

Aboriginal Cultural Practices

lutruwita is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



Tasmanian Aboriginal people have maintained a vibrant, unique and dynamic cultural life through the continuation of cultural practices that extend back far beyond living memory.

Aboriginal necklaces

Necklaces of kangaroo sinew, grass cord covered with ochre, strips of animal fur and strings of shells were worn by Tasmanian Aboriginal people for countless generations.

Perhaps the most striking and unique type of necklaces were those made from the pearlescent kelp shell (*Phasianotrochus irisodontes*) known as the marina (or *maireener*).

How were shell necklaces made?

The tradition of creating shell necklaces has always been a cultural activity undertaken exclusively by Aboriginal women.

After the shells were collected they were prepared with smoke and the outer layer was rubbed away revealing a pearly blue. The women then made tiny holes in the shells using a sharp object such as a bone point or the eye tooth of a kangaroo and strung them on animal sinew or twine before the shells were polished with mutton bird or penguin oil.

What is the cultural significance of shell necklaces?

These shell necklaces were highly prized and often traded between tribal groups and with visitors to *lutruwita* (Tasmania). In 1802, explorers with the French expedition led by Nicolas Baudin observed the tradition of shell necklace making. Botanist Leschenault noted their importance and use in ritual exchange:

'Several of them [the Aborigines] crossed the strait [from Bruny Island]...On arrival, [the chief] gave me the necklace he was wearing, which was made of shells of glistening mother-of-pearl, strung on a small cord made of bark and grass. [H]e asked in exchange a necklace of glass beads, which I immediately gave him'
Leschenault 1802.

These small but brightly coloured marina shells are still treasured by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community today. A small number of women continue to painstakingly collect, clean and polish shells. These women have carried on the tradition, renewing and creating an interest for younger members of the Aboriginal community, whilst also receiving both national and international recognition for their craft.



Aboriginal baskets

Basket weaving is an important cultural practice for Tasmanian Aboriginal women. Intricately woven fibre baskets and kelp baskets were traditionally highly prized for their practicality, and today treasured for their aesthetic excellence.

What are woven baskets?

A number of grasses, including the pale rush (*Juncus pallidus*), white flag iris (*Diplarrena moraea*) and forest flax lily (*Dianella tasmanica*) are collected according to the season. The grasses are placed over a slow fire to make them pliable. They are then split and/or stripped, and woven into the desired shape using a stitch that is unique to Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural practice.

Woven baskets were utilised in everyday life and varied in size according to their desired use. They were used for carrying personal items such as stone tools and ochre, for collecting and storing food, and were even worn around the neck by women diving for shellfish.

Kelp baskets

Another unique Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural practice is the tradition of making kelp baskets. In the past, these containers were made from the broad leaf of the bull kelp to collect and carry water and ochre. Sticks were threaded through either side of the kelp and string handles are made from twisted grass and bark.

Are baskets still made by Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

In recent times, Tasmanian Aboriginal women have actively revived traditional methods of collecting, preparing and weaving native grasses. Contemporary weavers now experiment with new materials including a wider variety of grasses,

shells, wool and feathers – ensuring that this cultural practice continues to evolve.

Aboriginal canoes

Canoes made from bark or reeds were used by Tasmanian Aboriginal people to travel to offshore islands to hunt for seasonally plentiful food such as mutton birds and seals. Today, the traditional art of canoe building has been revived within the Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

Materials used to make these canoes varied across regions: stringy-bark in the south, paper-bark in the north-west, and reeds in the east. Their resourceful construction however, remained the same with between three and five bundles of bark or reed lashed together with fibre cord and tapered at the ends so that the bow and stern rose high out of the water. Fire could be carried on a bed of clay and the canoe was propelled by a pole or by a person swimming alongside.

Canoes were used for both inland water crossings and sea voyages. In 1831 Aboriginal leader *Wurati* described voyages to islands as far as Eddystone Rock and Pedra Blanca, up to 25km off shore, stating that;

‘their catamarans was large, the size of a whaleboat, carrying seven or eight people, their dogs and spears. The men sit in front and the women behind’ Wurati as told to G.A. Robinson, 1831.

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