Bilong Ol Meri (For All Women): The New Guinea Bilum

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Abstract
The bilum (there are, no doubt, seven hundred different words for it in the languages of the country) is part of the persona of New Guinean women. She makes it herself, knotting the mesh with skilful fingers. The handles are long enough to fit across the top of her forehead. When empty, the bilum covers the shoulders like a half-cape; full, the mesh stretched to the limit with firewood or sweet potatoes, it can carry thirty or more kilograms. It is a treasured personal item — an infant’s cradle, a shopping basket, and a delivery van propelled by womanpower, head bent, shoulders bowed under its weight.
Bilong Ol Meri (For All Women): The New Guinea Bilum

The bilum (there are, no doubt, seven hundred different words for it in the languages of the country) is part of the persona of New Guinean women.1 She makes it herself, knotting the mesh with skilful fingers. The handles are long enough to fit across the top of her forehead. When empty, the bilum covers the shoulders like a half-cape; full, the mesh stretched to the limit with firewood or sweet potatoes, it can carry thirty or more kilograms. It is a treasured personal item — an infant’s cradle, a shopping basket, and a delivery van propelled by womanpower, head bent, shoulders bowed under its weight.

For many New Guinea women, weaving is almost a daily activity; in rural and remote areas this may be from the necessity to provide all kinds of net bags and other items made by looping or netting string for personal use, gifts, everyday clothing and ceremonial wear. But many women, in both rural and urban areas, make traditional and innovative bilum for sale as they have realised that designing

Bilum sellers at Mt. Hagen airport, Western Highlands Province, 1999. The PNG flag design is popular with tourists and locals alike. The buyer on the right is a Kanak woman from New Caledonia. (Photograph: Susan Cochrane)
and making bilum is a means of asserting their economic independence and initiating new forms of cultural exchange.

The recent proliferation of new designs for bilum in the Highlands region of Papua New Guinea provides an example of a new context for women’s creativity. In her study of bilum, Maureen Mackenzie observes that:

Rather than yielding to imported functional equivalents, the range of the traditional artefact is expanding, it is acquiring a new value as a medium of innovation and personal expression … it is emerging as a non-traditional symbol of post-Independence Papua New Guinea. (20)

The bilum is an article that has generally been overlooked in publications and other representations of New Guinean art. MacKenzie’s comment that the bilum is the most hard-worked accessory of everyday life hints at one possible reason for its neglect. It has generally been considered a utilitarian article and a women’s craft of little cultural significance (21). Recent research however has demonstrated that the bilum is not only used for carrying burdens and is a necessary personal artefact for every man, woman and child, but that many types exist which are variously used as practical garments or carry-alls, for adornment as part of dance costume, and in some instances, for ritual purposes.

MacKenzie’s research reveals how the bilum features in the myths of many regions of New Guinea. Humans are not the only ones to carry bilum; myths from many regions tell of spirit women who possess net bags and in the East Sepik province some ancestor figures store potent substances associated with the fertility of crops in their net bags. Net bags are used in men’s rituals and in some societies are still believed effective in providing protection in the supernatural realm (10–11).

As the bilum is an important part of dress, like any fashion accessory there is a choice of several styles in natural fibres and colours and nupela (new designs) woven with bright acrylic thread. Women also make the bags for family members, and often exchange them among themselves as informal gifts. Whether bilum are used in formal exchange or informal gifting, great care is taken in the choice of fibres and the colour scheme, as for example when weaving a large, circular ‘wedding bilum’ as a gift for a sister or close female relative. This will be an important part of the bride’s costume and later will be used to carry the firstborn child. Such bilum are treasured personal possessions.

The looping technique used to make bilum is common to items for everyday use and ceremonial attire. Each bilum is completed from a single string. The maker adds to the string by spinning selected fibres against her thigh and then uses the new length to loop the desired effect into the netbag. Asa Hisau explains that her personal Madang-style bilum was made by her aunt, who has since passed away. Hisau says such bilum are especially treasured because they are thought to contain some part of the deceased person — as the fibre is rolled along the thigh particles of skin and hair become entwined in the string, becoming
A baby in a bilum, whether being carried on a woman’s back or swinging comfortably from the rafters, is still a familiar sight in PNG today. This photograph is from the Cochrane PNG Collection, UoW Archives, RefD160.
Bilum woven in crochet silk made by Sister Anieto of the Papuan Little Sisters of the Poor as a gift for my mother, circa 1960. (Photograph: Susan Cochrane)
an essential part of the bilum. For the person to whom it is given, it will always be a precious reminder of the loved one long after their death.\textsuperscript{3} 

The design and making of bilum by women of the Highlands and other provinces of Papua New Guinea continues to be a fertile source of innovation. Text messages on bilum are increasingly popular, ranging from patriotic slogans to quotes from the Bible, or stating an individual’s identity and locality, or bearing greetings such as Hapi Krismas. Little trinkets sewn inside add another personal touch. Many bilum makers now prefer vibrant colours and are dextrous with weaving new motifs into their work. The crescent shape of Western Highlands bilum, in coarser fibre loosely woven, is used to transport heavy loads of garden produce and firewood. Most often the fibre for this kind of carrying-bilum is ‘bush string’, but unravelled hessian or plastic-coated fibre from rice or coffee sacks has been found to serve just as well.

In the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, many items change hands at markets in towns where villagers sell their surplus foodstuffs, baskets, bilum, items of adornment and small quantities of prepared or raw materials. As elsewhere in the country women of the Eastern Highlands provinces sell their bilum at marketplaces in the provincial capital of Goroka to raise the cash needed to pay for school fees, medicine, clothing and transport. Bilum-makers have invented a plethora of new styles and colour combinations in recent years, so visiting the market is essential to keep an eye on the competition and to find the vendors of coloured wool and cotton threads, tufts of kapul (fur of cuscus, a type of opossum), and prepared natural fibres.

Many of the bilum on offer are made from local plant fibres coloured with natural dyes. Although synthetic coloured yarns are readily available and often preferred for new designs, bilum made from bush string have not been supplanted, as the strength and resilience of natural twine is appreciated. The fur of kapul is also widely used in the Highlands, either to make a complete net bag or, more frequently, woven in tandem with other yarns to enhance the texture and effect of the finished article.

Visit any market place in PNG, and it is evident that local buyers as well as tourists appreciate attractive bilum. At Goroka in the Eastern Highlands, women gather early at the town market place or lay out their wares on pavements. Among the vendors of garden produce, betel-nut and single cigarettes, are clusters of women surrounded by a patchwork of brightly-coloured bilum. There is an air of convivial competitiveness among the sellers. The potential buyer hesitates in front of one array and the seller points to each bilum with a long stick, citing prices and answering questions, others willingly volunteer Tok Pisin, English or vernacular translations to ensure that a fair and informed transaction takes place. Although each maker has her own speciality, some designs and motifs become fashionable; some are self-evident, for example, ‘Cross’ is favoured as a Christian symbol, and ‘One Ace’ by card players. ‘Butterfly’ is generic, but the source of
Artist Francis Poka at the Goroka market sporting an innovative bilum decorated with cock feathers. His speciality is carved and painted groups of figures like soccer teams, patrol officers and policemen, as well as Christ and the saints. (Photograph: Susan Cochrane)
‘Yonki Pawa’ is not evident until told it is derived from the shape of pylons at Yonki power station. The bird of paradise motif and strong colours of the Papua New Guinea flag are also popular in design. Throughout Melanesia, the claiming of a territory or the proclamation of a Protectorate was accompanied by a flag-raising ceremony, which heralded the colonial regime. The raising of the flag of the new nation at the celebration of Papua New Guinea’s Independence on 16th September 1975, represented the changing of an era. From being the ultimate symbol of colonial authority, flags have become integrated into contemporary Melanesian culture as a symbol of indigenous sovereignty. In West Papua the Morning Star flag, the once forbidden symbol of Papuan separatists, when woven into a personal netbag bears the sentiments of its owner.

O’Hanlon notes that women in the Western Highlands are characterised by the ways they wear their bilum and the types of bilum they choose:

The way in which a bag is worn denoted female attractiveness; eligible girls are said to wear their netbags gap ol: knotted so the handles are long and the bag extends well down the back…. Linguistic and cultural distinctions are made with regard to how netbags are worn, whether suspended from the forehead or worn over the shoulder, the first indicating someone brought up to work hard, the latter indicating ‘someone with fancy ways … always throwing a netbag over her shoulder and going off to the market’. (41)

A bilum is often incorporated into the splendour of a full set of ceremonial attire, or bilas. As Michael Mel explains, there are many occasions for which bilas are
Text woven into bilum is quite common, but it is rare to see figures incorporated into the weaving such as this Kapul (Cuscus fur) bilum with the yellow personnage. Designed and made by Igope Jakupa, 1997. (Photograph: Susan Cochrane)
necessary for families and clan groups at the time of a death and mourning, birth, initiation and marriage; on secular occasions, to welcome dignitaries, to mark important days for schools or churches and to participate in festivals. Men and women have their own distinctive sets of bilas, which might include face and body painting, magnificent headdresses, masks and elaborate wigs and an enormous variety of armbands, necklaces, pendants, ear-lobe and nose ornaments as well as the appropriate type of bilum (126–56).

Igope Jakupa, sister of the renowned contemporary artist Jakupa Ako, designed a dance cloak in one of Goroka’s fashionable bilum patterns, ‘Diamond’, for Jakupa to wear as part of an elaborate costume. MacKenzie notes that these flamboyant multi-coloured cloaks worn by men of Gahuku in the Eastern Highlands were created by women as spectacular attire to enhance the presence of the wearer in a group performance (10).

There are not many tourists in the Highlands, as inter-clan fighting, hold-ups on the road and unreliable airline schedules do not make it a favourite destination. In these circumstances, the tourist market has not been the primary impetus for the escalation of experimentation with new colours and designs; yet in recent years designs and colours have proliferated. As bilum artist and entrepreneur Maggie Wilson explains, it is always exciting to try a new pattern and competitiveness among women is keen. In the extensive gardens surrounding her Haus Poroman Lodge out of Mt Hagen, Wilson, together with other women of her clan, has cultivated all the plants that provide fibres for weaving and natural dyes. She encourages local weavers to make every kind of traditional and experimental bilum, sells their work and participates in workshops and exhibitions. Several talented bilum weavers have even experimented with making western-style clothing — skirts, dresses and jackets — using the knotting technique. Wilson showed me her own experiments with skirts (illustrated in cochrane 1997 102) and I heard that someone had taken bilum dresses to show in Paris.

Agatha Waramin, originally from Wewak in East Sepik Province, has lived in Papua New Guinea’s capital, Port Moresby, for many years and since her children have grown up she has devoted more time to her artistic career, developing an extensive repertoire of bilum designs and styles. Her large ‘exhibition pieces’ explore the nature and essence of the art of weaving. Waramin has learnt how to weave styles of bilum from all over the country in order to demonstrate to workshop participants and audiences how to identify them, what the roles of various bilum are, and the weaving techniques involved in the different types. She has held workshops in many venues in Australia and participates in virtually all Papua New Guinea delegations to Pacific Festival of Arts.

In 1994, Agatha participated in the Contemporary Art of the South Pacific exhibition, sponsored by the University of New South Wales, and gave workshops at the St George campus. On this visit to Sydney she went on a trip to the Blue Mountains with a friend and was vividly impressed by the Three Sisters rock
Agatha Warramin with the bilum display at the Festival of Pacific Arts, Noumea, 2000.
(Photograph: Susan Cochrane)
formation. Later in the year Agatha embarked on her first major pictorial work using bilum stitch — a representation of the Three Sisters (Cochrane 1997 100).

It is only recently that bilum have begun to be considered as ‘collector’s items’ or ‘artwork’ and exhibited in cosmopolitan art galleries in Australia and elsewhere. In 1999 the Aketaufa Sori Mama Grup (a group of widows from the Goroka community) was commissioned to make a continuous bilum weaving *Bilong Ol Meri* (for all women), to be part of an installation by Michael Mel at the third Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery. In this context, *Bilong Ol Meri*, was indicative of the respect and appreciation for the art of weaving in Pacific islands cultures. Its presence in the Triennial of contemporary art signalled the abandonment of the prejudiced concepts that indigenous women’s art and creativity is inferior, utilitarian and insignificant in the hierarchy imposed by Western interpretations of it. The continuous bilum, *Bilong Ol Meri*, was a fine example of the innovations that are occurring in bilum-making; it was discussed, negotiated and completed as a collaborative enterprise by the Aketaufa Sori Mama Grup (Semos 108).

The remarkable developments that have taken place over the past twenty years attest to women’s creativity in taking a conventional style in new directions. The incorporation of new materials (coloured cotton and synthetic yarns, plastic, tinsel), the continual invention of motifs in weaving and styles for wearing, keenness to participate in new avenues such as workshops and exhibitions outside their own locality, all indicate the eager spirit with which New Guinea women take advantage of opportunities and rise to challenges.

NOTES

1 Bilum are made throughout New Guinea, including in West Papua, the Indonesian province. Bilum is the name for netbag in Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin, the widely spoken vernacular language, but there are names for each type of bilum in all of the New Guinea languages.


3 Asa Hisau 1988, personal communication Madang.

4 Personal communication Mt Hagen, 1996. Maggie Wilson went to New Caledonia in 1998 to hold bilum-making workshops with Kanak women (organised by the author). A similar type of weaving had been used by Kanak women in the past but the technique had been lost. Conducting the workshops, she found that the skills could be revived and also that the same or similar plants as those used in PNG grew in New Caledonia, which Kanak women could use for weaving.


WORKS CITED


