

FIJI MASI
Cloth of the Gods
TEACHER NOTES



Fiji Masi

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THE ISLANDS OF FIJI

Fiji is an island nation in the South Pacific Ocean.
It is situated east of Vanuatu, west of Tonga and South of Tuvalu.

The country occupies a cluster of about 322 islands, many of which are small uninhabitable atolls.

Only 106 of the islands are permanently inhabited.



Fiji - The Facts

- The population of Fiji in 2007 was 827,900.
- The two major islands of Fiji are Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. These two islands hold 87% of Fiji's population.
- The two main cultural groups that make up Fiji's population are Indigenous Fijians 57% and Indo-Fijians 37%. Fiji's culture is a rich mosaic of indigenous, Indian, Chinese and European traditions. The culture of Fiji has created a unique communal and national identity.
- The official languages spoken in Fiji are Fijian, English and Hindi.
- Different regions of Fiji are known for their practice of and expertise in a particular area of craft, for example masi (tapa cloth), weaving, or pottery.
- Namuka-i-lau, one of the Lau islands is renowned for its beautiful intricately printed masi cloths. The Lau islands are to the east of the main islands of Fiji, closer to Tonga and are spread over about 500km of ocean.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1834.htm>

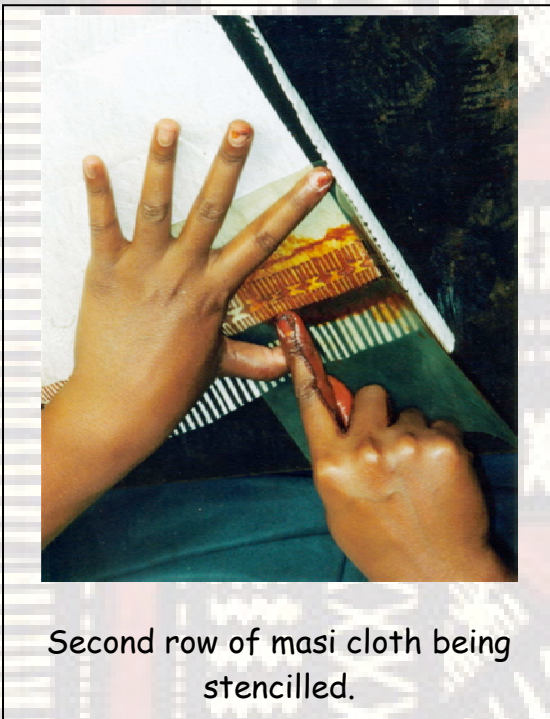
WHAT IS MASI?

FIJIAN MASI is a beautiful fibrous cloth made from the inner bark of the masi tree (also known as the mulberry tree). Other forms of bark cloth can be found throughout the Pacific such as tapa in Tahiti, ngatu in Tonga and siapo in Samoa.

Fijian masi is distinctive for its finely detailed, skilfully stencilled geometric motifs. The motifs (masi kesa) are carefully printed from the outer edges of the cloth into the centre the heart of the cloth. This is a process unique to Fijian masi. At the centre is usually a flower motif with a symbolic meaning.

"Masi contains the spirit of the land it comes from, the tree it was once part of and it also contains the essence of the women who beat the cloth and decorate it."

Catherine Spicer, *Fiji Masi - An Ancient Art in the new Millenium*, 2004.



Second row of masi cloth being stencilled.



Masi with central flower motifs.

There are two types of masi produced in Fiji today, traditional masi kesa (printed masi cloth) and decorative masi kesa.

Traditional masi embodies the spirit of Fijian culture. The motifs on traditional masi have special meanings for Fijian people and can be read and understood like a story. Someone who understands traditional masi motifs can identify who made the masi and the area of Fiji that they come from.

Decorative masi is produced purely for its aesthetic qualities. Decorative masi is produced to sell to the tourist market and is often used on products like place-mats and woven bags. decorative masi is not thought of by masi makers as a lesser art form than traditional masi. The retail of Decorative masi provides a valuable income for masi makers and allows the production of traditional masi to be a more sustainable one.

THE MAKING OF MASI CLOTH

MANY HOURS OF WORK GO INTO THE MAKING OF MASI

The making of masi 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.

The process of masi is ancient and has remained the same for hundreds of years, as has the raw material used to make masi - the bark of the paper mulberry tree, known in Fiji as the masi tree.

MODERN TOOLS

Like many modern artists and crafts people, the makers of masi have embraced modern tools in order to make their practice more efficient - knives have replaced shells, plastic containers have replaced wooden bowls and x-ray film is now used to create the detailed masi stencils, replacing the traditional banana leaf.

In the past banana leaf stencils had to be cut every morning before a single piece of masi could be printed. Modern masi stencils cut from x-ray film are durable and last a very long time.



Masi plantation

TO MAKE MASI THE ARTISTS MUST FIRST CHOOSE THEIR TREE...

Four mature trees are used to make one sheet of masi 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 suckers the exact number of trees needed to create another masi cloth!

PREPARING THE BARK

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 masi cloth.



When a large order of masi comes in the whole family lends a hand.

BEATING THE MASI CLOTH

Beating the cloth takes hours of labour. Every woman has her own distinctive rhythm that she beats the masi to. The rhythmic sound of masi being beaten is much like a drum and in some areas of the islands it can be heard throughout the day. However, the islands fall silent and the beating of masi stops on Sundays, during church services and on sacred occasions such as a funeral.

FELTING - THE LAST LAYERS

When the masi cloth has been beaten it is then felted. Several layers of lewena bark, usually four, are beaten together to create the masi cloth. Masi can vary in thickness depending on its desired use.

A single layer of masi is very delicate, fine and soft. This type of masi is used for the elegant turbans and garments worn by chiefs and priests as well as for soft scarves and sashes.

When masi is created with many layers it is thick, durable and very strong.



Fijian Chief in layers of fine Masi cloth.

KESA KESA ***PRINTING the MASI CLOTH***

DYES and PIGMENTS

The dyes and pigments used for printing masi cloth all come from the natural environment. The makers of masi are extremely aware of how they source their materials. The making of masi is an environmentally aware and sustainable practice.



A mangrove tree.

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.



Umea clay.

UMEA: Umea is a deep brown coloured clay that is grated and mixed with the brown and black dyes. It acts as a fixative allowing the dyes to adhere to the masi cloth.

BLACK DYE: Soot is used to create black. The soot is mixed with a little Umea and then mixed with kesa juice. Kesa juice comes from the bark of a kesa tree and is processed in the same way that the brown dye from the Mangrove tree is.



Squeezing kesa juice

MASI STENCILS



Masi stencils being prepared

The patterns used for masi 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 masi motifs have a very modern aesthetic and tell the stories of the Fijian people.

The iseru, a traditional Fijian comb has inspired one of the more popular Masi stencil designs. The Iseru design is a symbol of being prepared for special occasions and ready to receive guests into your home.

Many of the motifs are derived from plant and animal forms. The patterns and designs used on masi cloth are distinctive and unique to each area of Fiji where they were printed.



The iseru a traditional Fijian comb.



A pattern derived from the sharp teeth of the Barracuda is often found in the detailed borders of a masi cloth.



Frangipani Flower



Hibiscus Flower

WHAT IS MASI USED FOR?

CLOTH OF THE GODS

CHIEFS AND PRIESTS

In the past a single, unprinted piece of masi used to hang down from the ceiling of the village Chief's hut. This piece of masi was very sacred. Known as the cloth of the gods, it was used as a way for the Chief and the High Priest to communicate with the gods.

The masi worn by a Chief has a distinctive deep, rich red colour. This colour is obtained by either smoking the cloth, a long and sacred process that involves its own ceremony and rituals, or soaking the cloth in a blood red dye. These prestigious masi garments are said to hold the Chief's essence and that of his ancestors.



The room of a Chief.

FUNERALS, BIRTHDAYS and WEDDINGS



Traditionally it was only the men who wore masi in every day life. The only time women wore masi was for weddings and special ceremonies. Today men and women in Fiji are proud to wear masi for special occasions such as weddings and significant birthdays.

Not simply a decorative object, masi is an important part of almost every aspect of traditional Fijian life.

Masi is used to wrap a newborn baby collected from the hospital, 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.

(Nancy Atkin, Published online 29/09/00)



Well-known Fijian national rugby player, Ratu Alifereti Doviverata, wore a traditional masi costume when he married Fiji Daily Post journalist Rosi Tamani.

Photo by Ricardo Morris
<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/artok/craft/s193440.htm>

Fiji is a land of spirit, a nation whose people are deeply attached to the spirit of their land and very aware that the life force moves through all people and all things around them. The sacred, living nature of the land of Fiji is also manifested in an ancient craft and art known in Fiji as 'masi, the cloth of the gods'.

Catherine Spicer, *Fiji Masi - An Ancient Art in the new Millenium, 2004.*

GLOSSARY

Masi- a Fijian bark cloth made from the paper mulberry tree.

Masi Kesa - the printed form of masi cloth.

Tapa - a decorative bark cloth found in Tahiti, similar to masi. Unlike the printed motifs of masi the designs on tapa are hand painted.

Ngatu - a Tongan form of tapa cloth. Also hand painted.

Siapo - the Samoan form of tapa cloth. Also hand painted.

Lewena - the inner bark of the masi (Paper Mulberry) tree used to make masi cloth.

Dudua - the wooden log used to beat the masi cloth on.

Ike - the wooden mallet used for beating the masi cloth (A precious object handed down from generation to generation).

Papasia - the traditional wooden bowl used for soaking the wood chips used for making the dye.

Kesa - the juice made from the bark of the kesa tree. kesa is used to make black dye for printing masi.

Umea - the red clay used as a fixative in red and brown dyes.

X-ray film - plastic x-ray sheets used for making modern day masi stencils.

Draudrau - motifs used to decorate masi cloth.

Iseru - a wooden Fijian comb. The comb pattern is often found in the stencilling process.

EDUCATION NOTES

CURRICULUM LINKS

LEARNING AREAS:

- **VISUAL ARTS:** Understanding the Arts in Context, Developing Practical Knowledge, Developing Ideas, Communicating and Interpreting.
- **SOCIAL STUDIES:** Levels 1-5, eg. Understanding how Cultural Practices reflect and express people's customs, traditions and values. [12]
- **KEY COMPETENCIES:** Managing Self, Relating to Others, Using Language, Symbols and Texts, Participating and Contributing, Thinking.

PRE AND POST VISIT ACTIVITIES

- **CREATE** a rotational pattern using stencils.
- **FIND OUT** what traditional masi colours brown and black are made from.
- **THINK** of some questions that you would like to ask about masi.
- **LOOK** at a map of the Pacific and find out where bark cloth has been used.
- **RESEARCH** the different symbols used on other types of bark cloth in the Pacific.
- **EXPLORE / CREATE** your own personal symbols and patterns. Create your own masi cloth design using your personal symbols.
- **FIND OUT** about other cultures that use highly decorative patterns on cloth. What sorts of functions and cultural significance do these cloths have?