

Women United Together Marshall Islands
(WUTMI)

**The Past Weaving the Future Project:
Passing on Traditional Knowledge throughout the
Republic of the Marshall Islands**



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Weaving in the Marshall Islands Report

The Past Weaving the Future Project: Passing on Traditional Knowledge throughout the Republic of the Marshall Islands

Weaving in the Marshall Islands Report

Prepared by: Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI)
Majuro Atoll, 2009

Summary: The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) and WUTMI's Weaving Project consisted of four components: 1) Locate Master Weavers; 2) Conduct a Workshop on Traditional Weaving; 3) Train participants to become "Skill Docents"; 4) Development of Weaving Portfolios. WUTMI first identified two Master Weavers, Mrs. Kiop Leon of Arno Atoll and Mrs. Belleri Annam of Mejit Island, who then led two weaving workshops at WUTMI's 2nd Annual Meeting in 2007. One Workshop focused on making a type of Marshallese sitting mat called a *Tōlao*, and the other workshop focused on making baskets, or *Iep*. The workshops were one week long, and each participant learned how to weave and finish the product taught in the workshop. As the participants of the workshops continue to practice and build their weaving skills, WUTMI hopes that they become "Skills Docents" to their communities. In addition to the workshops, two manuals, or "Toolkits," were created, listing the materials used to make these products (one Toolkit is for making *Tōlao*, and the other is for making *Iep*), as well as providing step-by-step instructions on how to weave them. These Toolkits will be duplicated and distributed as the final part of this project.

In addition to the workshops and Toolkits produced for the *Tōlao* and *Iep*, WUTMI staff worked with trainees at Wa in Aelon in Majel (WAM) to create an additional tool kit providing the steps and materials necessary to produce a Marshallese canoe sail, or *Wōj/ā*. All of these Toolkits—for *Tōlao*, *Iep*, and *Wōj/ā*—will be duplicated and distributed as the final part of this project.

Source: All information presented in this report was collected by direct interviews with members of the Marshallese community, including Ms. Annie deBrum and Mrs. Bellari Annam.

Acknowledgement of Support: This report has been financed in full with Historic Preservation Funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

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Weaving in the Marshall Islands

Weaving has been a vital part of Marshallese culture for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Given the limited resources of these isolated atolls, historically weaving has been the primary means of producing essential material items for the Marshall Islanders. Items created through weaving materials from local trees included clothing mats, sleeping mats, sitting mats, sails for traditional canoes, and many other common items for everyday use. Weaving was an essential part of everyday life for Marshall Islanders.

Traditionally, all Marshallese women learned the skills of weaving. Starting from an early age, girls would sit with their mothers and grandmothers and begin to learn how to weave. From about the age of 13, girls would be skilled enough to begin to produce woven products on their own. Within a community, families would produce their own woven mats for clothing, sitting, and sleeping, as the need for these items arose. Weaving would take place in people's homes, outside, or wherever the women decided they wanted to sit and begin weaving.

Marshall Islanders used entirely local materials in their weaving. The primary source of these materials was the trees native to the atolls, namely different varieties of pandanus (*Pandanus tectorius*) and coconut trees (*Cocos nucifera*). Leaves from the pandanus trees were first collected, and then the thorns were stripped from the sides. The leaves were then dried under the sun (*kajeje*) or warmed over a weak fire (*rañrañ*), and then pounded with heavy wooden instruments to make them soft and flexible (*noi*). Finally, the leaves were torn into strips (*iie*), the size of which were adjusted depending on the type of object they were intended for. For sleeping mats and “blankets,” the leaves of a particular species of pandanus, known locally as *unmaañ*, were used, because of their finer quality. To decorate their woven products (*kainōknok*), Marshallese used local materials to dye strips of pandanus a darker color, or a red color, which they then interweaved with lighter-color pandanus strips to create intricate patterns and designs. To create the “dyes” used to produce a darker or a red color, Islanders used the roots of local *nin* trees (*Morinda citrifolia*), or a plant known as *atat* (*Triumfetta procumbens*), or a plant known locally as *joñ* (*Bruguiera gymnorhiza*). In the case of *joñ*, the outside bark of the tree would first be scraped off and collected. Then, the already prepared pandanus leaf strips would be set inside a paper-like material that was taken from local coconut trees. And, finally, the prepared *joñ* would be rubbed onto the pandanus strips, creating a permanent darker coloring. All the “dyes” used left a permanent coloring. The fact that dyed pandanus leaves from hundreds of years ago (that can be seen in Marshallese woven products preserved in museums today) still retain their color attests to this fact. These practices of

preparing materials for weaving continue through today, though store-bought dyes are often used in place of the natural dyes used traditionally.

In traditional Marshallese society, both men and women wore clothing made from a finely-woven mat (*nieded*). The materials for these mats would be prepared as described above, and the women of a family would then weave the garments required for their families. For a man, a mat would be woven (often with intricate patterns) and then fastened around the waist in the style somewhat similar to that worn by a modern-day Sumo wrestler, except with the backside being entirely covered. For a woman, an ankle-length mat (also made with intricate patterns) was worn fastened around the waist. Ropes made from materials taken from coconut husks (*kkwa*) were used to fasten the clothing of both men and women around the waist. The weaving of these clothing mats was especially fine, to provide flexibility of the mat and hence flexibility of movement for the people who wore them. To clean these clothing mats, the mats were first shaken to remove the dust and debris, and then set out in the sun for long periods of time to remove any odors. This method of cleaning clothing mats was used for all kinds of woven mats, and is still used in the Marshall Islands today.

Another important use of weaving skills in the Marshall Islands was the creation of mats (*jāki*) used for sitting and for sleeping. *Jāki* came in various sizes, depending on the person making them and the size of the space they were intended for. Also made from dried and prepared pandanus leaves, *jāki* were woven in different styles, according to their purpose, and often had intricate woven designs. Because Marshallese traditionally sit and sleep on the ground, these *jāki* played an especially important role in Marshallese households in pre-modern times, when there was no cement, tile, or other similar materials available to cover the floors inside homes and other structures. Traditional Marshallese houses consisted of a thatched roof supported by wooden posts, usually with no walls. Marshall Islanders scattered bits of coral, similar to gravel, to make up the “floors” of these houses. Over this gravel layer they placed *jāki* for sitting and basic purposes. These sitting mats were not as finely woven as the mats used for clothing and for sleeping. One example of a sitting mat is the Marshallese *Tōlao*, which is woven in a different fashion from the more-finely woven *jāki* used for sleeping. When it came time for sleeping, Marshall Islanders took out special sleeping *jāki*, which were made of finer-quality pandanus (*unmaan*) like the mats used for clothing. The Islanders placed these finer *jāki* on top of the coarser *jāki* used for sitting and everyday purposes. Marshall Islanders slept on top of these sleeping *jāki*, and, in addition, they had special finely-woven *jāki* that they used as blankets. Within a family, separate *jāki* were designated for use by the men and boys of the family, and these *jāki* were especially important to and respected by the family members.

Historically, weaving skills were also essential for the construction of traditional Marshallese canoes. Women traditionally wove the sails (*wōjlā*) for these canoes, again using the prepared leaves from the pandanus tree. The weaving of the sails was done in such a manner that when the sail faced strong winds, the weaving would loosen, or “open,” giving the sail slack so that the canoe wouldn’t capsize. Conversely, when the winds were light, the weaving would remain tight. The sails were made by first weaving several rectangular, long “strips” using pandanus leaves, and then cutting these strips and sewing them together so that they formed a triangular “cloth” part of the sail. This “cloth” part of the sail was then fastened to two wooden poles, usually made from wood from the breadfruit tree (*mā*) (*Arocarpus altilis*), that were then attached to the canoe using a sturdy rope, called *kkwaʼ*. This exceptionally strong rope was made by hand-rolling together pieces of coconut husk fiber until they formed a strong rope. The *wōjlā* varied in size according to the size of the canoe for which they were intended, and they could reach up to over 20 feet in length and height. Sails would be routinely replaced on canoes as they were damaged and worn-down by the ocean and its waves. Without these woven sails, ocean travel, for which the Marshall Islanders were renowned, would have been virtually impossible.

In addition to these woven items mentioned above, Marshall Islanders also traditionally wove many items for everyday use. Such items include carrying bags and baskets (*iep*), baskets for storing food, plates for serving food, hand fans, containers for preserving food, hats and various kinds of jewelry. The techniques and materials for weaving these items varied according to the item type and its importance, with some of the items being more finely woven, and other items being more coarsely and quickly woven. For example, plates would have been woven impromptu and made from fresh green leaves of pandanus or coconut trees, not from the dried and softened pandanus leaves used for making clothing mats and *jāki*. Jewelry and hand fans, however, were made from the dried and softened pandanus leaves, and were more finely-woven, though in a different fashion than the weaving of the clothing mats and *jāki*.

In the Marshall Islands today, the importance of weaving is not as prominent as it was in the past. On certain islands—namely, Mejit, Namu, Ebon, Namdik, Ailinglaplap, Utrik, and Jaluit—weaving is still common. However, on many islands, the art of weaving is largely lost. This reduction in the prominence of weaving can be attributed to many causes: the availability of imported material items (for clothing, sleeping and sitting materials, bags, plates, etc.) that are widely used in place of traditional materials; the separation of families that arises as members of the family move to the urban centers; and the focus on education and working in modern industries, just to name a few. But weaving is still an important part of Marshallese culture and is still a valued skill that some women utilize to earn income to help support their families. Handicrafts, such as woven jewelry, purses, hats, crowns, baskets, and many

others, are widely produced and available for purchase in the Marshall Islands. *Jāki* are often given as gifts at birthdays, marriages, and other special occasions.

In the Marshall Islands today, modern materials, such as glue, store-bought dyes, thread, cardboard, and others, are commonly used in conjunction with traditional materials in making some types of handicrafts. In the case of canoe sails, sails made from canvas or plastic tarp-like material have almost entirely replaced the use of traditional woven sails. However, in the Marshall Islands there are currently ongoing projects—such as WAM’s (Wa in Aelon in Majel) traditional canoe building program and WUTMI’s Sustainable Livelihood Project—that promote the use of traditional weaving skills as a means of earning income and also as a means of preserving this important part of Marshallese culture. Marshall Islanders recognize the uniqueness and importance of their traditional weaving skills, and they are working on ways to preserve and promote these skills so that they carry on for future generations.