

# Continuing Cultural Practice

Tasmanian Aboriginal women have been shell stringing for countless generations. This ongoing practice lies at the heart of a continuing cultural knowledge that is passed on from mothers and grandmothers to their daughters and granddaughters, creating an unbroken string from the past to the present.

## CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Histories and Cultures

## CONTENT AREAS

 Geography

 History

## GENERAL CAPABILITIES

 Intercultural Understanding

 Critical and Creative Thinking

## KEY CONCEPT

Continuing cultural practice: Cultural practice is to acknowledge traditional custodianship of the land. An acknowledgement of Country pays respect to the traditional custodians, ancestors and continuing cultural, spiritual and religious practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and, provides an increasing awareness and recognition of Australia's Indigenous peoples and cultures.

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## SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

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

## GUIDING QUESTION

What is the cultural significance of the practice of traditional shell stringing to Tasmania's Aboriginal people?

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

“It’s something that can be handed on to my granddaughters. The more you instil in them, the more likely they are to continue the process... It’s about the continuation, the sharing”.

Jones cited in *kanalaritja* 2016: 99

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Shell stringing is a valuable continuing cultural practice for Tasmanian Aboriginal people that has been passed from one generation to the next for many thousands of years.

Shell stringing and shell necklace making is often described as both a spiritual and cultural practice that is as important for today’s Tasmanian Aboriginal communities as it was for their ancestors.

Fanny Cochrane Smith is photographed here wearing a shell necklace. Knowledge of the value that was placed by her on her necklaces as cultural possessions has been passed on to her descendants.



Fanny Cochrane Smith wearing a shell necklace  
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## An Enduring Family Cultural Practice

Fanny Cochrane Smith was born in 1834. Fanny learned many aspects of cultural life from her mother *Tanganutara* and passed much of her cultural knowledge, including shell stringing, to her descendants.

Fanny is one of a strong community of traditional female ancestors of contemporary Aboriginal people whose knowledge and practices are continued today. Bronwyn, featured in the video clips, and Liz Tew, both descendants of Fanny, are members of a large community of Tasmanian Aboriginal people who demonstrate this enduring cultural practice.

In the following extract from *kanalaritja* Liz Tew tells us about Fanny’s links to her past through her mother *Tangautara*.

*Tanganutara* was born at *layrapinthe* (Musselroe Bay) in the north east [of Tasmania] on the cusp of British invasion. As a young girl she was stolen from her family and Ancestral Country and grew up with sealers... The women of *Taungutara*’s generation were survivors, the Ancestral grandmothers of our Community.

Tew cited in *kanalaritja*, 2016: 109

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Lola Greeno, a Tasmanian Aboriginal elder and shell stringer emphasises the importance of shell stringing and necklace making as cultural acts that have been practiced throughout time, particularly during times of historic upheaval for Aboriginal people and their culture. Many other women tell the same story.

Our ancestors, including those directly affected by Robinson's disposessions and relocations from their traditional lands, did not stop making during the hardest times. It is in the spirit of acknowledging their determination that the transmission of the

knowledge and skills of shell necklace making continues. By their making, Tasmanian Aboriginal people made a future.

Julie Gough cited in Lola Greeno – Cultural Jewels 2014: 108

Shell stringing is an ancient and continuing cultural practice. Patsy Cameron, an Aboriginal elder and researcher, describes her joy in researching illustrations of necklaces made by her traditional people before their lives were disrupted.

My experience with doing research and looking into the really old traditional ways makes my heart sing. When I saw the illustrations by Nicholas-Martin Petit from Baudin's 1800 to 1804 voyage, I asked the question, 'What's different about these than

the strings we make today and why did it change? Why did we adapt our making of shell necklaces from the distant past to the present day?'

Cameron in *kanalaritja* 2016: 48

The illustration of a shell necklace (below) was drawn by French visitors to Southern Tasmania who accompanied the Baudin Expedition of 1802.



Illustration of a shell necklace. | Detail from *Terre de Diémen. Armes et ornemens*

Patsy speaks of her realisations from her research in the following statement:

In 1792 Labillardière observed that Aboriginal women wore 'fillets of bright flowers, berries and strings of brilliant pearly blue spiral shells upon their bare heads', and he was given a necklet of pearly shells by an Aboriginal man he believed to be an important leader. Watercolours from Baudin's 1802 expedition depicted Baraourou, a man of Maria Island, wearing a circlet of king or queen maireener

shells around his neck. These necklets are similar to that found at West Point. Records show three types of shell necklets worn by the Aboriginal people before the invasion: a circlet or crown worn around the head, a string worn close around the neck, and a band worn around the arm.

Cameron cited in *The Companion to Tasmanian History* 2005: 330

Patsy reminds us of the importance of Tasmanian Aboriginal shell stringers having ownership of their cultural traditions. That ownership provides strong links with their past, present and future becoming '*kanalaritya*', an unbroken string.

The oldest known shell necklet was found in a coastal living place at West Point, south of Marrawah. The necklet, comprising 32 king or queen *maireener* shells each pierced with a small hole, had been placed with cremated human remains in a burial pit about 1800 years old.

Making shell necklaces has always been the role of women, and today women stringers still have 'ownership' of the cultural tradition. Women had and have the knowledge of

where and when to collect the shells, in places such as Bruny Island, Robbins Island, the coastline around Woolnorth, the north-east coast and on beaches around Bass Strait islands, usually between June and March. Strings of shells were of great value, used as items of trade or to enable collection of the sacred red ochre used in rituals. The collection and distribution of ochre was also the role of women.

Cameron cited in *The Companion to Tasmanian History* 2005: 330

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › For how long have Tasmanian Aboriginal women been gathering, sorting and stringing shells for necklaces?
- › Why is shell stringing such a highly valued practice and cultural resource for Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

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## *luna tunapri*: Women's Knowledge

Briony Downs introduces the *luna tunapri*, women's knowledge initiative in the Art Guide Australia to emphasise the importance of shell stringing for today's Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

For more than a thousand years, shell stringing has endured as an integral symbol of identity and connection within the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. It is a time-honoured skill passed down through generations of women, its techniques closely guarded and

exact locations of shells protected from common knowledge. Even amidst the [devastation] of the Tasmanian Aboriginal population under colonial invasion, shell stringing has remained an art form deeply connected to history, memory and tradition.

*kanalaritja*: An Unbroken String marks the culmination of the *luna tunapri* (women's knowledge) workshops, an initiative led by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community in association with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to facilitate skill sharing.

Downs cited in Art Guide: 2017

Bronwyn shows us one of her necklaces that represents her continuing connection to her culture and her connection to *luna tunapri*, women's knowledge.



Bronwyn holding her one of her shell necklaces. | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What purpose did the *luna tunapri* workshops serve for today's Tasmanian Aboriginal people?
- › How do Tasmanian Aboriginal women ensure their culture of shell stringing continues in the face of the cultural disruption that has occurred throughout the past two centuries?

# New Technologies and Adaptation

The materials and techniques of shell necklace making changed once contact with Europeans began.

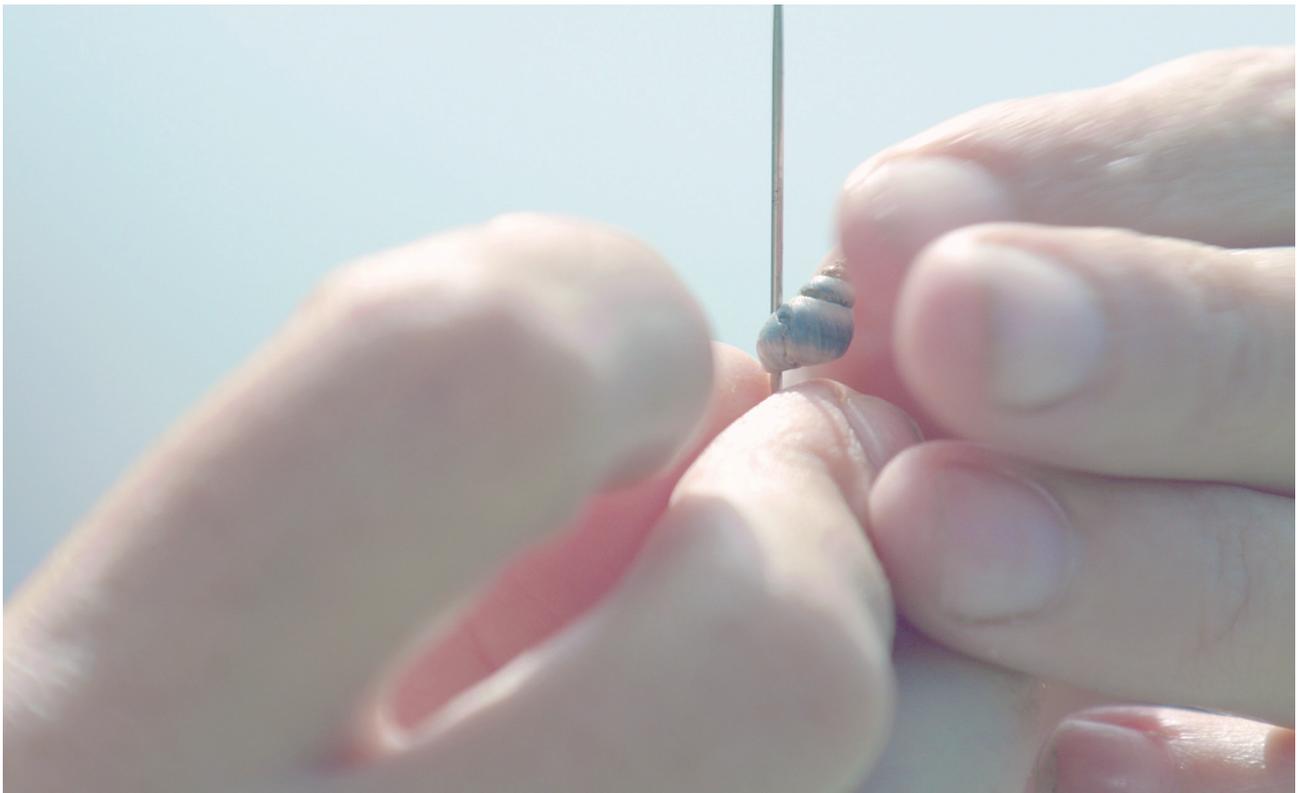
Patsy Cameron tells us:

There are differences in shell necklaces made thirty years after the invasion. The shells are smaller, and the necklaces are longer, worn in loops around the neck as they are today. The shells are maireeners but of different species; the 1802 necklet was made with king or queen maireeners, the 1830s necklace with small maireeners. In the necklet, the shells are spaced apart, threaded on kangaroo tail sinew

or fibre string, while the necklace maireeners are strung on cotton thread and the shells are close together. The 1802 shells were pierced using the eye-tooth of a kangaroo, and the 1830s shells were probably pierced using a metal awl.

Patsy Cameron cited in *The Companion to Tasmanian History* 2005: 330

Bronwyn strings shells using contemporary tools such as a steel needle and cotton thread.



Bronwyn practicing shell stringing. | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How did people adapt shell necklace making as new materials and techniques became available?
- › How might technology continue to change practice for today's Aboriginal shell stringers?

# Shell Necklaces and Meaning

Generations of makers have sustained this uniquely Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural practice.

Carding cited in *kanalaritja: An Unbroken String* 2016: 6

To the right is an image of Trukanini, photographed in 1866 wearing a shell necklace. The continuation of shell stringing honours the strength and resilience that she and other ancestral women showed in the face of the profound cultural disruption they experienced.



Trukanini wearing a shell necklace | Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Tasmanian Aboriginal women have made, worn and traded shells and shell necklaces for countless generations.

As noted earlier, members of the French expeditions observed that Aboriginal shell necklets were generally short and worn on the head, close to the neck, or on the arm.

The short necklet had a practical application in the pre-invasion culture where people moving through the bush and diving into the sea would not have been able to wear long looping necklaces. However, when this tradition was interrupted after 1803, the people adapted their practice and made the strings of shells into long strands. The other major adaptation was the use of British tools – the steel needle and cotton thread. As with the early adoption of dogs to assist with the hunt, Aboriginal women quickly used the needle and cotton to modify their

traditional practice. Thus the circlet of large king or queen maireener shells changed from the ancient practical short necklet, to the delicate and intricate shell necklaces made by Aboriginal women after the invasion. Needles allowed the stringers to create necklaces with beautiful patterns using shells of different shapes and colours. Maireener shells are hard to gather and clean for stringing, but many stringers waded out into shallow seaweed beds and painstakingly collect the live shells.

Patsy Cameron cited in *The Companion to Tasmanian History* 2005: 330

The practice of shell stringing may have evolved over time with the advent of new materials although the purpose has remained constant for countless generations according to Tasmanian Aboriginal women today.

The purpose of the shell stringing practice is to create necklaces of delicate intricacy. In *kanalaritja*, there are examples made by Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestors in the 19th century right through to the work of today's makers. Lucy Beeton's delicate strands of rice shells have survived since the 1800s, while contemporary stringer Ashlee Murray's king

marina shells gleam with pearlescent hues as they catch the light. As one of the youngest shell stringers, Murray feels a deep connection to history as she hones her practice. "We are one of the only peoples in the world stringing shells like this, so I think it is quite defining of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Downs cited in *Art Guide*: 2017

In the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery touring exhibition *kanalaritja: An Unbroken String*, Leonie Dickson and Verna Nichols talk of continuing the circle and say:

"This exhibition is called *An Unbroken String*: our mother Ila (Girlie) Purdon believes in circles and impressed upon us that the circle must not be broken."

Leonie and Verna Nichols cited in *kanalaritja* 2016: 100



Leonie Dickson and Verna Nichols photographed in 2016 at *Putalina* (Oyster Cove). | Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. | Image: Stephen Thomas, Roar Film

Today's stringers are continuing the circle that was started by their mothers, grandmothers, and the women who have gone before them.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- › How do today's Aboriginal shell stringers retain the special connection to Country and identity that was demonstrated by their ancestors?
- › How are today's Aboriginal shell stringers maintaining "The Unbroken String" through their continuing cultural practice?

[www.theorb.tas.gov.au//living-cultures/shellstringing/teacher-drawer](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au//living-cultures/shellstringing/teacher-drawer)

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