

# Economies

Shell stringing was a part of a Tasmanian Aboriginal economy in the past and continues to be in the present. There is a long history of the trade and exchange of shell necklaces to meet people's needs and respond to economic opportunities. The following article explores the economic history of this continuous cultural practice and identifies some of the women who were, and continue to be, leaders in this practice.

## CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES



Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Histories and Cultures

## CONTENT AREAS



History



Economics and Business



Technologies



The Arts

## GENERAL CAPABILITIES



Intercultural Understanding



Critical and Creative Thinking



Personal and Social Capability

## KEY CONCEPT

An economy is a system of organisations and institutions that either facilitate or play a role in the production and distribution of goods and services in a society. Economies determine how resources are distributed among members of a society; they determine the value of goods or services; and they even determine what sorts of things can be traded or bartered for those services and goods.

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## SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › cultural practice
- › continuity and transition of a cultural practice
- › living communities.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

In what ways has shell stringing been a part of a Tasmanian Aboriginal economy historically?

Who are some of the women who have been leaders in this practice?

This printed material is **to be used with Shell Stringing – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at [www.theorb.tas.gov.au](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au)

The Living Cultures Shell Stringing resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

# Introduction

Early historical records report that shell stringing was an important cultural practice for Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and played a significant role in gift giving and trade. During periods of extreme disruption and hardship, shell necklaces were a valuable item for trade and exchange.

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## Exchange and Trade

Early explorers have recorded being generously gifted shell necklaces by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people they met. Certainly, shell necklaces had long been an item of trade and exchange, but some of the earliest documentation of this activity appears in 1830 when George Augustus Robinson visited Robbins Island, as part of the so-called 'Friendly Mission', where he was given shell necklaces.

The sealer women presented me with several necklaces made of shells, and in return I gave them beads, pincushions, buttons etc.

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 214

In 1833 Quakers, Backhouse and Walker visited Wybalenna. In spite of the dispossession and the disruption of cultural practices experienced by Aboriginal people when taken to Wybalenna, shell necklaces retained a significant role in gift giving and trade.

We purchased many shell necklaces of them for cotton handkerchiefs, which several of the women immediately set about to hem.

Backhouse and Walker cited in Plomley 1987: 262

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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- › What do these accounts tell us about the people's response to their changed circumstances at Wybalenna?
  - › What does this tell us about the practice of culture over time?
  - › What does this tell us about living communities?
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## *Pilunimina* or 'Queen Flora'

*Pilunimina* was born in the north east of the state in the very early 1800s. She was abducted as a child and survived over 20 years living with various sealing men on the different Bass Strait islands. In 1830 *Pilunimina* was removed to Swan Island under the instructions of George Augustus Robinson, and after joining Robinson in his search for Aboriginal people still living in the north east, was taken to Wybalenna, a Christian mission located on Flinders Island.

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The oldest provenanced shell necklace in the TMAG collection is a striking blue maireener necklace made by *Pilunimina* in 1854. *Pilunimina* was also known as Bessie Clarke.

*Pilunimina* contributed to the weekly Wybalenna markets, which ran from 1836-1838. Robinson's journals document the details of the first market held on 9 August 1836.

Articles offered for sale included crockery, tea caddies, pocket knives, table knives and forks, fishing lines, straw hats, shirts, pipes, plums, sugar and rice. Various articles brought for sale to the market by the Aborigines included skins, poultry, necklaces and baskets.

Plomley 1987: 648



Photograph portrait of Bessie Clarke at Oyster Cove | TAHO: PH30/1/3648

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › In what ways is *Pilunimina* demonstrating her resilience and strength?
- › What is the significance of *Pilunimina*'s necklace being held in the collection by TMAG?
- › 'How might today's Aboriginal community feel about the necklace and its place in the museum collection?'

## Lucy Beeton

Lucy was born on Gun Carriage Island in 1829. Her mother was a Cape Portland woman *Watanimarina tatiyana* (also known as Emerenna) and her father an English sealer, Thomas Beeton.

Lucy luckily escaped the ill-fate of Wybalenna and instead grew up on the island ... was privately educated in Launceston, and returned to the Islands to become a Community leader, staunch educator and activist for her people.

Lucy also became a successful businesswoman, gaining the reputation as 'Queen of the Straits'.

Lucy is known to have made shell necklaces and traded these in Launceston.

Her mutton bird and shipping business possibly created the first commercial avenue for shell necklace supplies to both Launceston and Melbourne. The fortuitous locales of the sealing establishments permitted – even encouraged and fortified

– the continuation of a number of cultural practices. Shell stringing became tied to the seasonality of muttonbirding, a traditional practice that became a unique commercial industry developed amongst the Islanders. The mutton bird season between March and April coincides with favourable weather

and tidal patterns for shell collecting and the commercial operations also presented a market opportunity to export other commodities including shell necklaces, yakka gum and tin.'

Rimmer cited in *kanalaritja* 2016: 25



Drawing of Miss Lucy Beeton (1829-1866) | TAHO: AB713/1/11765

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What were the impacts of colonisation on the shell necklace trade?
- › What does this tell us about Aboriginal people's response to colonisation?

## Cape Barren Island

In 1881 a small parcel of land was 'set aside' for an Aboriginal reserve on Cape Barren Island. Life on the Reserve, although restrictive, saw practices such as shell stringing and muttonbirding continue as

important cultural traditions that connected families and provided much needed economic benefit. [S]hell necklaces also continued to be given as gifts.

Rimmer cited in *kanalaritja* 2016: 25-26

The convenience and abundance of shell resources, particularly the highly prized *marina* shells and numerous other delicate shell species, meant our women were able to not only maintain the tradition of stringing shells but develop the practice to include a wide range of other local shells, including rice shell and toothies – shells unique to the Islands. In 1882, a Tasmanian Legislative Council report on fisheries recorded:

In 1908 Henry Baker, a United States Consul, visited Cape Barren Island as part of a trade-related tour of the Bass Strait Islands. He wrote an article that appeared in the *The Examiner* newspaper on Monday, September 14, 1908. He reported on a number of points of interest regarding the production, types of shells and sale of shell necklaces. Baker also notes the generosity of the Cape Barren Island community, despite the fact that families were very much in need of income.

*On a recent visit to this (Furneaux) group I found a number of attractive varieties of shell necklaces, which are very little known to the Hobart trade... The half-caste children at Cape Barren Island were contributing quite a number of these interesting varieties while I was there, to be sold for the benefit of the Children's Hospital at Launceston, Tasmania.*

Baker cited in *The Examiner*, 1908

1908, Monday 14 September. *Shell necklaces: Trade with America.* | Launceston: Examiner newspaper.

*...that for necklaces, ear pendants, and other ornamental purposes, some of our shells are most highly prized. The following are largely collected and prepared by the half-castes on the Barren and Badger Islands, and obtain a fair price.*

Rimmer cited in *kanalaritja* 2016: 26

**SHELL NECKLACES**  
**TRADE WITH AMERICA.**

Mr. Henry D. Baker, American Consul at Hobart, writes:—I would be glad if you could call the attention of your readers to the possibility which, in my opinion, exists for the successful exploitation of Tasmanian shell necklaces in the United States. I recently wrote a report for our Department of Commerce and Labour on these necklaces, and have received several letters already in regard to the same, a copy of one of which I send you. By some organisation of those interested in this trade and generous sending of samples to the United States, I feel sure that a very big business could be worked up. I would be very much gratified if this could happen, especially as the stringing of shell necklaces would afford home employment for a number of women and children who might be much benefited thereby. In the United States there is always a big market for such attractive novelties, especially just before Christmas, and at places where tourists congregate. At Atlantic City, for instance, the tourist population in summer is about 200,000, and along the four or five miles of famous "Board Walk" there are hundreds of small shops which sell just such novelties as these. I think the leading jewellery merchants, notion dealers, the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, and the Department of Commerce and Labour at Washington, might be furnished with samples; also some might be sent to the Alaska-Yukon Exposition at Seattle next year.

Mr. E. Fairfax Scott, importer Chicago, U.S.A. To Mr. Baker.—I wish to be placed in communication with a reliable manufacturer and exporter of the different kinds of shell necklaces that you mention in your Washington report. In order to save time and delay you might give the exporter my name and address, and ask him to quote me direct in gross lots. He must take into consideration that I will have to pay 60 per cent. duty on their entering the United States, so the price would have to be low. Also, as I have never seen the goods, I would like him to send me one or two samples, and should there be any charge for same, I will remit when I hear from him. In purchasing a quantity I am prepared to pay cash in advance. I feel that I am indebted to you for your interesting letter, and thank you in advance for the favour asked.

August 4, 1908.

Extract from daily Consular and Trade reports:—Tasmanian shell necklaces—How an industry is carried on in an Australian island—Consul Henry D. Baker, writing from Hobart, gives the following account of the traffic in shell necklaces in that part of Australia:—The invoices of shell necklaces exported from Hobart to the United States for the year 1907 amounted to 3083 dollars. The shells which are used for the stringing of necklaces for this export trade are known locally as the "mariners' shell," of which there is a green and a blue variety of many different sizes, varying from about one-fourth to one-half inch long, the width being about half the length, and the shape that of a cornucopia. They are found among the seaweed at low tide, around the south and east coasts of Tasmania, and among the Furneaux group of islands in Bass Strait, to the north-east of Tasmania. The shells, to have any value, must not be taken dead, but while the fish within them is alive, otherwise they have no lustre. After being taken from the seaweed they are exposed to the sunlight and atmosphere for several months, and the fish eaten out of them by flies and ants; after which they are immersed for further cleansing in hydrochloric acid, after which treatment their appearance is quite lustrous, and shows many of the prismatic colours. Some of them are string in this natural state, while others are dyed pink, light or dark blue, green, and yellow. After stringing they sell at retail in Hobart for about 60 cents a necklace, or about 1.80 dollars a dozen necklaces, and in still larger quantities at about 4.50 dollars a dozen. The sale to tourists from the mainland of Australia during the summer season is very large. The best shells are found in the vicinity of D'Entrecasteaux Channel. Those found on the East Coast of Tasmania are about the same in appearance, but are usually more easily broken than the shells of the South Coast of Tasmania. Those of the Furneaux Group are apparently of good quality, and when properly cleaned make very attractive necklaces. In these islands the work of gathering and stringing the shells is performed mostly by half-caste women and children. On a recent visit to this group I found a number of attractive varieties of shell necklaces, which are very little known to the Hobart trade. They were made up from shells known locally as "penguins," "toothies," "cards' teeth," "rice" shells, "feather" shells, and "painted ladies." The half-caste children at Cape Barren Island were contributing quite a number of these interesting varieties while I was there, to be sold for the benefit of the Children's Hospital at Launceston, Tasmania. Hobart firms which export shell necklaces to the United States are also importers to a smaller extent of shell and pebble ornaments from the same American firms which buy necklaces; pearl shells being the most common article of import. The cities of San Francisco and Vancouver, British Columbia, furnish for the local tourist trade many bracelets made up from polished Japanese and Chinese pebbles, to which is usually attached a spangle—the heart-shape of the island of Tasmania. It is said that these bracelets are the work of Japanese in

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › Why is the continuation of these cultural practices important to Aboriginal people?
- › How does this link to identity?
- › What does this tell us about today's living community?

# Appropriation and the 'Hobart Necklaces'

From the 1870s to the 1950s there were two parallel streams of shell necklace making and marketing: by Aboriginal people based on the Bass Strait Islands and by various non-Aboriginal firms, either only shell trading, or fur and shell trading out of Hobart. Unpacking these two directions of shell necklace work, authentic and the 'Hobart necklace' copies, is complex and ongoing.

Tasmanian and mainland newspaper advertisements illustrate what appears to be regular resurgences in sales of Tasmanian shell necklaces from the mid- 1860s to 1910, followed by intermittent advertisements and [articles] until the 1950s... At least ten Hobart dealers in shell necklaces emerged from the 1870s to the 1920s, half of whom were also furriers.

Subsequently mass production and cultural appropriation of Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklaces occurred as the wearing of shell necklaces entered mainstream culture... Non-Aboriginal opportunists in Hobart, with maritime connections, started their own industry of shell necklace production, 'Hobart Necklaces', by unsustainably harvesting southern seaweed beds to dislodge shells in their tens of thousands, creating a predominately overseas market, supplying necklaces in vast quantities.

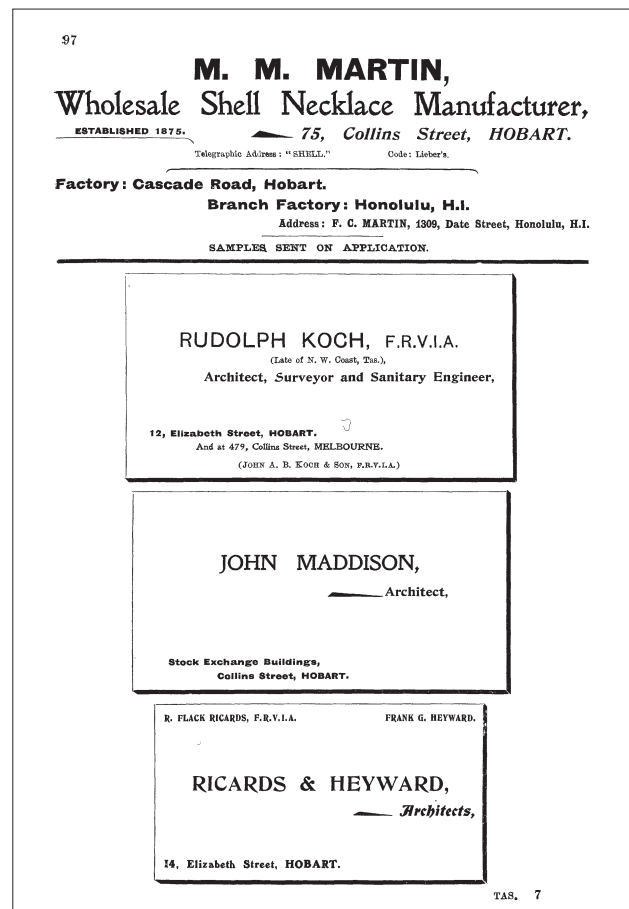
Gough cited in *kanalaritja* 2016:71-72

With the death of Mrs Martin in 1942, [a well-known dealer in shell necklaces], the most infamous era of the cultural (mis)appropriation, mass production, and wholesale export of shell necklaces ended.

Gough cited in *kanalaritja* 2016: 72

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What is cultural appropriation?
- › How might the mass production of shell necklaces have impacted on the Aboriginal shell necklace trade?
- › What effect might this have had on the Aboriginal community?



An advertisement from 1906 for shell necklaces made by non-Aboriginal people. | M M Martin Advertisement. TAHO SD\_ILS:981598

# Lola Greeno

Aunty Lola was born on Cape Barren Island and lived on a northern beach called Prickly Bottom, an ideal harbour to collect shells. So that they were able to access medical services more easily, the family moved to Flinders Island when Lola was about 10 or 12. Aunty Lola remembers her great-grandmother Julian Burgess, as a leading woman of her time known for her shell stringing. She taught Lola's mother and together they made necklaces to sell (mostly to Minister Cloudsdale) which provided an income to help with food and clothing for the families. They also used to exchange shell necklaces for food and clothes at Bowman's Store at Whitemark on Flinders Island.

In the 1980s Lola began stringing seriously and enjoyed 13 years of stringing with her mother until she passed away in 1999. Lola's career has since spanned 30 years of traditional shell necklace making, exhibiting and selling her works all around the world. In 2014, Lola was acknowledged and celebrated with a Living Treasure Award: *Masters of Australian Craft*, which saw her solo exhibition *Lola Greeno: Cultural Jewels*, tour around Australia. Lola has created pieces on commission for museums and private collectors and you can find her work available for purchase online and in a number of art galleries.



Living treasure Lola Greeno celebrates her 70th birthday with a special exhibition in Hobart.

Image: ABC News, Carol Raabus

## DISCUSSION QUESTION

- › What does Lola's story tell us about how the continuation of culture occurs across time?

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