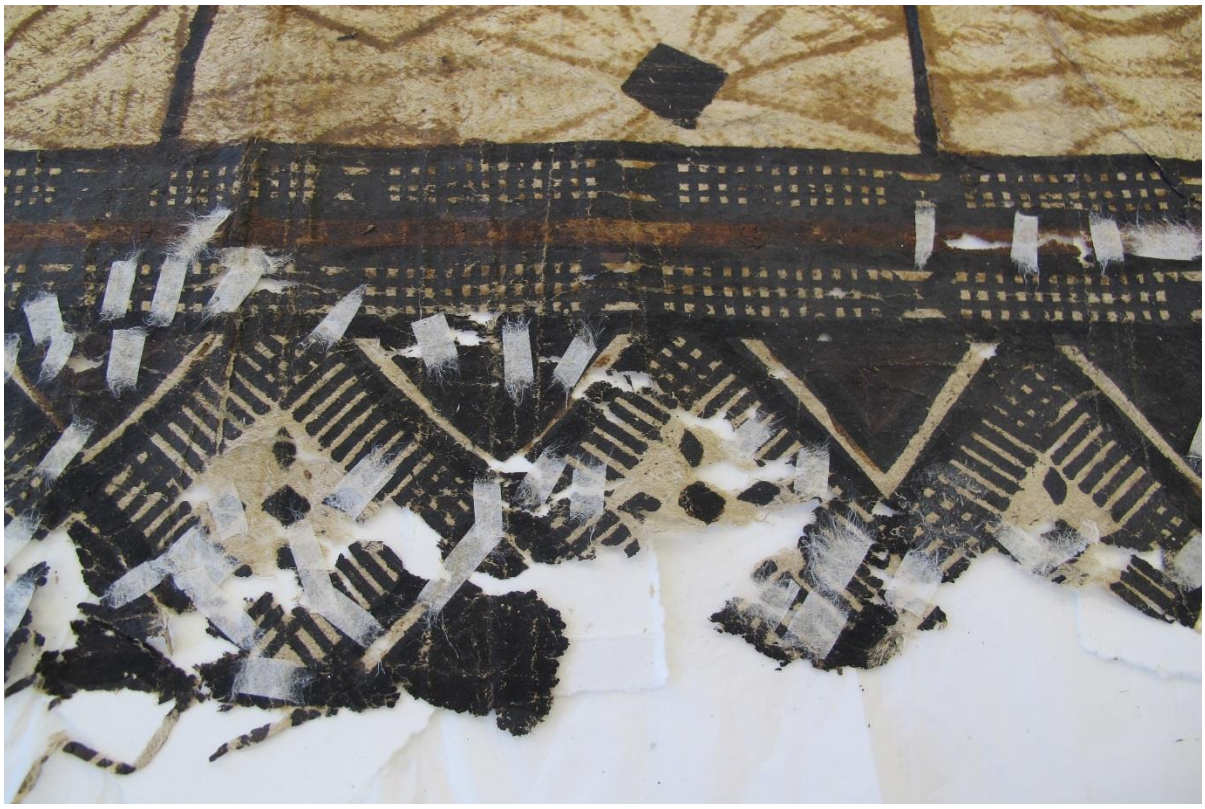

Figure 1. Conservation treatment of masi kesa, Fiji, 1986.233, 52262, by Sabine Weik: top) damaged areas at the edge of the cloth before treatment; centre) treatment in progress; bottom) after treatment. © Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira.

Where delamination was apparent, wheat starch was chosen to re-bond the layers. Small holes and tears which would lead to further damage if left untreated were repaired with Japanese paper colour matched with acrylic paints and glued with wheat starch. More extensive conservation work was needed on masi where black dye had eaten away the fibres (Figure 1). All 74 masi, except the fragile dye-affected items, are now stored on rolls placed in acid-free boxes.

These interventive conservation treatments were not specifically discussed in the PCAP sessions; the knowledge holders were very interested and appreciative of the conservation work carried out but did not feel it necessary to contribute directly to a discussion of treatment techniques. But beyond this, working with indigenous communities on such a project enriches the work of a conservator immensely, not necessarily in the actual conservation work but in the relationships and friendships that come out of this close cooperation. This project has changed the way we see and value these artefacts and also how we approach them for the conservation work they need, so that they are preserved for future generations.

References

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Suppliers

Wheat starch and smoke sponges
Deffner & Johann, Restaurierungsbedarf und Denkmalpflege, Germany
https://deffner-johann.de/de/

Author biography

Sabine Weik-Barton has had a long career in the conservation of ethnographic material, specialising in plant fibres, barkcloth and feathers. She trained in Germany and Italy before moving to New Zealand to establish herself in private practice. A decade later, she returned to Germany to the position of Senior Conservator at the Linden-Museum Stuttgart, one of the major ethnographic museums in the country. Since 2015 she has been employed at Auckland Museum, New Zealand, initially as the conservator for the Pacific Collections Access Project (PCAP), and upon completion of that, now as Conservator for Gallery Improvement. Since the 1980s she has regularly published research in conservation journals.