

Queensland Bags and Baskets

Fact Sheet



Making baskets in Aurukun. Image: QM, Gary Cranitch.

Introduction

Bags and baskets have been used across all Indigenous Australian communities for a variety of purposes. Considerably different fibres are employed by different groups throughout Queensland due to the region's very diverse plant life and geographical variation. Bags can be distinguished by the type of technique used. Some are made with knots, single loop, loop and twist, and hour-glass or figure-of-eight. Baskets are either woven, twined, or coiled. There are many varieties within each main group, and are generally distinguished according to the community in which they are made.

South East Queensland

Indigenous women from south east Queensland once produced a distinctive style of dilly bag using a coiled technique incorporating an ornamented diagonal pattern of knots, which crossed at forty-five degree angles, resembling a knitted garment. There is no evidence of traditional weaving having survived and a resurgence would prove problematic due to the availability and accessibility of tradition fibres once extracted from the bark of hibiscus or Moreton Bay Fig.



A bag from south-east Queensland. Image: QM.

Western Queensland

In western Queensland, an innovative contemporary weaver has chosen spinifex fibre from her immediate environment around Mt Guide. Spinifex grows prolifically in this arid region and was once used by the Indilandji people for medicinal purposes, shelters and smoking ceremonies. Contemporary weavers throughout Queensland continue to embrace new materials to interpret traditional techniques and skilled women and men encourage younger people towards these practices.

East Cape York Peninsula

On the East Cape York Peninsula, baskets and bags were often patterned with stripes of varying colours obtained by different dyes extracted from roots, barks and leaves. Around Coen dilly bags are occasionally still made from twined bark fibre referred to as bush string, and are used to carry everyday materials and shopping. At Lockhart River, there are a few women continuing the practice of weaving *puunya*, a traditional carrying basket, from watul grass (*Lomandra longifolia*) which grows prolifically in the nearby bush land. *Puunya* baskets do not have great rigidity, yet the structure is still capable of holding a basket shape. After the collection of long blades of grass, the fibre is split and dried before dyeing it, immersing bunches into boiling water infused with scrapings from the inner bark roots of plants such as wuyku (*Merinda reticulata*), to produce a vibrant yellow colour. It is then twined over warp strands in a circular motion. Other colours are prepared and later incorporated into the body of the basket to create a pattern of bands.



A puunya basket from Lockhart River. Image: QM.

West Cape York Peninsula

On the West Cape York Peninsula, women from the Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama communities also produced knotted and looped bags from either twined bark or cabbage palm fibres, although in recent years the practice has declined as skilled weavers began to lose their sight with age.

Wik and Kugu groups from Aurukun produced up to five different types of weaves in their bags and baskets depending on their purpose. Referred to as dilly bags, *waangk onyan*, in the Wik language, were made quickly with a knotted technique to produce an open mesh suitable for carrying large items

without stretching. *Waangk waangkam* were made using a figure of 8 looped technique to facilitate a generous stretch to carry large load of food or personal items on top of the head. *Waangk mee* (*mee* meaning eye) are made with a smaller open twisted loop technique which forms the 'eye' in the open weave, often with alternating rows of colour. Each are made using two upright sticks with a cross string to begin the framework. A continuous strand of rolled two ply string is looped or knotted and worked in a circuit to form the body of the bag while incorporating decorative bands of colour.

Today, women in Aurukun prefer to weave baskets from pandanus or cabbage palm fibre, using a technique introduced to the community during mission days, influenced by island traditions. Colours are achieved with traditional dyes extracted from roots and leaves grown locally. The coiled basket begins with a central ring and spirals outward with the weft fibre catching each preceding row developing any shape depending on the tension applied, often incorporating innovative patterns.



Three types of waangk bags from Aurukun. Image: QM.

Far North Queensland

Unlike other groups in Queensland, who considered weaving a woman's task, men and women from the rainforest groups all practised weaving. The unique bicornual baskets from this region were used for leaching toxins from poisonous plants, for fishing, for carrying babies and as trade items. To make the baskets, the prickly outer casing of the lawyer cane is removed and the fibre split. Several strands of split cane are strung like a bow to produce the foundation for the basket's crescent shape. Two continuous strands of finer fibre are twined across the foundation, and worked up the vertical strands to develop the basket's shape. Rings of cane are then attached to the interior of the basket at regular intervals to strengthen it. Two handles of thicker cane are attached to the mouth of the basket, one short handle for carrying by hand and another much longer one for carrying around the forehead. Fibres used were never dyed in preparation and any coloured decoration was painted on after the basket was completed. Natural pigments such as ochres were applied to those used for ceremonial or sacred purposes. What was once a versatile functional domestic object and valuable trade item, now has a presence on the current art market.



A bicornual basket from far North Queensland. Image: QM.

Rainforest groups around the Daintree River use fibres from grasses and the Black Palm (*Normanbya normanbyi*) to make bags and baskets. Kuku Yalanji women made dilly bags called

bajli, using fibre stripped from the dense narrow leaves of a tufted perennial grass-like plant, *Lomandra hystrix*, heated over the fire to become pliable. The fibre from the Black Palm is still used to make the traditional *kakan* basket. Beginning from the bottom with several thicker base strands, two continuous strands of fibre are each twined over the thicker filaments, working in a circular clockwise motion to build the body. Binding the top with strips of the fibre to form a rim then finishes the basket.

Traditionally colours were only obtained from the bark of Wattle trees (*Acacia flavescens*), where the stripped fibre would turn red after being immersed into brackish water for a few hours. Dying the fibres using an infusion of natural materials in boiled water was not practiced until the introduction of metal containers into communities through the missions.

Weavers in Yarrabah, south of Cairns, embraced a coiled technique introduced to the community by a Saibai Islander in 1908. Weavers from Yarrabah use yagal, pandanus fibre, to produce highly innovative coiled baskets. The pandanus species available on the mainland becomes brittle as it dries, so the fibre is split fine for weaving. The split fibre is rolled up while still green, dried and dyed with natural dyes from roots and other resources found in the area. It is then coiled onto a framework of lawyer cane, taking many weeks to complete. If the fibre is not to be dyed, it is woven green, and as it dries it enhances the basket rigidity. The women continue to push boundaries with each new basket, often introducing found material such as clay beads and feathers into the weave.



A coiled basket from Yarrabah. Image: QM.

Further Information

Barnard, T., 2005. The North-East: Contemporary Basket Making in Queensland, *Woven Forms Exhibition Catalogue*, Object Gallery, Sydney, pp.28-33.

West, 1980. *Aboriginal String Bags: Nets and Cordage*. Museum Victoria, Melbourne, p.35.

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