

Bilum, Bilas, Bilumwear. PNG Women Loop Stylish Dresses to Create New Identities

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Abstract

Starting from a succinct introduction to Papua New Guinea and its history, this essay will sketch the significance of string bags (*bilums*) in traditional and contemporary lives of men and women throughout the country before looping back to considering the country's colonial and postcolonial history from the perspective of the transformations in bodily attire as a result of mission and colonial influence, leading to a consideration the desires and intentions of contemporary women to wear clothes reflecting their current identity as citizens of a global world, with its implications of modernity, development, and gender. The spread of looped *bilumwear* garments in the market also represents an opportunity for income and autonomy for the women involved in its production.

Keywords: bilumwear; string bags; women; contemporary identities; fashion.

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Introduction

Like the looped fabric of *bilumwear*, this chapter is manufactured from a single strand of two-ply string that loops upon itself into a continuous weave, hopefully sufficiently flexible and stretchy to contain the different elements necessary to illustrate the development and meaning of this fashion statement by a group of contemporary women from Papua New Guinea. Starting from a succinct introduction to Papua New Guinea and its history, I will sketch the significance of string bags in traditional and contemporary lives of men and women throughout the country before looping back to considering the country's colonial and postcolonial history from the perspective of the transformations in bodily attire as a result of mission and colonial influence, leading to a consideration the desires and intentions of contemporary women and to wear clothes reflecting their current identity as citizens of a global world, with its implications of modernity, development, and gender differentiation. The double strand of the looping string is therefore that of gender, ethnic and national identity on one side and ideas of tradition, modernity and emerging social class on the other. The developing *bilumwear* industry also resulted in opportunities for income and autonomy for a less privileged group of women, the workers in the cooperatives producing these fashionable clothes. The more successful *bilumwear* stylists, on the other hand, have also benefited from new entrepreneurial opportunities and from international attention as contemporary artists exposing in cosmopolitan museums and art galleries. Bilumwear is therefore considered both from the symbolic point of view as expressing ideas, but also, importantly, as agentive material objects: that is *things* that *act* in the world, creating new possibilities for habits and practices.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea occupies the eastern half of the large island of new Guinea, to the North of Australia, it has been an independent Melanesian nation since 1975 after a variegated experience with German, British and Australian colonisers depending on the time and area.¹ Even more varied than the experiences of foreign rule are the cultures of Papua New Guinea; its cultural diversity is reflected by the linguistic data that more than 800 indigenous languages, belonging to two distinct language groups, are spoken by the people inhabiting the villages and towns in the islands, coasts, swamps, forested valleys and plateaus of this country. Three official languages (English, Tok Pisin and, to a lesser extent, Hiri Motu) today act as *linguae francae* allowing communication among people from different areas of the country.

Other aspects of the cultures animating the life of this country, social organization, beliefs, customs, bodily attire and artistic traditions are as diverse as the language spoken, and have long attracted anthropological attention to its people who have responded to colonisation and missionary evangelisation with the typical Pacific capacity for creatively indigenising foreign influences, giving rise to complex, articulate and evolving contemporary cultures. Of particular relevance here is the variety of ways in which local communities expressed their culture and worldviews by using elements drawn from their natural environment to create highly distinctive styles of self adornment, both in everyday life and for ceremonial purposes. The importance of self-adornment, or *bilas* as it is called in Tok Pisin, has carried on in recent times, with the introduction and adoption of western items of clothing in alternative to or complementing the more traditional styles.²

The looped string bags of tradition

Among such astonishing diversity, it is surprising to find a relatively mundane item of personal attire cutting across cultural differences: string bags. Known locally by their indigenous names that may also

1. The western part of the island was a Dutch colony, and since the sham Act of Free choice of 1969, it has been ruled by Indonesia. See Pieter Drooglever, *An Act of Free Choice: Decolonisation and the Right to Self-Determination in West Papua* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009).
2. See Michael Mel, "Bilas: Dressing the Body in Papua New Guinea," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, vol. 7, ed. Margaret Maynard (Oxford, Berg publisher, 2010): 451–9.

differ according to their size and function, they are known throughout Papua New Guinea by their Tok Pisin name, *bilum*. In her ground-breaking book *Androgynous objects* Maureen MacKenzie describes the “flexible looped string bag” as

the most hard-worked accessory of everyday life in PNG. It appears in many sizes and shapes, from large flexible open-looped domestic carryalls to finger-sized tightly-looped amulets. The *bilum* is traditionally constructed from the interconnected loops of bark fibres handspun into a virtually unbreakable two-ply string. Each bag is completed from a single string, as the maker, usually although not always a woman, alternately adds to the string by spinning more fibres against the thigh, and then uses the new length to construct further loops of the bag.³

Though originally more common among the non-Austronesian speaking cultures of the interior of New Guinea, the skill of looping string bags has been transmitted through cultural contact between groups, in particular since colonial pacification has fostered increased mobility; today it is widely diffused throughout the country, in rural hamlets and in the growing urban centres. For several years now women from all walks of life in PNG have assimilated and incorporated foreign materials in their *bilum* making, from commercial dyes adding to the range of colours in their natural yarns, to imported strings of many different kinds. Though some conventional constraints on colour, design, and looping techniques reserved to specific groups or clans exist, women’s creativity and self expression have found a fertile ground in the experimenting allowed by this flexible and versatile item. Innovations in *bilum* styles are but one example of the cultural creativity emerging from exchanges and relationships between different traditions and cultures, of the “ability of articulating the outside and inside, the global and the local which explain the liveliness of many contemporary societies of Oceania.”⁴

The same versatility and flexibility of string bags is reflected in the uses to which *bilums* are put by women men and children, and by the significance attributed to them by different people in different places and contexts. Mackenzie charted the multiplicity of shapes, sizes, functions, and roles of string bags in everyday and ritual life of people in the country. It is worth recapitulating her splendidly illustrated ethnographic survey at some length, as it is the very characteristics and associations of string bags that she described that make contemporary looped *bilumwear* such an interesting and attractive choice for the young women of Papua New Guinea who are fashioning a new transnational identity for themselves without wishing to renounce their roots in the surprisingly varied traditions of their country.

At its most mundane, a string bag is a container used to carry, store and safeguard all sorts of objects and goods, from garden produce to personal belonging, from cradled infants to mementoes of the departed. It can be of different sizes, and the loops may be entwined loosely to make it stretchable, or more tightly to create a more concealing fabric; its elasticity and versatility make it a multifunctional accessory of daily life and attire, used by children, women and men.

In addition to utilitarian uses, string bags are also used as gifts in informal exchanges to forge, maintain and assert social ties between mothers and their sons and young daughters, wives and their husband and affines, sisters and their brothers, and between a woman and unrelated person with whom she wishes to establish or remark an amicable relationship (such as a visiting anthropologist). Among some *bilum* producing groups, string bags are also an important element in ceremonial exchanges occurring for example at initiation, marriage, and mortuary ceremonies; made by women, they are contributed as part of one group of participants’ gift to another group, thus contributing to the social exchanges between clans or lineages.⁵

3. Maureen MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String bags and gender in central New Guinea* (Melbourne: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), 1.

4. Adriano Favole, *Oceania: isole di creatività culturale* (Bari: Laterza, 2010), 36–7.

5. See, for example, Elisabetta Gnecci Ruscone, “The extraordinary value of ordinary objects: string bags and pandanus mats as Korafe women’s wealth,” in *Women’s Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific*, eds. Anna Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 151–80; and Elisabetta Gnecci Ruscone “Parallel Journeys in Korafe Women’s Laments (Oro Province, Papua New Guinea),” *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, vol. 124, no. 1 (2007): 21–32.



Figure 1: The looped weave of bilums (©Jan Hasselberg 2016)



Figure 2: Highlander dancers at the Morobe Show 2006. Looped net supports the feathers on their headdress (©Jan Hasselberg)

The looping technique results in one of the few flexible and pliable cloth-like materials traditionally produced in New Guinea, the others being woven mats and the beaten bark cloth generally known as tapa in the Pacific area.⁶ In some of the *bilum* producing areas the same technique has also traditionally been used to produce other items more of, mainly ceremonial, garb such as the mourning capes worn by widows, the netted head coverings worn by men Highlands' men under ceremonial headdresses, and men's dancing aprons. Mackenzie describes how, already in the 1980's, the assimilation of imported colourful wools in the production of *bilums* had given rise in the Gahuku Eastern Highlands to a creative evolution of colourful ceremonial looped cloaks produced by women for men to wear in order to enhance their appearance.⁷ Fine string bags are also displayed by women on ceremonial occasions, for example Umeda dancers of the Sandoun Province dance carrying their best string bags, empty but stretched out by inserting a small stick, to show off its design and display their feminine attributes in contrast to those performed by male dancers.⁸



Figure 3: Women dance displaying *bilums*. Morobe Show 2006 (© Jan Hasselberg)

The symbolic and cultural significance of *bilums*, beyond their utilitarian function, is also expressed throughout Papua New Guinea in local mythologies in which spirit women carry string bags, which become “embodiment of ritual potency representing cultural knowledge.”⁹ One such myth is told by the clan elders of the people who are believed to be the original inhabitants of the area around Tufi,

6. See Brigitta Hauser-Schaublin “The Thrill of the Line, the String, and the Frond, or why the Abelam are a Non-cloth Culture,” *Oceania*, vol. 67, no. 20 (1996): 97.
7. Mackenzie, *Androgynous Objects*, 10.
8. Alfred Gell, *Metamorphosis of the Casowaries: Umeda society, language and ritual* (London: University of London Atlone Press, 1975), 183.
9. Cf. Mackenzie, *Androgynous Objects*, 7–10.

in the Oro Province, and attests to the antiquity of the *bilum* making technological knowhow. It tells about life at a time of darkness, when men and women lived in caves and worked by the light of burning coconut fronds, until one man noticed a faint gleam of light to the east, over the sea. He persuaded his brothers to help him build a canoe and they paddled out to sea, following the glimmer until they spied an old woman working on a string bag by the light of something that she kept in a stoppered bamboo tube. When the old spirit woman fell asleep, the men stole the bamboo and paddled homeward, but the old lady, Abumarara, felt the sun's heat leaving her side and awoke. She chased the men crying out: "where is my daylight?," she turned into a cloud and then into thunder, she caught up with the canoe and began rocking it. The terrified men cracked open the tube against the side of their canoe, and the sun escaped into the sky, rising above the point of Kofure, as it still does every day at dawn to this day.



Figure 4: Tufi women with *bilums* paddle to the market (© Jan Hasselberg)

But going beyond even the symbolic, since Marilyn Strathern's argument on "Melanesian construction of artifacts perceived as images"¹⁰, anthropologists working in Oceania "have made 'objects' a prime focus of analysis—but objects redefined in terms of their innate subjectivities, their role as social agents";¹¹ they consider objects not just as things to be seen, appreciated aesthetically and interpreted as symbols of something else, but also as the stuff of experience, as creating social knowledge through bodily, sensorial experience. So, for example, gender identity is somehow 'made' rather than 'expressed' by the actions of women as they perform their everyday tasks, in the realms of production and reproduction. The very actions of gathering and preparing raw materials and then looping a string bag, the way in which the new *bilum* is flattened out to display it, rolled up inside-out to store it, loaded with produce and emptied of its contents, as well as the obvious parallels between a maternal womb and the shape of the *bilum*, its stretchiness, and its function as baby carrier and portable cot, are easily associated to a

10. Marilyn Strathern "Artifacts of history, Events and the Interpretation of History," in *Culture and History in the Pacific*, ed. Jukka Siikala (Helsinki: Finnish Anthropological Society, 1990), 167.

11. Joshua Bell and Haidy Geismar, "Materialising Oceania: New ethnographies of things in Melanesia and Polynesia," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 20 (2009): 4.

maternal womb. Furthermore, “the way in which the bilum is ‘carried’ by women but ‘worn’ by men provides a universally understood key to gender differentiation.”¹²

Beyond its association with a particular image of womanhood, the socially approved hard working mother who provides garden food for her family, contributes gifts to kin and clan, and bears children, many other aspects of identity may be looped into the texture and patterns of bilums, and in their use in the context of gift exchanges at ritual celebrating lifecycle events. In chapter 1 of Maureen MacKenzie’s exhaustive text, several aspects of identity associated in different PNG cultures to specific types of string bags are discussed. Particular styles of *bilum* are reserved in some societies, to mourners; for example in the Gulf, Western and Central Provinces of PNG widows wear tiny string bags around their necks, containing their deceased husbands’ personal possessions. At the end of the mourning period such string bags are burnt to effect a clean break between the widow and the deceased. In other societies, such as Abelam and throughout the East and West Sepik provinces, special kinds of *bilums* mark important stages in men and women’s lifecycles; in the Murik Lakes region a string bag decorated with cowrie shells is reserved to the head of the matriline.¹³ Local variations in techniques, colour and pattern combinations express the carrier’s regional identity. In the growing urban centres, *bilums* are also effective indicators of tribal identity, distinguishing women of different origins.

At same time though, in the early post-independence days, characterised by a search for shared customs and items of material culture speaking of a national identity forged out of the unique traditions of hundreds of different cultures, *bilums* emerged as one such transversal neo-traditional symbols of PNG unity¹⁴ More specifically they aptly represented an idealised rhetoric of PNG womanhood, referring to the qualities and values of *kastom* pertaining to a traditional but not primitive mother and wife, hard-working and nurturing, upholding the moral values of the community, accompanying her family on the path to development and independence. “A neo-traditional symbol, the string bag connects divergent past histories, validates traditional customs and stimulates a sense of unique PNG cultural heritage which owes nothing to western cultural forms.”¹⁵

Contemporary *Bilums*

Several authors have since commented on the creative ways in which PNG women have appropriated imported materials such as wool and synthetic yarn, or commercial dyes, to create new models and styles of string bags.¹⁶ As well as an avenue for creative expression, making *bilums* for sale has also offered women precious opportunities for earning cash and developing entrepreneurial capabilities. The markets of Goroka, Mount Hagen and Port Moresby, in particular, feature several *bilum* sellers with their colourful wares, for local and tourist buyers. Some women are now able to widen their market by selling overseas through merchants or directly online. Although women from most regions make string bags for themselves, for giving in formal and informal exchanges or for selling, certain regional centres have acquired a reputation for the commercial production of beautiful *bilums*, among these are the Southern and Eastern Highlands, for the colourful and soft stringbags, with addition of wool and animal fur, the Sepik for natural bark string bags, and the Madang area for their particular patterns in shades of purple obtained from natural dyes and the fringed finish.¹⁷ The new materials available have allowed women to

12. Mackenzie, *Androgynous Objects*, 18.

13. Mackenzie, 15–8.

14. Mackenzie, 2–5.

15. Mackenzie, 20.

16. See, for instance, Susan Cochrane, *Becoming art: some relationships between Pacific art and Western culture*, Doctor of Philosophy thesis (Wollongong: University of Wollongong, 1995), <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/2088>; Susan Cochrane “Bilong Ol Meri (For All Women): the New Guinea Bilum, *Kunapipi*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2005); Nicolas Garnier, “Fashion and Bilum, from Tradition to Modernity, from Individual Creation to Collective Achievement,” in *Hailans to Ailans, Contemporary Art of Papua New Guinea Art*, ed. Pamela Rosi (Victoria: Alcheringa Gallery, London: Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, 2009).

17. Susan Cochrane, “Bilum breakout: fashion, artworld, national pride,” *Artlink*, vol. 29, no.2 (2009): 64.



Figure 5: Baby cradled in his *bilum* (© Jan Hasselberg, 2010)

save time for producing the yarns, to add to traditional patterns and designs and to infinitely increase the range of colours and hues; however, some women still prefer bush yarn for their string bags, especially for the strong, expandable large *bilums* for carrying heavy loads such as garden produce, or for the string bags made to sell to those tourists who appreciate the natural look of bush yarn.



Figure 6: A variety of *bilum* styles for sale at the Ukarumpa market (@Kunahupe Michael John, 2009)

The changes in contemporary string bags are also related to the new lifestyles and aspirations of its users. Generally speaking close-knit patterns and shorter handles are preferred by urban dwellers, who feel they are safer as their contents are more concealed and safer from pickpockets; smaller *bilums* are made for carrying cell phones and other personal items, while string bags with longer handles are favoured by students and school children for carrying books like a satchel. The greater mobility of people within the country has also resulted in experimentation with patterns and looping techniques that are considered typical of other provinces, but innovations result also from women creatively experimenting new designs and patterns, including in their repertoire new symbols referring to aspects of contemporary life, some of these quickly become popular and expert *bilum* makers are known to study a new pattern they have seen in the street in order to try reproducing it for themselves.

It is important to note that women in Papua New Guinea generally begin a new bilum with nothing but an idea in mind. They do not use sketches or plans. Before they start the looping, the women have made a decision about the desired size and design. They know the amount of yarn and the colours needed. When they choose a pattern they may refer to a known design, may have been inspired by another woman's bilum or they may invent a new style themselves.¹⁸

Among the popular designs looped into contemporary string bags are the cross and the Christmas tree as symbols of Christianity; the bird of paradise pattern from the national flag, often reproduced in the flag colours, indexes the wearer's identity as a citizen of the independent state of Papua New Guinea, and is a popular item around national celebrations such as Independence Day, but other patterns are more specific references to the maker's or wearer's life, aspirations, and desires. These include designs such as *kundu* drum, referring to traditional dance festivals; computer and highway designs, relating to the wearer's everyday work in 'modern' contemporary contexts.¹⁹ Also popular are string bag patterns

18. Regina Knapp "Netting and Networking: String Bags from the Highlands of Papua New Guinea," *Baessler-Archiv*, vol. 60 (2012): 135.

19. Knapp, 143–8.

incorporating written messages or slogans, which refer to a person's affiliation to a specific cultural or religious group, province or sports team. Such inventiveness in devising new patterns to be looped into the string bags' designs also helps the makers obviate some of the traditional restrictions on using the patterns belonging to specific clans or tribes.²⁰

By examining *bilums* as media of self-presentation resulting from women's desires and imaginings, Barbara Anderson carries into the present Mackenzie's observation that their different styles have long given expression to categories of social difference; she argues that "growing inequality has introduced additional axes of distinction that are now woven into the bags: class, education, region, generation, urban/rural residence, and so on."²¹ Processes of social change and the associated desires and opportunities for social mobility and self-expression are all involved in the vibrantly creative use made by women of customary techniques to express their interest for contemporary values such as freedom and mobility. Their "experiences of freedom and constraint, precarity and possibility, encourage the emergence of new shapes and styles that tease the edges of 'traditional' femininity"²².

The expressive potential of *bilums* has also been recognised by the inclusion of these artefacts as part of artistic exhibitions and performances in museums and art galleries, both in Papua New Guinea and abroad, part of a wider movement for the recognition of textiles, typically a female production, as art. The cultural significance of the different kinds of textiles produced by women throughout Oceania has been commented on by Annette Weiner, who described cloth as a metaphor for society.²³ Heather E. Young Leslie, and Ping-Ann Addo have commented on hybridity and pragmatic creativity as a salient Pacific aesthetic, expressed in particular by contemporary textile artists throughout Oceania.

Contemporary Pacific textile artisans conjoin, blend and re-imagine key traditional practices and ideologies, producing and deploying alternative materials, meanings, and encodings. The resultant 'hybridized' products offer reflexive modes for dealing with the rapidly changing political and economic realities experienced by Pacific peoples over the last century. These are some of the characteristics of what some have identified as hybridity—a syncretism of essences, forms, and practices. ... *Pragmatic creativity* is our term for a sense of willingness, an opportunistic investigation and awareness of the local environment, a perpetual openness to inspiration by the local, as it is applied in the production of artistic material. '*Pragmatic creativity* is a way of seeing, being in, and fashioning the world that is alert, flexible, pliable, open to modification, adaptation, re-adaptation and, yes, to hybridization.'²⁴

The growing awareness of the artistic relevance of typically female productions in textile materials including *bilum*, is reflected in the inclusion of such artefacts in art galleries, museums exhibitions and events, which has become increasingly common since the 1990s.²⁵ In 1999 a collective of widows from Goroka participated with a "continuous *bilum* weaving" to Michael Mel's installation at the Third Asia Pacific Triennial, at the Queensland Art Gallery.²⁶ Such designation of *bilums* as art is also sustained at the 'grass roots' level in Papua New Guinea where, writes Nicholas Garnier, several urban dwellers collect string bags from different provinces and different patterns not to wear or use as commodities,

20. For a discussion on the limitations to contemporary artists' creativity imposed by traditional cultural copyrights and taboos specifically associated to textiles in PNG, see Wendi Choulai and Jacquelyn Lewis Harris, "Women and the fibre arts of Papua New Guinea," in *Art and Performance in Oceania*, eds. Barry Craig, Berrie Kernot and Christopher Anderson (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999): 21–7.

21. Barbara Anderson "Style and self-making: String bag production in the Papua New Guinea Highlands," *Anthropology Today*, vol. 31, no. 5 (October 2015): 15.

22. Anderson, 20.

23. Annette Weiner, "Why Cloth? Wealth, Gender and Power in Oceania," in *Cloth and Human Experience*, eds. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1989): 37–72.

24. Heather Young Leslie and Ping-Ann Addo, "Hybridity and Pragmatic Creativity," *Pacific Arts*, vol. 12, nn. 3–5 (2007): 13.

25. Ross Searle, "Weaving the Old with the New: Textile Art Forms in Niugini," *Artlink*, (December 1996): 16–4, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/427/weaving-the-old-with-the-new-textile-art-forms-in-/>.

26. Susan Cochrane, *Bilum Breakout*, 64.

but to display in their homes like works of art.²⁷ Further domestic recognition of the status of *bilum* work as an artistic endeavour was promoted by the ambitious Apa Kenge National Bilum project, coordinated by Dame Carol Kidu, Minister for Community Development and Nicolas Garnier, Director of the Alliance Francaise in Port Moresby and lecturer at the University of Papua New Guinea, with a group of women from the Morata settlement of Port Moresby, who agreed to cooperate in the looping of a “monumental” string bag to be displayed in the Grand Hall of the National Parliament building to complement the—mostly man made—artworks representing the diverse cultures of the unified nation of Papua New Guinea. Woven by seventeen women, the *bilum* colourfully loops together people from all the country, the centre piece is a large reproduction of the national flag, which is surrounded by smaller provincial flags. In Garnier’s own words,

This monumental bilum is an example of a modern creation deeply rooted in tradition. It illustrates the capacity of public institutions (a University and the Parliament) to initiate and acknowledge the creativity of women who live in particularly harsh conditions. It also shows that the creation of a monumental bilum, otherwise a modest artefact, by a group of women living in a neglected settlement of the capital city, could generate national pride and be taken as an example to demonstrate the talents of PNG citizens to the rest of the world.²⁸

Before I finally turn to the invention and development of *bilumwear* as social and cultural fashion phenomenon, it is necessary to make another, this time historical, detour to provide the reader with some background to the changing dress styles in Papua New Guinea from colonial days to date.

A short history of colonial and postcolonial clothing in PNG

It is important to keep in mind the extreme diversity of indigenous cultures within Papua New Guinea, a variety of languages, customs and beliefs that is made even more diverse by the overlaying of different historical experiences of colonisation and Christian evangelisation by several different mission organizations. People in different parts of the nation have been contacted, colonised and evangelised at different historical times by colonialists and missionaries with ideas and worldviews that reflected their own cultural backgrounds. It is generally understood for example, that among the early missionaries, the Catholics were less concerned with eradicating traditional dances and costumes, while Lutheran and Methodist missionaries, emanating from the Victorian culture at home, invested more energy in covering and disciplining pagan, savage bodies by introducing garments that became indicators of a newly acquired identity as civilised convert.²⁹ Particular emphasis was placed on the training of female converts to become good wives for the male converts and good mothers for future generations of native Christians. Such project of refashioning bodies was realised, among other things, by teaching women to sew and wear long, loose calico tops, which are now common throughout the country and are known as *Meri blouses*.³⁰

It is easy to associate such dress codes to the imposition of a western, Christian view of proper womanhood and modest comportment. Missionaries however were not the only ones to be preoccupied with the outward expression of indigenous identity through clothing. In apparent contrast to the missionary project colonial rules and Native Regulations were devised to govern racial segregation, so for example from 1919 to around 1940 “all Papuans, both male and female, were forbidden to wear clothes on the

27. Nicolas Garnier, *Fashion and Bilum*, 2.

28. Nicolas Garnier, “The Apa Kenge National Bilum,” *iconophilia*, (April 8, 2011), <http://www.iconophilia.net/?s=bilum>.

29. Richard Eves, “Colonialism, Corporeality and Character: Methodist Missions and the Refashioning of Bodies in the Pacific,” *History and Anthropology*, vol. 10, no. 1, (November 1996): 85–138. On page 104 and 105 respectively are two ‘before and after’ staged photographs (c. 1890, from the Methodist Overseas Mission collection in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales) of the same three Dobuan girls, whose conversion is clearly marked in the second image by their wearing of blouses.

30. See Michelle MacCarthy, “The morality of *mweki*: Performing sexuality in the ‘Islands of Love,’” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, (2016): 165.



Figure 7: Dancers, Morobe Show 2006. Creative use of looped textile to make a garment covering the dancers' breasts (©Jan Hasselberg)

upper part of the body,” except when attending church.³¹ Such regulations, according to Regis Tove Stella were part of a wider agenda to enforce racial segregation by legislating that indigenous people, while not offending Western sensibilities, should remain “native” and authentic.³² Beyond these, sometimes contrasting, colonial tactics for the ‘edification’ of natives through the control of their bodies and clothing, however, another aspect must be taken into consideration. As has been highlighted by several authors working throughout Oceania, Pacific people were not merely passive recipients of exogenous influences. “Without denying the semiotic chainmail which linked nakedness, sexuality and sin in Christian conceptions, we need to acknowledge how introduced cloth was actively sought by Oceanic peoples; its very materiality a sign of the spiritual efficacy and power of foreigners.”³³ Women from different parts of the Pacific and New Guinea, informed by their various cultures and influenced by their different experiences of colonisation and evangelisation have differently participated in the re-elaboration and appropriation of western garments whose meanings became dramatically transformed, “saturated with the values of indigenous sanctity and rank, anti-colonial resistance, cultural pride, women’s collectivities, national identities and transnational connections in an increasingly globalised world.”³⁴ If in the early phase of Christian conversion native women appropriated the materials provided by missionaries and learned to sew and wear cotton dresses and blouses, the resulting *ailan dresses* (Vanuatu)³⁵, *robes mission* (New Caledonia)³⁶ and *meri blouses* (Papua new Guinea) are all exemplary cases of the tension between imposition and re-appropriation in the creative agency of indigenous women in the face of change. Over the years these garments have been subjected to processes of incorporation, indigenisation and transformation, becoming iconic of several aspects of their wearers’ identities, including Christianity, modernity, ethnicity, denomination, nationality. The colourful, loose fitting long blouses or dresses are now considered to be the customary ‘national’ bilas for women.³⁷ From their missionary origins they have carried over the idea that these are the most appropriate clothes for women to ‘look good,’³⁸ with all the implications of representing the ideal woman, a Christian wife and mother, a hardworking upstanding member of her community, and yet authentically tied to indigenous customary lifestyle. To the point that in later years, such image has been brought into question by the lifestyles and aspirations of some women who work and live in urban centres and who are forging alternative models for their life, and no longer feel that they are comfortable wearing *meri blouses* or their national equivalent, as they are symbolic of an old-fashioned image of womanhood, not representative of who they are or wish to be.³⁹

31. Edward Wolfers, *Race Relations and Colonial Rule in Papua new Guinea* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1975), 47.

32. Regis Tove Stella, *Imagining the Other: the Representation of the Papua New Guinean Other* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 97. See also Jacqueline Lewis- Harris, “The Motu Koita of Papua New Guinea,” *Berg Encyclopedia of Costume*, https://www.academia.edu/3129446/The_Motu_Koita_of_Papua_New_Guinea-_Berg_Encyclopedia_of_Costume.

33. Margaret Jolly. “Saturated History of Christianity and Cloth,” in *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*, eds. Hyaewol Choi and Margaret Jolly (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 432.

34. Jolly, 432.

35. Lissant Bolton, “Gender, status and introduced clothing in Vanuatu,” in *Clothing the Pacific*, ed. Chloe Colchester (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 119–39; and Maggie Cummings, “Looking Good: The cultural politics of island dress for young women in Vanuatu,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2013): 33–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2013.0007>.

36. Anna Paini, “Rhabiller les symboles: les femmes kanak et la robe mission à Lifou (Nouvelle Calédonie),” *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, vol. 117 (2003): 233–53; Anna Paini, “Risemantizzare vecchi e nuovi simboli: Robe mission e imprenditorialità delle donne kanak (Nuova Caledonia),” in *Antropologia dell’Oceania*, eds. Elisabetta Gnechi Ruscone e Anna Paini (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2009), 237–63; Anna Paini, “Re-dressing Materiality: *Robes Mission* from ‘Colonial’ to ‘Cultural’ Object, and Entrepreneurship of Kanak Women in Lifou,” in *Tides of Innovation in Oceania: Value, Materiality and Place*, eds. Elisabetta Gnechi Ruscone and Anna Paini (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 139–79.

37. See Michael Mel, “Bilas: Dressing the Body in Papua New Guinea,” 456–7.

38. Maggie Cummings, “Looking Good: The cultural politics of island dress for young women in Vanuatu.”

39. Ceridewn Spark, “Working Out What to Wear In Papua New Guinea: The Politics of Fashion in *Stella*,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2015): 39–70.

Bilumwear: its makers and wearers

So, following in the wake of Annette Weiner's work as developed by Susanne Kuechler and Graeme Were's writing, I will conclude this essay by considering the emergence of *bilumwear* in Papua New Guinea from the point of view of the agentive capacity of cloth in the Pacific; that is asking what the looped *bilum* clothing does, as well as what it means.⁴⁰ Because as Webb Kane reminds us, clothes, just like other material objects, are not merely expressive of other meanings "invisible and immaterial ideas," they have a role in causal relations in their own right, they are a way of acting in the world, and thus new clothing should be considered to make new practices, habits, intentions, possible.⁴¹

What emerges by following the string as it loops from traditional *bilas* and *bilums*, to the adoption and incorporation of colonial ideas about the proper ways to dress bodies, to the modifications of stringbags to account for changed lifestyles, is that self adornment, dressing up, are not casual activities. People have always put and continue to put attention and energy into what they wear to express their identity in different situations. It is in this context of creative adaptations and innovative solutions to 'looking good' that the invention of *bilumwear* should be contemplated.

Probably the first to experiment with creating garments for the fashion market by adapting the looping technique was Sharon Brissoni, a designer of Italian origin, born and bred in Papua New Guinea's capital, Port Moresby. After working for some time in the Milano fashion industry, Sharon had returned to live in Port Moresby and in 1995 she began researching the kinds of textiles that were produced in the country, as she had become aware that international fashion designers were searching for new innovative textiles to use in their creations. In the course of her research, she read Maureen MacKenzie's classic text on *bilums*,⁴²

and immediately became fascinated by the *bilum* bags and textile ... I learned how to loop from local women who showed me the technique when I began my research—I wanted to know what tools were used, how the fibre spinning occurred and how the looping was done. I cannot compare my looping abilities to the local women's! ... I began experimenting with the textile, working with one local lady we co-created simple garments like tops, skirts etc. I then began looking at using local traditional dyes to colour the prototypes—the first attempts were quite dreadful! What kept me going was the excitement around moving into uncharted territories of design and creativity.⁴³

In time, Brissoni built up a team of eleven women living in the settlement of Morata, on the outskirts of Port Moresby; recruited by word of mouth all women knew each other and came from the Highlands area of PNG. The women worked as a group in a workshop space where they could bring their children when necessary, they were full-time employees and

I made it clear to the women that they would receive wages regardless of me being able to sell the product or not, I knew how difficult it was for them to get a job (the majority of the women I worked with were illiterate and had not received an education, some of them only spoke their traditional dialect and had never spoken Pidgin or English) so I wanted them to earn an income in order to support their families.⁴⁴

Sharon Brissoni's pioneering productions also relied on the collaboration of a woman in the Highlands who was responsible for sourcing the raw bark fibre to be spun by local women into string according to the quality required by the women in Port Moresby to loop fashion garments.

40. Susanne Kuechler and Graeme Were, "The Social World of Cloth in the Pacific Islands," in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, vol. 7, ed. Margaret Maynard (Oxford: Berg publisher, 2010), 381.

41. Webb Keane "The hazards of new clothes. What makes signs possible," in *The art of clothing: a Pacific experience*, eds. Susanne Kuechler and Graeme Were (London: UCL Press, 2005), 6–7.

42. Cf. Mackenzie, *Androgynous Objects*.

43. This, and all the following quotes by Sharon Brissoni are from an e-mail interview I conducted with her, dated 3–3–2019.

44. Brissoni, interview, 2019.

The raw materials were a mesh of different bark fibres which I researched and collected traveling to the Highlands myself and sourcing them from different villages. I also used local seeds, feathers and nuts to adorn the garments ... The garments would then be fumigated by a local company to comply with regulations around exporting natural products overseas—they would undergo quality control and then be ready for shipment to the clients overseas.⁴⁵

Working out the best way to make use of the looping technique and local fibre strings was an experimental process, Sharon Brissoni describes her early designs as

quite conventional, but as I began exploring the textile's features (how it draped, texture and flow) my designs started to conform to its conditions of elasticity or rigidity ... The designs were inspired by the textile itself, its natural colours, lightness and transparency in the loop, its ethereal consistency.⁴⁶

Although the initial concept and designs were her own, she relates that she worked closely with the women in her group who, once they accepted the idea of adapting their skills as *bilum* makers to the new task of producing clothes,

were very much involved in the design process. We collectively discussed and reviewed the designs reflecting on what was possible and what could not be achieved in terms of translating from the design to the actual product ... At first they followed what I asked them to do, then as they became more confident in themselves and their know-how they began to experiment on their own ... All the women I worked with were very creative and I could see how they became more and more daring with their creativity once we started generating exposure of our products ... they were very brave because it wasn't the traditional *bilum* bag they were producing but an entirely new product.⁴⁷

Given Sharon's previous experiences and contacts in the Italian fashion industry, her enterprise aimed at producing garments for the international market "the jet-setting people who spend their summer holidays on the Cote d'Azur and Amalfi coast and who are always on the search for new, innovative and exotic products." In her efforts to generate interest for her newly established PNG business, in 1999 Sharon Brissoni presented her label at MOMI-MODAMILANO, then in 2000 at Milanovendemoda. From this participation in the European fashion trade shows, and some photographic shoots, several orders were generated for the group of women working in Port Moresby.⁴⁸

This also spawned some attention from the local media, and more women began to experiment themselves with the possibilities of making clothes by adapting the traditional materials and skills of *bilum* making. Mothers and aunts began making smart clothes for their daughters or nieces to wear on special occasions. Just like when making string bags, women can get inspiration by a model or pattern they see on someone, and try looping their own version of it, making use of the wide array of strings and dyes available to them.

Over time, several other Papua New Guinea women have started businesses and cooperatives to produce and market *bilumwear* fashion. Among the best known contemporary designers of *bilum* clothing are Florence Jaukae and Kathy Kata, both of whom have also shown their work in international as well as local contexts, participating in fashion shows and in exhibitions celebrating contemporary art from PNG or the Pacific.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the main difference between these enterprises and Sharon Brissoni's

45. Brissoni, interview, 2019.

46. Brissoni, interview, 2019.

47. Brissoni, interview, 2019.

48. Robyn Rankin, "The Beauty of Bilumwear," *Lily Magazine*, (2014).

49. For example, Florence Jaukae — Kamel's *bilum* dress *Kalibobo* (2010) has been acquired by the Brisbane Art Gallery QAGOMA as part of the permanent collection, and the stylist has featured in the gallery's exhibitions such as "No. 1 Neighbour: Art in Papua New Guinea 1996-2016" and performances such as "Twist and Loop" with choreographer Julia Mage'au Gray (see <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/twist-and-loop/>). After Cathy Kata was artist in residence at the Young Museum in San Francisco, when she participated in workshops and exhibitions, her work was also shown in Canada and

pioneering label, is that their work is primarily directed to the domestic market.

Considering that *bilum* were—and still are—an integral part of prestige costumes and elaborate self-adornment, the ready acceptance by the PNG public of the new fashion of *bilum* clothing is not surprising. Appreciation of the skill and originality of each weaver is embedded in PNG culture.⁵⁰

For example one of the earlier achievements by Jaukae-Kamel was in 2006, when she was commissioned to design and produce a line of *bilum* clothing to be worn by the Papua New Guinea teams at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. Given the time involved in the production of *bilumwear*, it is not often worn as everyday garments, it is most often seen as smart, formal dress on occasions where the wearer's identity and social standing is consciously displayed (beauty pageants such as Miss Papua New Guinea or Miss Pacific Islands, graduation ceremonies, charity galas, etc.). So who are the customers of these *bilumwear* designers and producers? And, to return to the question of agency what does *bilumwear* do? For the most part they are with a higher standard of education than the majority, they are urban dwellers, students or professional women, often they have spent some years abroad pursuing education or work opportunities, as such they do not easily conform to the idealised image of the 'good PNG woman,' modelled on the rural Christian mother. Such women have been described by Ceridwen Spark as a "group hitherto consigned to the margins of Pacific societies on the basis that they represent an 'inauthentic minority,'" who are the protagonists of "An Oceanic revolution," also thanks to the publication of new Papua New Guinea fashion magazines such as *Stella* and *Lily*.⁵¹ In a previous article Spark has highlighted the existence and predicament of an emerging group of women, who have largely been ignored in scholarly writing on Papua New Guinea

The educated Papua New Guinean women of today are both in the minority and construed by many Papua New Guineans as inauthentic, especially in relation to their uneducated 'grass roots' village-dwelling counterparts. Seen as having transgressed their gender roles, they are perceived as threats by both women and men and subject to additional forms of discrimination. Anecdotal evidence and newspaper reports suggest that educated women may be more subject to verbal and physical attacks on the street or in buses (see, for example, the 2008 Papua New Guinea Post Courier stories of 12 April, 15 April and 21 May). These attacks are made possible in part because of educated women's visible difference (for instance, wearing jeans) from the majority of PNG women. Also, however, such attacks are to a great extent culturally sanctioned as the proper response to women who have stepped out of line.⁵²

In such context, deciding what to wear 'to look good' involves several considerations, including the elaboration of new gender roles and relations, issues of emerging urbanised classes and class envy, the development of collective identities beyond the village and clan of origin and even beyond Papua New Guinea itself. Spark shows that *Stella's* editorial policy of representing different styles of dress and publishing stories of successful women subverts the hitherto common view of educated women wearing western clothing as somehow immoral or at the very least as relinquishing traditional culture and gender roles, thus contributing to the construction of new femininities, and highlights the trans-national, Oceanic, Pacific Island, rather than national or village identity to which this cohort of women refers to. At the same time, this alternative depiction and normalisation of modern Papua New Guinean women

Great Britain as part of the "Hailans to Ailans" international exhibition of contemporary PNG art (2009), see note 15.

50. Cf. Susan Cochrane, "Bilum breakout," 64.

51. Ceridwen Spark, "An Oceanic Revolution? *Stella* and the Construction of New Femininities in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014): 54.

52. Ceridwen Spark, "Changing Lives," *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 25, no. 63 (2010): 17–30. For a discussion of the ways in which female agency is interpreted as stepping out of line and validates gendered violence in contemporary PNG, see Holly Wardlow, *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2006), in particular chapter 2.

as participating in the regional Oceanic identity also undermines the characterisation in western media of Papua New Guinea as a backward country where women are inevitably victims of violence.⁵³



Figure 8: Goroka Bilum Festival featuring Florence Jaukae Kamel's 2019 collection (©Johannes Terra)

The acceptable, even desirable, clothing that are published in these modern Papua New Guinean women fashion magazines, are of course of many different kinds, from jeans to stiletto shoes and business attire, to second hand dresses and blouses. While globalisation certainly plays a part in the adoption of such western outfits, Spark argues that there is more to the modern PNG women's choices than passive copying of global fashion. As the invention of *bilumwear* demonstrates global influences are interpreted according to local sensitivities,

In the case of PNG, this reworking involves Papua New Guinean women's creative engagement with fashions in ways that incorporate locally made and traditional pieces, designs, and influences.⁵⁴

An important aspect, therefore, of *bilum* wear fashion is precisely that it permits the women who live and desire lives that lie outside the conventional rural model of womanhood, the educated, professional cosmopolitan women who make up the majority of the readership for magazines such as *Stella* and *Lily*, to choose clothes which fit with the construction of new feminine subjectivities involved with modernity yet wishing to acknowledge and display a recognition of and connection to local traditions. Unlike the westerner's use of 'ethnic' clothing, with its subtext of authenticity, PNG women wearing *bilumwear* are conscious of and gratified by the design skills and the constant experimentation with new materials and patterns embodied in their garments. But these are not the only qualities that are fostered by the development of this local fashion industry, as Susan Cochrane emphasizes, the promotion and marketing of these garments involves entrepreneurial skill, flair and spirit of competition.⁵⁵

It should also be remembered that whether it is a small, individual side business by *bilum* makers and sellers at the town markets, or larger scale enterprises where a designer develops lines of fashion clothes

53. Spark, *Working Out What to Wear*, 48.

54. Spark, 44.

55. Cochrane, *Bilum Breakout*, 64.

and employs a number of women to loop the garments, this trend also provides many women with an avenue for income, economic independence and a different role in the family and society.

The increasing popularity of *bilumwear* fashion also feeds into other avenues for (mainly female) entrepreneurship, such as the creation of outlets like the Miss PNG Shop opened at Vision City a popular shopping centre in Port Moresby as an outlet for local producers of fashion and accessories, which features over 20 stockists, including *bilumwear* makers, thus increasing the marketing and shopping opportunities, as ready-to wear items can be purchased off the rack at cheaper prices than custom made garments.⁵⁶

As *bilumwear* becomes more widely recognised and marketed as suitable garments for women who wish to claim a place and identity as women of the contemporary modern world, but without denying their rootedness in Papua New Guinean culture, there is a greater diversification among designers and producers, from high-range internationally known stylists, to producers of off the rack ready-to wear items, to market vendors. Due also to their personal history, which in parallel to that of some of their customers, involves cosmopolitan connections and experiences beyond the national border, the two best known *bilum* wear stylists have also made a name for themselves, and for Papua New Guinea's female creativity, in international art contexts. Among the most recent instances of institutional recognition of *bilum* making as art are The Honolulu Biennial 2019 which features *bilum* fibre artist Florence Jaukae Kamel from Goroka; the "Hailans to Ailans" exhibition held in 2009 in two galleries in London and in Victoria, BC, showing the work of contemporary PNG artists including Cathy Kata; and *Twist and Loop*, the performance event created by Florence Jaukae Kamel in collaboration with tattoo artist and choreographer Julia Mage'au Gray for the exhibition "No.1 Neighbour: Art in Papua New Guinea 1966-2016" held at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane.⁵⁷ Both Cathy Kata and Florence Jaukae Kamel are renowned for their production of garments using *bilum* materials and techniques, they are the main protagonists of the current fashion trend for *bilumwear*. As Ruth McDougall claims, their work contributes to the ongoing debate on contemporary/ethnic art.

We need only look at the spectacular fashion garments made by women in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea using traditional *bilum* (or string bag) looping techniques to find works that are completely contemporary visual expressions as well as being located in a particular place. These garments are created to demonstrate a particular mode of Papua New Guinea aesthetic sophistication, to encourage younger women to learn looping traditions, and to enlarge the potential market for their work. Forging responses to experiences of the 'global' from a position deeply embedded in local histories and social realities, individuals such as eastern Highlands *bilum*-wear maker Cathy Kata exposes us to a different way of thinking. Rather than being outside the contemporary, the objects they create extend and deepen our experience and understanding of the contemporary.⁵⁸

Conclusions

Bilums are an ubiquitous item of bodily attire, *bilas*, in Papua New Guinea. Women originally made them with natural fibres and natural dyes, but have long incorporated introduced materials and innovative patterns have developed. Worn by women and men, *bilums* are highly adaptable; new styles are constantly been created reflecting the necessities and aesthetic sensibilities of different lifestyles and gendered identities.

Since the 1990's a number of women have began experimenting to create clothing using the looping techniques of *bilum* making. *Bilumwear* is popular among women of the emerging urban middle class. These garments express their cultural connection to traditional aesthetics and skills whilst adhering to a

56. See Lily PNG Magazine Facebook post 19th January 2019.

57. See <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/twist-and-loop/> for a description and videos on the event.

58. Ruth McDougall, "A View from Elsewhere. A Global Stage — Curating Textiles from the Asia Pacific," in *The Handbook of Textile Culture*, eds. Janis Jeffries, Diana Wood Conroy and Hazel Clark (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 2.



Figure 9: Goroka Bilum festival, bilum dress by Florence Jaukae Kamel collection (©Johannes Terra)

contemporary identity predicated upon postcolonial discourses valorising selected aspects of customary ways felt to be constitutive of a national or Pacific identity, evolving out of tribal and colonial experiences. In a more global dimension, *bilumwear* is the product of transcultural encounters and circulation of ideas. Looking beyond the garments' meaning to what they do, *bilumwear* brings together local aesthetics and skills to a new style of clothing, fitting to the new gender and personal identities fashioned by those Papua New Guinean women living in the urban and transnational context of university studies and professional careers. *Bilumwear* has also been presented at international fashion fairs and art galleries, as representative of the creativity of contemporary artists in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. Equally innovative are the cooperatives created by women entrepreneurs, a new form of collective work providing income to women.

Today, most women designing bilumwear work collectively. The development of bilumwear production ... engages women to work in a rather new way. Although the markets they target are different, Sharon Brissoni, Florence Jaukae ..., and Cathy Kata (<http://hailanstoailans.com/artists/biographies/cathy-kata-biography/>) ... have created co-operative groups of women to work under their direction. For example, Cathy Kata deals with marketing the products, looking for clients and advertisers, as well as taking charge of conceptualizing the style of the textile, including shapes, colours, and materials. Under her direction, the women then execute the garments. Sometimes, they may make only pieces of the garment, which she then assembles. Interestingly, the women who work for Cathy Kata and other bilum designers are not necessarily kin-related, although the social conditions they live under are similar and reflect recent issues confronting women living in urban societies. Because of the development of administrative and business opportunities in Papua New Guinea, men are very mobile and some abandon their wives in quest of new job opportunities. As a result, many women are left alone with their children and many live in locations that are remote from their home villages and far from any relatives. Often, in such circumstances, many are left without resources and support. Making bilumwear can therefore offer women in difficult social positions an opportunity to earn some money to sustain their families.⁵⁹

These cooperative enterprises represent a departure from customary *bilum* making, an individual activity for village women who make string bags as gifts to family and in ceremonial gift exchanges.

An expression of women's creativity in the organisation of production and in the product, *bilumwear* is chosen by women of a newly emerging class on occasions such as graduation and beauty contests, where they are making their mark as women navigating along the routes of the contemporary world, while acknowledging and claiming their rootedness in local heritage.

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59. Nicolas Garnier, *Fashion and Bilum*, 4.

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