

# The uses of shells in traditional Tuvaluan handicrafts

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*This paper examines the collection and utilization of shells in handicraft production in Tuvalu. Of particular interest were those made by women living on the islands of Funafuti and Nukufetau (See Figure 1). These two islands were chosen for study because they are the major suppliers of shells and shell handicrafts.*

## Introduction

Shell handicrafts have a strong traditional significance for the people of the islands of Tuvalu. Shell jewelry used to be considered a prized possession on Vaitupu (Koch, 1983). On special occasions the men of Niutao would wear a headband woven from women's hair decorated with six or seven cowrie shells. Excavations of ancient graves on Vaitupu and Nukufetau yielded necklaces and pendants made from mother-of-pearl and cowrie shells, among other things (Koch, 1983). Today, shell handicrafts are given to relatives or friends departing Tuvalu. They are also given to guests at special functions, visiting high-ranking officials, and are worn by men and women when performing the **fatele** (a local dance).

Handicraft production has become a major-income generating activity for the women of Tuvalu. Several local women indicated that they earn up to AU\$40.00 per week by making shell handicrafts. Seventeen per cent of women over 15 years of age earn a significant income from handicraft production, averaging AU\$10.00 per week. Fifteen per cent of all income generated by women is derived from handicrafts (Tausi & Posselt, 1996).

Five main species of shell are used in handicraft production. They are two species of white cowrie (**pule kena**), *Cypraea obvelata*, the gold-ring cowrie, and *C. moneta*, money cowrie, and a black cowrie (**pule uli**), *C. caputserpentis*, commonly known as snakeshead cowrie. The money cowrie is the commonest and so the most widely-used of the species. Two species of land gastropod, both locally referred to as **misa** (*Melampus luteus* and *M. fasciatus*),

are the other shells used. Other species of shell are seldom used because they are too fragile.

At least 25 named handicrafts that utilise shells are made by women. Some items, such as necklaces, are made entirely of shells. Shells can also be used to decorate certain items, such as napkin rings, for example. The different types of shell handicrafts, their cost price and materials used in their manufacture are listed in Table 1 on page 4.



Figure 1: Map of Tuvalu

## Collection and preparation of shells

Shells are collected mainly by women and children. The handicrafts using **misa** are usually made in Funafuti from shells collected locally. Although the three species of **pule** (cowries) are found in Funafuti, they are uncommon on the main islet, where most people live. I was told that they are fairly common on the uninhabited islets. However, a boat is needed to reach them, thus making it harder for women to harvest shells there. **Pule kena** and **pule uli** are the main shells harvested in Nukufetau. **Misa** is also collected, but is mainly used for decorating some handicrafts.

### *Misa*

**Misa** collection was observed on Funafuti, where they are collected by women and children. These shells are found in shady moist areas under coral rubble and debris on land. Apparently the best times to collect them are when it is rainy or on nights with a new or first-quarter moon. At these times **misa** move to the surface of their shelter, making collection easier. Collection at other times involves sorting and turning over coral rubble.

**Misa** are usually collected into a plastic bottle with a lid (if there is no lid, rolled tree leaves are used as a stopper). A kerosene pressure lamp is used for night collecting.

After collection, some women kill **misa** by pouring hot water over them. They are then transferred to a 20 kg flour sack, which is put in a shady place out of the direct sunlight, to prevent the shells from losing their lustre. If **misa** are not killed immediately they are left in the sack to die. Some women bury them instead, and the meat is eaten by various insects. After about a week the shells are washed and cleaned in the sea. They are then rinsed in diluted bleach to remove any smell.

Holes are made in the shell with a nail attached to a piece of wood. A shell is secured firmly in a cavity in a piece of a coral rock, and then the nail is pushed gently but firmly through the shell. Depending on the type of handicraft to be made, one or two holes are made in particular parts of the shell. The shells are then threaded with either nylon fishing line or local material, such as **taa** (see glossary).

### *Pule kena and pule uli*

I observed the collection and preparation of **pule kena** and **pule uli** on the island of Nukufetau. **Pule kena** is collected with bare hands at low tide. This shell occurs mostly under coral rocks in intertidal pools on the lagoon reef flat. The best times to collect **pule kena** is at low tide when it is rainy or at night. At these times the animals make their way to the surface of the rocks.

The mid-rib of an old pandanus leaf is used as a tool to remove the **pule kena** from holes in the coral. The live shells are collected in a can or a plastic container, such as a bowl. When collecting at night, a kerosene pressure lamp is used. Collectors normally stay out for 2–3 hours, during which time they can collect 500 or more shells.

When I observed the collection of **pule kena**, rocks were overturned to remove the animal from them. The rocks were not returned to their original position. I counted between 5 and 15 **pule kena** per rock of dinner-plate size.

**Pule uli** are normally collected on an outgoing tide on the outer reef. They are collected mainly by women. They are best sought when it is sunny, because the dark colouring of the shell reflects the light, making it easier to see them.

The preparation of **pule kena** and **pule uli** is very similar to that of **misa**. However, instead of being rinsed in diluted bleach they are soaked for a day in a bucket of fresh water.

**Pule kena** and **pule uli** are hard shells. I observed hole-making using a nail tapped with a pair of pliers.

## Marketing

Few tourists visit Tuvalu. The major buyers of shell handicrafts are therefore Tuvaluans, with shell necklaces being the most popular items.

The major outlet for women's handicrafts is the Tuvalu Women's Handicraft Co-op. Ltd. (Handicraft Centre). The main centre is in Funafuti, with branches on most of the outer islands. The Funafuti centre buys handicrafts once a week from both women and men. There are about six private retailers who also buy handicrafts, mainly necklaces. They sell their goods mainly outside the airport, when the plane calls into Funafuti.

Table 1: Handicrafts made with shells in Tuvalu

Handicraft name	Description	Price AU\$	Materials used
<b>Shell necklaces (Tui)</b> Pule pepe <sup>1</sup>	Butterfly	1.90	<b>pule kena, pule uli</b> , plant seeds ( <b>fuaga uli</b> ) or <b>misa</b> for decoration; nylon fishing line
Tui fafetu <sup>2</sup>	Star	2.60	as above
Tui fafetu tonga <sup>3</sup>	Star	1.90	as above
Tui masela <sup>4</sup>		1.90	<b>misa uli</b> or <b>pule kena, lau kie</b> (fine pandanus leaves) coloured using local or imported dyes, raffia (polypropylene film), wool, cardboard and nylon fishing line
Pule feitu tasi	Triangle	1.70	<b>pule kena</b> or <b>misa</b> , nylon fishing line, <b>misa</b> or plant seeds for decoration
Pule fakavasa	Double strand	1.90	<b>pule kena</b> and nylon fishing line
Tui misa tuatasi	Single strand	0.80	<b>misa</b> and nylon fishing line
Tui misa tualua	Double strand	1.30	as above
Tui misa fakavasa	Double strand	1.90	<b>misa kena, misa uli</b> , nylon fishing line
Tui misa fuli ki lotu/tua	Spiral		
<b>Pendants (Malele)</b> Malele kena pule tasi	Single flower	2.00	<b>pule kena</b> , plant seeds, coloured or plain <b>taa</b>
Malele kena pule tolu	Three flowers	2.50	as above
Malele kena pule uli tasi	Single flower with black cowrie	2.00	<b>pule kena, pule uli</b> and <b>taa</b>
Malele paa <sup>5</sup>	Bonito hook made of mother-of-pearl	3.00	Mother-of-pearl shell and <b>kolokolo</b> (coconut sennit)
<b>Hair clasp (Pine ulu)</b> Pine pule/misa		1.80	<b>pule kena</b> or <b>misa</b> , cardboard, <b>taa</b> or raffia or <b>lau kie</b> (fine pandanus leaf), <b>togo</b> ( <i>Rhizophora mangle</i> ) or <b>gie</b> ( <i>Pemphis acidula</i> )
<b>Brooch (Pine faka mau gatu)</b> Pine faka mau gatu misa		0.80	<b>misa</b> , safety pin, <b>taa</b> or nylon fishing line
Pine faka mau gatu pule		0.80	<b>pule kena</b> , safety pin, <b>taa</b> or nylon fishing line
<b>Headband (Fou)</b>		1.70	woven <b>lau fala</b> (pandanus leaves and <b>lau kie</b> (fine pandanus leaf) usually coloured with local dyes), <b>misa</b> or <b>pule</b> or both, nylon fishing line or very fine <b>kolokolo</b> (coconut sennit) or <b>taa</b> , needle to thread <b>taa</b> or <b>kolokolo</b>
<b>Earring (Ligi) pule/misa</b>		2.00	earring hooks, <b>pule kena</b> or <b>misa</b> or both, or <b>pule uli</b> , nylon fishing line or <b>taa</b>
<b>Door curtain (Pui mataloa)</b>		30.00	<b>pule</b> or <b>misa</b> nylon fishing line
<b>Belt (Fusi)</b> Fusi pule		3.30	<b>pule, lau fala</b> , dyed <b>lau kie</b> , nylon fishing line or <b>taa</b>
Fusi misa		2.20	<b>misa, lau fala</b> , dyed <b>lau kie</b> , nylon fishing line or <b>taa</b> or fine <b>kolokolo</b>
<b>Napkin rings (Mea fao sologutu pule)</b>		3.00 per set	<b>pule kena, lau fala, taa</b> or nylon fishing line or fine <b>kolokolo</b>
<b>Basket (Ato pukupuku pule)</b>		5.00	<b>pule kena</b> , nylon fishing line
<b>Vase (Teu pule)</b>		12.00 big 3.00 small	<b>pule kena</b> , nylon fishing line and sometimes <b>misa</b> for decoration

<sup>1</sup> Twenty-four inches is the standard length of the strand. A strand consists of about 80 **pule kena**.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-four inch strand. The star is made up of 65 small **pule kena** and 5 **pule uli**.

<sup>3</sup> Star without the pointed tips, edge of star arms rounded.

<sup>4</sup> Has its origin from the Marshall Islands.

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, the masterfisherman of Niutao wore a necklace of mother-of-pearl shell bonito hooks. Each hook represents an occasion when 100 or more tuna are caught by the masterfisherman at one time (pers. comm., Laisini).

Three times a year the Funafuti Centre orders cowrie necklaces through its branch in Nukufetau. Each order is usually for about 200 pieces. Each woman is limited to no more than 20 necklaces, in order to be fair to the suppliers. However, it is not uncommon for the women of Nukufetau to send their goods on the inter-island ship to relatives in Funafuti for them to sell on their behalf. They are sold either to the Funafuti Centre or to private retailers. Table 1 lists the cost price of shell handicrafts. The retail price is determined by adding a 30 per cent mark up.

Unworked shells (**misa** and **pule kena**) are also sold either to the handicraft centre or to private retailers. They are bought by the center for \$5.00 per bag of 1,000 shells. The retail price for all bags of shells is \$7.20. **Pule uli** are sold individually depending on size. The price ranges from 6 to 10 cents each.

In Nukufetau, where most of the cowrie shells come from, the **pule kena** is sold by the 500 g 'Irish Cake' tobacco can, which holds about 1,400 shells. They are sold to the Handicraft Centre for \$5.00 per can or to private retailers for \$7.00. I was informed that it is easier for the women to sell the **pule kena** in a tobacco can than to count out the 1,000 shells required for bagged sales.

The **tui fafetu** and **tui pepe** are the most common shell handicrafts made in Nukufetau. They are also the most profitable. Approximately 150 **pule kena** and 5 **pule uli** are used in making the **tui fafetu**. About 10 **tui fafetu** (each worth \$2.60) can be made from one tobacco can full of **pule kena**. Each can of **pule kena** is therefore worth about \$26.00, compared to the \$5.00 or \$7.00 obtained for the unworked shells.

The export of shell handicrafts for sale overseas is limited, although most leave the country as gifts with departing friends and relatives. It is not unusual to see 10 or more necklaces around the necks of departing passengers. The Handicraft Centre exports some shell goods to 'Jack's Handicrafts', in Fiji. I was also informed by a handicraft producer that recently one of the private retailers has established a market in Western Samoa. Table 2 shows the value of handicrafts sold through the Handicraft Centre during the period 1990–1995.

These data most likely underestimate the sales of goods from Nukufetau, and overestimate those sold through the Handicraft

Centre for Funafuti. This is because many of the necklaces and other items sold directly to the Centre by women on Funafuti may have come from relatives in Nukufetau, and would be misrepresented in the data as originating from Funafuti. Sales through the private retailers are also not accounted for.

Table 2: Value of handicrafts through the Women's Handicraft Centre, 1990–1995

Year	Total value in AUS	
	Funafuti	Nukufetau
1990	1564.55	416.40
1991	5777.20	3364.58
1992	7962.30	3413.52
1993	9176.90	834.56
1994	3535.59	2864.66
1995	3216.10	1913.92

## Management

The National Government has no regulations covering the collection of shells. However, in 1994, the Nukufetau **Maneapa** ('Council of Elders') placed a verbal ban on the export of unworked **pule** and **pule uli** from Nukufetau. It did not include the export to Funafuti of handicrafts using these shells. Previously, large quantities of shells were collected for relatives in Funafuti to produce handicrafts for sale. The local economy missed out on revenue made from the sale of the goods. The ruling effectively encourages 'value adding' to the raw material on Nukufetau. Although no fines are imposed, an offender can expect to be called to the **Maneapa** to receive counselling from the elders.

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### Glossary of common local names

**Misa:** *Melambus luteus* and *M. fasciatus*.

**Pule kena:** *Cypraea obvelata* and *C. moneta*.

**Pule uli:** *Cypraea caputserpentis*.

**Taa:** Processed pre-emergent coconut leaves, those tightly packed together in the coconut 'spike', known as 'rito' in the Cook Islands.

**Tui fafetu:** A shell necklace made of **pule kena** and **pule uli**. The central pattern is a star.

**Tui pepe:** A shell necklace made from **pule kena** and **pule uli**. The central pattern is in the form of a butterfly.

### References

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## Shell money production in Langalanga, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands

by Akiro Goto<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Shell money has been one of the most important cultural items in Melanesia. There are several types: cowrie shells, beads, rings and drum-shaped, among others. The cowrie-shell type also occurred in mainland South-East Asia and East Asia and has been an important item for exchange and accumulation in Papua New Guinea. Shell beads can be used both as ornamentation and as money. This type is widely distributed in Melanesia, occurring in Papua New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and Vanuatu. In Western Province (New Georgia) of Solomon Islands, ring-type shell money (**poata**) was used. **Poata** is a large 7–15 cm diameter ring made from giant clam shells, and used for bride price and exchanged for slaves, stones, bark cloth, shields, necklaces and bird eggs. In the Choiseul Islands of Solomon Islands a drum-shaped money (**kisa**) made of giant clam shells was used. It had different exchange rates according to size (Miller, 1978).

Langalanga, of Malaita Province, Solomon Islands, is among the few areas where shell money is still produced. The approximately 2,000 Langalanga people inhabit the Langalanga Lagoon area of the central west coast of Malaita Island, one of seven provinces that comprise Solomon Islands (Fig. 1). For the study of resource use and shell money production among the Langalanga, I stayed for about a total of three months in Abalolo village<sup>1</sup>. Abalolo villagers subsist mainly by fishing, gardening or collecting. Their main marine resource zones are the sea beyond the reef, outer islands, reefs around outer islands or, in the lagoon, the lagoon itself and coastal reefs. Their terrestrial resource zones are the coastal plain, mangrove between villages, rivers, river terraces and mountain slopes.

### Shell-money production in Langalanga

The Langalanga produce the shell-bead type of shell money, which occurs widely in Central Solomon Islands. Four species of shells are used: **romu** (*Chama pacifica*), **ke'e** (*Begonia semiorbiculata*), **kakandu**

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2. 11 August – 12 September 1990, 30 July – 31 August 1992 and 25 April – 31 May 1994.