The Red Barkcloth of Fiji – *na masi damu ni Viti*

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1. Stages of beating out *masi* in Vatulele (1981)
(L-R) Salote Rokete (age 13) doing the less-skilled initial heavy beating of a fresh bast, while experts Lavenia Lave (age 23) and Aliji Tuvu (age 32) continue with later stages of widening.
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Pour la plupart des gens, les tapa des Fidji (ou *masi*) les plus reconnaissables sont les masikesa décorés au pochoir, avec leurs grilles de formes géométriques brun-rouge et noires sur fond blanc. Moins nombreuses sont les personnes capables d'identifier les notables différences entre les étoffes blanc uni de Fidji et celles de la Polynésie centrale ou orientale. Et plus rares encore sont celles qui comprennent la signification de ces étoffes entièrement colorées, ou presque, en rouge ocre, sans parler de la manière dont elles sont, ou étaient autrefois, produites et par qui. De nos jours, on fabrique un type d'étoffe teinté ou coloré dans des tons allant de l'orange au rouge, assez souvent porté comme vêtement tant par les hommes que par les femmes lors des mariages ou autres cérémonies importantes. Il est certain que cela ajoute de la couleur à la tenue, mais cet ajout a-t-il un sens nouveau, et le cas échéant, est-il traditionnel ou bien s'agit-il d'une innovation récente ? On rencontre souvent dans les réserves des musées deux types différents d'étoffes de Fidji qui sont uniformément ou presque de couleur rouge ocre et, parfois, une troisième variété plus rare, qui n'est plus fabriquée depuis peut-être un siècle. Cet article se penchera donc sur ces différents types historiques, décrira leur fabrication et leur rôle social et replacera dans son contexte la version « cérémonielle moderne ».

2. Starting to fill in red section after completing black design (Elenoa Marica, Natewa, Cakaudrove, 1981). The paint has local red clay mixed into the bark infusion.
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3. Member of the Paramount chief's immediate family, Paulini Matebula wearing a waistband of *kesa*-soaked *masikuvui* as the top layer of her three-part skirt assemblage, the other layers being *masikesa* and *kumi*. (Vatulele 1993). As a chiefly woman of high status she was entitled to wear this.
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FIJIAN BARKCLOTH

Fijian barkcloth is called *masi*, and so is the paper mulberry plant (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) from the bast (white inner bark) of which it is made. The word "tapa" has a particular meaning, as we shall see later, and is only used by Europeans and tourists, or by Fijians talking to them. Banyan (*Ficus* sp.) and breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus* sp.) barks have hardly been used in Fiji in the historic period. It may be that *Ficus* cloth preceded the Asian-origin *Broussonetia*, which may have come into Fiji later (Clunie's research suggests perhaps as recently as AD 500 – pers. comm. 2016). Today *masi* is carefully cultivated in dedicated plantations, protected from excessive wind and animal predation. Cultivation was traditionally women's work, but today in many (not all) places the men help, or do it all. Male specialists make the anvils (*dutua*) and beaters (*ike*), but today virtually all processing is the prerogative of women.

When saplings reach 2 to 2.5 m, they are harvested. The barks are stripped off while still green, the outer barks peeled off, and the basts soaked in water for some hours to remove much of the sticky sap. Any remaining outer bark specks are then scraped off with a cone shell. The strip of bast is then placed across the large hardwood anvil and beaten out very thin with a grooved beater of ironwood (*Casuarina* sp.), sprinkling water on from time to time (fig. 1)

Beating widens the bark, but shortens it slightly, so the fine muslin-like *masi* units are usually about 1.8 m long and 0.3-0.4 m wide. These may be dried immediately and used as men's hair-scarves (*isala*), bridal sashes (*wābale*), or arm and leg decorations for dance (*vesa*). If thicker cloth is needed, two to six units may be wet, wrung out, placed alternately top-to-tail and beaten again, felting them together and making a cloth 0.5 m wide. This may be immediately stretched out in the sun to dry, edge-weighted with stones, or it may first be end-joined with one or two other units to make a long narrow cloth. Wider pieces are later made by edge-joining, either by pasting using starch, or by damping and beating.

Much *masi* is and has always been used white, but much is printed in grids of geometric patterns using stencils cut from various leaves (fig. 2), or today the tough paper peeled off cardboard cartons, or even X-ray film or other stout plastic. The result is the handsome figured barkcloth (*masikesa*), for which Fiji is famous. The colors are invariably the white of the cloth with red-ochre and black motifs. The *kesa* paint is made by boiling the scraped bark of certain trees with a little water to produce a viscous liquid, which is then squeezed out. It is sometimes red enough without additional coloring (fig. 5), or red clays may be added to produce the desired color. Soot can finally be added to make the black paint.

THE COLORS ON *MASIKESA*, OR "FIGURED CLOTH"

The use of the three colors, white, black, and red ochre, is not coincidental, but symbolic. While the symbolism of these three colors (separately and combined) has been well-documented for parts of Africa (e.g. Jacobsen-Widding 1979), this is less true for the Pacific and has been particularly neglected for barkcloth. I have explored color symbolism at length elsewhere (Ewins 2009:138-43), but will re-state

4. Details of two pieces of *liti* made by men in Kadavu. Collection of the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Top, Red *liti* – *togonilau*. Bottom, Black *liti* – *vevewa*.
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5. Small piece of *masicagővi* (elsewhere called *masivakareregа*), Somosomo, Cakaudrove, 1981. In the left bowl is grated coconut mixed with turmeric, in the other bowl the oily milk squeezed from this and the small piece of *masi* intended for an arm ornament.
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6. Rearranging the *masi* on the smoking frame, with the large pieces inside and the small pieces suspended over the top. Women: Qereitoga Saumaibulu (left, in blue) and Maria Ralőgaivau (right).
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some principles. First, when figuration is present it stipulates aspects of spiritual and social life. The specific motifs, printed in black and red, and the generally geometric patterns in which they are arranged (fig. 3), combine with the white background to signify the particular social and geographical identity of the makers and users, with variations formerly covering everything from extended family (*itokatoka*) to *vanua* (socio-geographical group). A useful, if inexact, analogy is the clan tartans of Scotland. The size, shape, patterns and motifs also determine the uses of each type of cloth, and if worn, the status of the wearer.

Throughout Oceania, ritual processes are associated with the making of dyes and paints, and coloring objects (by either sex) is a magico-symbolic process, and the colors themselves are signs. In parts of Fiji, a woman is especially "potent" while her early pregnancy is unknown, and she should have nothing to do with making or applying paint – even *watching* the processes could be ruinous! Once she "shows" she is no longer dangerous. Of course, in her ignorance she can hardly avoid the peril, but it provides a handy explanation if anything goes wrong!

The white of plain *masi* has very positive connotations. Throughout Polynesia it is the color of *tapu* (in Fijian *lewā*), the cosmic rules for human conduct. It is thus also the color of priests, keepers of the *lewā* with access to the spirit world, and of men generally, who have the responsibility for enacting it. It is also the color of light and the day. It is this array of overwhelmingly positive significations that gives white *masi* its universality. It may perform virtually any function associated with *masi*, without further embellishment.

Black is the temporal color – of nature and the earth, of the night and death, and of women, who are the guardians of these. In Tonga, women should abstain from sex for two days before making black pigment, and in parts of Fiji, certain caves were restricted to women for burning candlenuts and collecting the black soot on broken pots or clamshells. However, no restrictions applied to candlenuts burned in the houses just to produce light. During confinement and after childbirth, women wore black *masi* whenever they ventured out of the house. Black was the color of shrouds, and still today continues to be worn during the three months of mourning following bereavement, being shed following a "lifting of mourning" ceremony called *vakataraisulu* or *luvabenu*.

Women use black *kesa* paint as the "key" color to lay out, contain and define the motifs and patterns of *masikesa* (fig. 1). The final color applied, red, also has a particular importance, as it is the color of the gods and of high chiefs, who were gods incarnate. It can be seen from all of the above that in the making and figuration of *masikesa* the entire cosmic, spiritual, religious, temporal and secular worlds of the Fijian people are signified and encompassed. But the spiritual potency of the cloth can be further distilled by not using black and by making cloths that are primarily just red. Also, avoiding the temporality that women notionally controlled, in two of the three documented types of red cloth, men arrogated the making and/or coloring to themselves

RED, THE COLOR OF THE GODS AND HIGH CHIEFS

To a Fijian, "red" (*damu*, *damudamu*, or in some contexts, *kula*) covers a broad spectrum that in English would span the orange-gold of turmeric, vermilion, crimson, through to brown. There are many references in ships' log-books, missionary journals, and other accounts to the weight attached to red in Fiji, such as the very high trade-value of vermilion pigment and any red articles of clothing or ornament.

At childbirth, mothers and newborns were painted with turmeric, and at the "re-birth" ritual following their first kill, warriors were smeared over (by their womenfolk) with turmeric and/or red paint. Even in the 1930s a Vanualevu priest would confide to a young researcher that "red cloth is especially pleasing to the gods" (Quain 1948:234). Indeed, the afterworld (*Burotu*) was also called *Burotukula* (Red Burotu) or *Vanuakula* (Red Land), because (as a domain of gods) everything there was believed to be red – including the vegetation! The departed spirits of chiefs went there from Fiji, and from other parts of Polynesia where it was called *Pulotu* or other cognates of *Burotu* (Geraghty 1993). In Kiribati, a clan named *Benuakura* (a cognate of *Vanuakula*) has as its totem a red-feathered bird, said to be man-eating. This recalls the red feathers (*kula*) that were in great demand and traded from Fiji throughout Polynesia, not merely because they were beautiful, but because of the potency of red.

All red body ornaments were exclusive to chiefs, including golden cowries and red bivalve shells that were worn as pendants, but most obvious to visitors to this day are the red garments which should only be worn by chiefs, since their divine connotation makes them arguably the most spiritually profoundly *masi* of all.

LITI – THE RITUAL BARKCLOTH MADE BY MEN

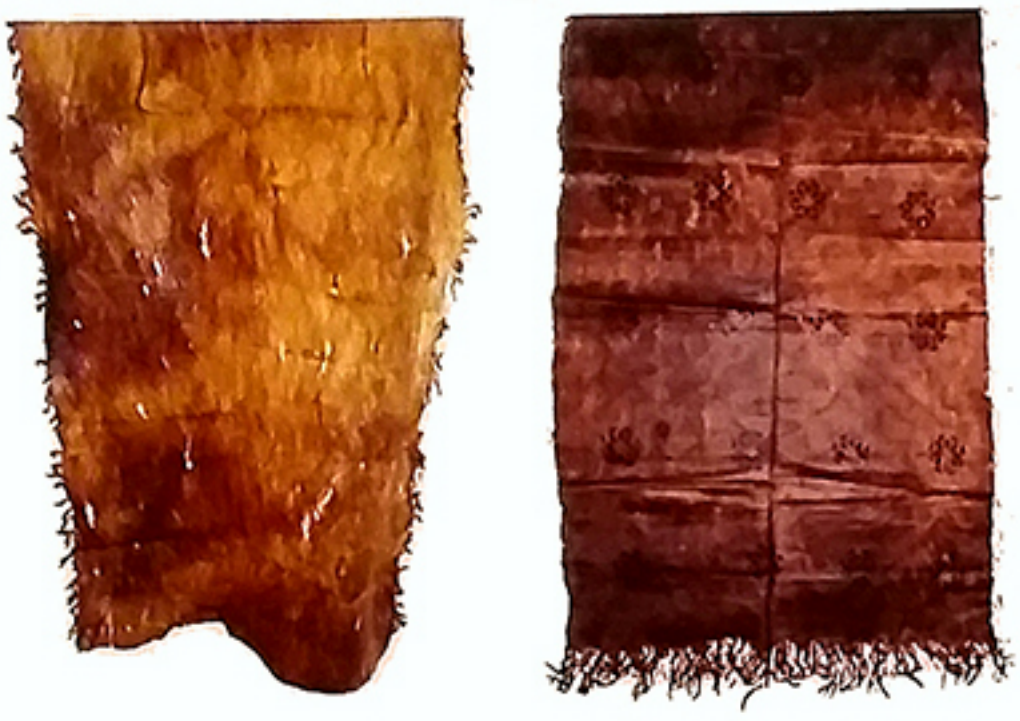
Most of the earliest published accounts of *masi* come from the first Methodist missionaries. Two mention a type of *masi* called *liti*, made in Kadavu exclusively by men, and chiefly supplied to Rewa and Rā (southeast and north Vitilevu), areas which had strong kinship links with Kadavu (Lyth 1842-1854: Oct. 16th, 1848; Williams 1858:67). This *liti* should not be confused with the *masikesa* of Colo (Vitilevu Highlands), which was made by women but figured by men – also unique in Fiji. There the *masi* was rubbed over grooved printing rollers to make patterns that included clan identification (Roth 1934; Ewins 2013:89; Ewins 2014:21, 30).

Missionary Jesse Carey (active 1859-75), conducted interviews regarding *masi* (Carey n.d.). These confirmed that in Kadavu only men made and painted *liti* and that there were two types, a black form called *vevewa* (which also means "owl") and a red form called *togonilau* (fig. 2). Although Lyth asserts that *liti* is "stained with red earth," *togo* is the local name for a mangrove (*Bruguiera gymnorrhiza*), the bark yielding a deep red-brown tannin-laden paint widely used in printing *masi*. It may have been used alone or added to earth to intensify its color. According to his great grand-daughter, Adi Litiana Maopa (pers. comm. 1980), the high chief Rātū Seru Cakobau of Bau, signatory of the cession of Fiji to Britain, wore a piece of red *liti* as his *isala* hairscarf, rather than the more usual white or *masikuvui* hairscarf worn by other chiefs. This would confirm *liti*'s great significance.

Of interest in one of the Carey transcripts is the information that it was *women* who burned candlenuts to make the black pigment (*loaloa*) used for *vevewa*. That female role is consistent with the symbolism discussed above. Another interviewee stated that *liti* intended for presentation at a gathering, or to be used as tribute/tax, was joined end to end to make lengths of up to one or two thousand fathoms (2-4 km)! No wonder it could take 20 strong men to carry the presentation bales of cloth (Williams 1858:40). There is no information about whether *liti* was restricted to chiefs, or whether the red and black cloths performed the same or different roles. *Loaloa* is invariably added to red paint, and in *liti* it may have merely been added to strengthen a weak color. Probably just because *liti* was not very attractive, little was collected by Europeans. It is totally obsolete, and I have seen a relatively few fairly small examples in museums (fig. 4).

MASIVAKAREREGA AND MASIKUVUI – GOLDEN-ORANGE AND RED BARKCLOTH

(a) *Masivakarerega* is a golden-orange-colored ceremonial cloth, to be worn only by chiefs. It was documented for Lau in the 1930s, but I have only ever seen it made (once in the 1980s) in Cakaudrove Province, where it is called *masicagōvi*. *Rerega* and *cago* are names for turmeric, which is prepared from the root of *Curcuma longa*, and used in powdered form. Rather than using full-strength oil, this is mixed with freshly-grated coconut, kneaded well and then strained. The *masi* is soaked in the liquor and squeezed out well, spread out flat and dried, producing a golden-orange, slightly oily, cloth (fig. 5).
(b) The root-bark of mangrove (see above) is said to be occasionally powdered and used in place of turmeric. Although the result is much redder, it is still (rather illogically) called *masivakarerega* or *masicagōvi*.
(c) *Masikuvui* (smoked *masi*) is a golden-brown to red-brown cloth that was always strictly restricted to chiefly use. I was told in Taveuni and in Namuka (Lau), that though women made the *masi* itself, smoking it was formerly done by men. This may have been so everywhere – it was so in the Vitilevu Highlands (Colo), where the men also did the printing (Roth 1934; Ewins 2014:21, 30, 35). However, during fieldwork from 1980 to 1995 I was only able to find one woman, Di Rua, in Mualevu village (Vanuabalavu Island, N.Lau) in 1981, and two women in Somosomo village (Taveuni Island, Cakaudrove Province) still making it in 1984 – Qereitoga Saumaibulu (then 57) and Maria Ralōgaivau (54).



7. Ends of two pieces of *masikuvui*: a single-bark-thick bridal sash, Taveuni 1984 (left); a double thickness sash with *tutuki* motifs printed on it, Vanuabalavu 1981 (right).
© R. Ewins

8. Arieta Rogoi (aged 84) seated in front of her *kumi* (Somosomo, Cakaudrove, 1981). Note the numbering of the *lalaga* sections in the white tapa edges of the cloth.
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9. Processing *gatu vakatoga*, Namuka 1985. Left: fixing *kupeti* or *kuveji* in place on *pāpā*. Right: pasting further *masi* components on to extend the cloth. Note the numbering of *lalaga in the white* tapa edge of the cloth. In the left foreground a tuber of arrowroot is visible, the "glue stick" used throughout processing.

These women demonstrated to me the following rather arduous traditional procedure:

1. A small fire is set using fine flammable kindling, loosely covered with thinly-split, very slow-burning *vesi* (*Intsia bijuga*) wood. This wood was formerly sacred, and so was anything made using it. Other woods are said to blacken rather than redden the cloth. Finally slivers of either sugarcane (*dovu*) or the sugar-bearing roots of the *qai* (*Cordyline* sp.) are added, since sugar burns with much smoke.
2. Over this a tepee-like framework (called *vale*, "house") is made from dry reeds or clean sticks such as those from *Broussonetia* after the bark is stripped off, which are always available. They are tied together at the top with vine or wire, and for big frames further vine may be twisted between them lower down to keep the legs spread and stable.
3. The *masi* has been well-soaked in coconut oil (*waiwai*), and sometimes turmeric may be added to enrich the color.
4. Excess oil is squeezed out, the smallest and finest cloths wrapped loosely around the tepee high up, then further layers lower down, held in place with green strips of *masi* bark. The largest pieces are wound around outside these.
6. Several pieces of old cloth, banana leaves, sacking, etc., are wrapped (*viviraka*) over the top and sides to contain the smoke and keep the fire from flaring up. A small "tent flap" is left to tend the fire and check progress.
7. The fire is lit using a dry taper of coconut flower-sheath, shoved in under the kindling. It flames briefly, then slowly smoulders and smokes. Fuel is added as necessary throughout the procedure.
8. At a time judged by looking through the opening, covers are removed and *masi* is rearranged to ensure even smoking, and to minimise the light lines caused by the legs of the *vale*. Timing would vary, but in the demonstration I saw, this was done twice, first two and a half hours after lighting up. All the *masi* was turned inside-out, and the arrangement was reversed, with large pieces innermost and small pieces hung down outside (fig. 6). Two and a half hours later the cloths were again turned inside out, but the large ones left inside. Smoking continued for a couple more hours, so it was a full day's work.
9. When the color is considered right, the coverings are removed. The *masi* feels a little crisp but decidedly oily, and has a pungent smell of smoke and coconut oil. It is carefully folded up and put away under the bed in plastic bags. It is mainly left plain, but today sometimes black motifs are stencilled on, usually spangled across it and not forming a dense band. I think this is probably a new development, resulting from women taking over the production from men, who never did stencilling (fig. 7).

I was told that for special occasions whole rows of smoking-fires might be made, and Qerei said she had once made 1,000 pieces in one continuous session.

(d) Modern substitute *Masikuvui*. Because making *masikuvui* is so demanding, it is now virtually a lost art. An imitation version is now made (invariably by women), which is still always called *masikuvui*. It would be more accurate to call it *masitoni* (soaked *masi*), since it is made *not* by smoking, but by dyeing

barkcloth in a weak solution of *kesa* paint and hanging it out to dry. But that name is never encountered. If expertly made, the result can be attractive, but lacks the subtle variety of tone and color of genuine *masikuvui*. However, even this "faux" *masikuvui* is reddish-brown, and is thus considered acceptable for chiefs to wear (as in fig. 3). Today, however, particularly for weddings, it is sometimes worn by presumptuous commoners.

KUMI OR *GATU VAKATOGA* – THE RED TONGAN CLOTH LOCALISED IN FIJI

In many parts of Fiji today, the most sacred ritual cloth, essential in birth and death and frequently used in marriage also, is prehistorically not Fijian at all, but localised from Tongan barkcloths. It is preponderantly rubbed with weak red *kesa* paint, with little if any black. In several parts of Fiji it is called *kumi* (a name also given to the red end-panel on Cakaudrove hand-painted *masibola*), but I have been unable to establish where this name originated or what it signifies (fig. 8). In Lau, a large number of islands covering a great expanse of water in the south-eastern quadrant of the Fiji Group, its name is *gatu vakatoga*, unambiguously referencing its Tongan origins. *Ngatu* (in Fijian spelled *gatu*) is the name for barkcloth in Tonga, and *vakatoga* means "Tongan-style". This rather tautological name is used to distinguish it from another cloth that is called *gatu vakaviti* ("Fiji-style"). This is divided into two halves, one stencilled with usual Fiji motifs and designs, the other rubbed like Tongan cloth. Unlike the two red cloths previously described, both of these are, and have always been, made entirely by women.

I have watched *gatu vakatoga* being made in Namuka. The process is similar though not identical to that described in intricate detail for neighbouring Moce Island (Kooijman 1977:109-54). Without reiterating Kooijman, I will briefly outline of the process, to explain the red color that is critical to its spiritual status.

The rubbing plates are made by women, who sew strips or twists of pandanus leaf (*voivoi* or *kiekie*), coconut leaflet midribs (*sāsā*) and/or fine pieces of sinnet (*magimagi*) to a backing of the fibrous coconut leaf-sheath (*vulo*) and pandanus leaf. Thin string spun from the bark of the *vau* (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) was formerly used, but today cotton thread is. The name of the plates, *kupeti* or *kuveji*, are cognates of Tongan *kupesi* and Samoan *'upeti fala*, and they share many (but not all) designs.

Processing is done by a women's work-team or *kabani* (company), sitting on either side of a convex board 2-4m long (*pāpā*), often a section of an old canoe hull. Instructions are called out as they proceed, mostly, in traditional Tongan. A strip of old fishing net is spread along the *pāpā* and *kupeti* spaced along it. Fine long strips called *lafoti*, made of sinnet or finely slit coconut leaf midrib, are laid along the top and bottom of the row of *kupeti* to demarcate the sections (*lalaga*) of the cloth. The lot is held in place with protective pieces of *masi* wrapped across the *pāpā* over the *kupeti* and stuck in place under long edges of the *pāpā*, using baked arrowroot (*yabia*) tubers like glue-sticks (fig. 9, left).

Figuring now begins. A single strip of *masi* (called a *laulalo*) is laid along the length of the arrangement. Each end extends past the outside edge of the *kupeti* by a handspan. This will remain white and is called the *tapa* (the only use of that word in Fiji). The cloth covering the *kupeti* is rubbed over by all of the women using swabs loaded with very weak *kesa* paint, to soften it.

The *kesa* is a mixture of two infusions made by boiling bark scraped from the *kesawai* (sp. unknown) and mangrove (*togo* – *Bruguiera gymnorrhiza*). The first is an almost colorless "extender" that lends the right consistency, the second gives the red color.

Next, every woman rubs the section in front of her with her arrowroot "glue stick", and glues on a short strip of *masi* called *laoluga*, rubbing it into place with the paint swab. Now the *gatu* is double thickness and the color is strongest over the raised parts, exactly as in brass-rubbing.

Further *laulalo* and more *laoluga* are joined on along the length and rubbed. When two rows (*lalaga*) are complete, on the command *rua* (two) the *masi* is lifted (*laga*) from the *pāpā* and pushed forward onto the laps of the women on one side. The *tapa* panels at each end are painted with the numbers 1 and 2. Another two *laulalo* are placed on the *pāpā*, edge-glued (*tou*) to one another and to the finished *lalaga*, and rubbing commences again (fig. 9, right). This is continued until the desired number of *lalaga* have been figured. Then the whole cloth is spread out on the village green and the women highlight the main patterns by overpainting with more viscous *kesa*, often darkened with soot. Such cloths can be huge, comparable in length to the *liti* described above, and far wider. They are used for ritual presentations, and smaller lengths are worn for weddings and other special ceremonies, and finally as shrouds draped over graves.

Despite their foreign origins, the *kumi* and *gatu vakatoga* cloths are highly valued "special" cloths, still made in several parts of Fiji and traded to places that do not have red cloths of their own. The connotations of the color red lend them similar importance to the near-obsolete *masivakarerega* and *masikuvui*, and the *faux* substitutes that today bear their name and carry on their function.

All the references of this paper have been integrated in the general bibliography at the end of the book. You are invited to refer to it.

TAPA

DE L'ÉCORCE À L'ÉTOFFE,
ART MILLÉNAIRE D'OCÉANIE
de l'Asie du Sud-Est à la
Polynésie orientale

FROM TREE BARK TO CLOTH:
AN ANCIENT ART OF OCEANIA
From Southeast Asia to
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