

## Barkcloth from the Solomon Islands in the George Brown Collection

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**ABSTRACT.** Historically, barkcloth in Southeast Asia and Oceania has been made using diverse plant species, mostly in the fig plant family (Moraceae). Despite the general use of woven textiles today, barkcloth is still made in some cultural contexts. Here, based on a previously undescribed ethnographic collection from the Solomon Islands, we report new information on an enigmatic local tradition of barkcloth decorated with a blue plant dye. Our immediate aim is descriptive, and to raise awareness of the tradition, but we also note difficulties for identifying the plants used to make barkcloth. Historical questions concerning the origins and spread of barkcloth traditions cannot be answered without better knowledge of their material foundations.

Over three decades, from 1879 to 1911, the missionary George Brown visited the Solomon Islands five times and collected 631 ethnographic items that are now stored at the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan. The items include 12 sheets of barkcloth from the western Solomon Islands, most of which appear to be made from fig (*Ficus* sp.) or breadfruit (*Artocarpus* sp.). Six from the island of Isabel have distinctive motifs painted with the indigo-blue dye. Only ten examples of blue-dyed barkcloth have been found previously in other museum collections, and these also came from Isabel. In other areas of Southeast Asia and Oceania, paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), is the most commonly used bast fibre source for barkcloth and is associated with the spread of Austronesian-speaking peoples. This plant appears to have had a minor role in the Solomon Islands.

### Introduction

Barkcloth is an ancient form of textile production that may have predated the use of woven cloth, since barkcloth can be made from a wide variety of plant sources and involves relatively simple techniques for its production. However, there is wide scope for refinement in both the production of the cloth, its decoration, and in its uses. In many locations today, barkcloth is still made despite the general use of woven textiles. In some locations, continued production may reflect geographic and social isolation as well as the local utility and cultural value of the cloth concerned. More commonly, perhaps, older traditions coexist with new uses and new values in contemporary culture and modern trade (Charleux, 2017).

In Southeast Asia and Oceania, barkcloth is known by a variety of names in Austronesian and other languages, and may be made from the inner bark (bast) of fig (*Ficus* spp.), wild and cultivated breadfruit (*Artocarpus* spp., *A. altilis*), paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), upas (*Antiaris toxicaria*), poison peach (*Trema tomentosa*, syn. *T. amboinensis*), beach hibiscus (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*), the mangrove trees *Barringtonia asiatica* and *Rhizophora* sp., and other trees (Kennedy, 1934; Kooijman, 1963, 1972; Leonard and Terrell, 1981; Aragon, 1990; Hill, 2001; Larsen, 2011; Vargyas, 2016; Moskvina, 2017; Butaud, 2017). Fig, breadfruit and paper mulberry appear to be the most commonly used sources for barkcloth in Southeast Asia and Oceania, but wild upas (*Antiaris toxicaria*) is also used in Africa, making it the most widely-used barkcloth

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