Corselets of Fiber
Robert Louis Stevenson's Gilbertese Armor

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In November 1914 and January 1915 the Anderson Auction Company of New York offered for sale a collection of letters, manuscripts, books, portraits, and curios which had been the personal property of Robert Louis Stevenson (Fig. 1). The list of curios included more than two hundred objects collected by Stevenson during the six and one-half years he traveled and lived in the South Seas. The University Museum bought some twenty of them, with money contributed by John Wanamaker. Of the Museum's purchases, perhaps the most spectacular were three coconut fiber corselets from the Gilbert Islands.

As the Anderson catalogue observed, the three corselets are all of extreme interest, being the Royal presents given by King Tembhoko, the T somewhat of the island of Apeamanu to R. L. Stevenson on the occasion of his departure from the island in 1887 (Anderson catalogue, Part 1 [1914] p. 87). The following is the story of these three corselets.

Fiber Armor

European visitors to the Gilberts during the 19th century described the inhabitants of these atolls as the most warlike people in Micronesia, if not in the world. Fighting was, they reported, a constant preoccupation, and almost everywhere they went they saw islanders with numerous scars on their arms and legs (Whites 1844: 47, 93). The weapons that inflicted most of these wounds were spears, swords, and small hand weapons made of coconut wood and lined with rows of shark's teeth. The common use of shark's teeth on weapons being especially characteristic of the Gilberts. Even more ingenious, and unique to the Gilberts and neighboring Nauru and Ocean Islands, was the protective clothing devised as a defense against these weapons. This included overallis, jackets, and corselets made of coconut fiber (Figs. 3, 4), helmets of coconut fiber or the dried, inflated skin of the coconut shell (Dodo), and wide belts of coconut fiber or ray skin.

Coarse fibers from the husks of mature coconuts provided the raw material for construction of the armor. These were combed and hand-spun by rolling on the thigh, producing smooth fiber with a long staple which could then be twisted into cord. The overallis, jackets, and corselets made of coconut palm, and from the sea.

After Spanish sightings in 1537 and 1606, most of the islands in the group were discovered by Europeans between 1765 and 1854, the last two being reported by whalers in 1826 (Maule 1865: 121-122). Natural objects are extremely limited, and before European contact materials for the manufacture of objects for daily living came largely from the pandanus and the cocoanut palm, and from the sea.

The Gilbert Islands

The Gilbert Islands are sixteen coral atolls in that part of the Pacific known as Micronesia (the region of "small islands"). Lying across the equator, they form the middle of a long chain which includes the Marshall Islands to the northwest and the Ellice Islands to the southeast. They are typical atolls, with few notable features: the low horizon, the expanse of the lagoon, the sedate-like rim of palm-tops, the sameness and smallness of the land, the evenly dispersed, and before European contact materials for the manufacture of objects for daily living came largely from the pandanus and the cocoanut palm, and from the sea.

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The Gilberts became part of the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate in 1892, and of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1915 (see Fig. 2). They were occupied by the Japanese during World War II, and since 1979 they have been part of the independent nation of Kiribati.
of the fiber belts were made of long bundles of fiber (three-ply braids, actually), bound together by twist
of fiber cord (Fig. 5). For a helmet, these bundles were bound in a spiral, and in the corselets and belts they
were laid horizontal and parallel. This method of construction pro-
duced an armor of great weight and rigidity.

The shark's teeth swords and hand weapons were "calculated rather to make severe gashes than date
wounds" (Wilkes 1840:47), and the netted armor must have provided good protection against them (Fig. 6).
More dangerous were throwing spears: in 1835, a seaman from the brigantine 'Hound' died soon after a
throwing spear 'passed right through his chest' (Coutier 1874:239). The corselets were proof against these,
as well as the shark's teeth, and their high backs protected the heads and necks of warriors in the front ranks
from stones thrown by the women and children behind them (Schmelz and Krause 1981:228, probably quoting
Parnkinson). In 1841, on Tabiteuea, the United States Exploring Expedition noted that the islanders
appeared to believe that in their armor they were invulnerable. As a demonstration of the power of fire
arms, "one of the coats of mail was hoisted up at the yard-arm, and fired at; the holes were then exhib-
ted, but did not seem to produce much effect upon them" (Wilkes 1840:45).

European firearms and knives were available from the early days of contact, and became important
toys of trade. Guns were not always used to advantage, but knives were more widespread and effective, and
bayonets attached to long poles were especially popular, correspond-
ing as they did to the long island spears.

The islanders continued to use their indigenous weapons, and the fiber armor still provided prote-
tion against them, as well as against knives and bayonets.

John Kirby, a beachcomber who lived on Kureia from 1838 to 1841, reported to the United States
Exploring Expedition that "this armor has been only a short time intro-
duced or used on the islands, and is not yet common in all of them" (Wilkes 1840:83), but this observa-
tion is uncorroborated and in fact

no one really knows when the armor was invented. It may have been used nearly as long as there was
lighting, which was up to the establish-
ment of the British Protectorate in 1892. Otto Finsch reported that on Tabiteuea in 1870, after a bloody
battle between the converted and unconverted, 300 spear, 79 muskets, and 17 "corselets" were handed over
to the mission to be burned (1893:136). At the time of his visit in 1880, the islands were in a state of
war, and he saw armed bands here and there, some in "very droll attire." Almost the same time, Richard Par-
kinson observed armor worn in battles between the people of Abaiaang and Tarawa, and on the island of Nonsouti
(1880:45-47).

The Dynasty of Abemama

During seventy years of intensive European contact, from the 1820s through the 1890s, there was on the island of Abemama a succession of strong leaders who
controlled developments within their territory to an extraordinary degree. The first of these, Teng Karoto, was born around 1781 into a family that had already gained control
of the island of Abemama and reduced neighboring Karia and Ara-
rus to the status of tributaries. (In Gilbertese, "ten" or "ten" is a prefix often used with men's names. It conveys a bit of formality, somewhat like the English "Mister." Ward Goodenough, pers. comm.) Teng Karoto "succeeded the newly-founded dynasty's power over the main atoll, ... [and] the other islands under more direct control and ... [was] recognised as Usu, or High Chief, of what came
to be called the State of Abemama" (Maude 1978:204).

In the 1840s, Teng Karoto abdica-
ted in favor of his son, Teng Fawale, who followed in turn by his
son, or half-brother, Tem Baiete in 1850. It was Tem Baiete who faced the full impact of the European
presence, and in 1851 he made his first move. By a "deliberate act of policy," he had all resident
foreigners, nine on Abemama and twenty-five on Karia and Aranuka, killed. In the following decades he
controlled all trading transactions, including the import and distribution of firearms, prohibited the importa-
tion of alcohol and the manufacture of sour toddy from coconut sap, forbade any permanent missionary
presence on Abemama, and absolutely banned labor recruiters from all three islands (Maude 1978:206-
212).

In 1878 Tem Baiete retired in

favor of his eldest son, Tem Binoka. Tem Binoka was "self-centered and arrogant... but... he possessed all
his father's intelligence, and an intellectual curiosity, particularly con-
cerning the ways of the outside world, which never left him" (Maude 1978:212). In 1873 he per-
suaded his father to allow a missionary teacher to visit Abemama, and from this person he learned writ-
gilbertese, some arithmetic, and some geography. He strictly enforced his father's policies in regard to alcohol,
firearms, and labor recruiters, and reserved the copra trade as a royal monopoly. He put down at least
three major revolts, the most serious of which occurred as late as 1885. Tem Binoka's uncle, Tem Binakoko,
was involved in the first and third of these revolts, and after the first his nephew banished him from Abemama.
In the 1890s Tem Binoka attempted, unsuccessfully, to conquer the entire Gilberts group (Maude 1978:212-222).

All things considered, the accom-
plishments of Tem Baiete and Tem

1. Coconuts (P. argus) and heuets (P. beti), with sharks' teeth necklaces (P. agit, left; and P. beti, right). Although they do not appear in the Andersen catalogue, the necklaces are listed in The University Museum accession files as having come from B.L. Stevenson, P. argus, 1.17 cm. 17789, 1.147 cm. 17799; P. beti, 1.141 cm. Overall, 1/2 in. 10 cm. (Photo by Adria Kats.)
When Augustinus Kramer went to the Gilberts in 1856 to collect ethnographic specimens for the Stuttgart Museum, he acquired many weapons and pieces of armor on the island of Doblou. Wanting to find out how people fought, he induced the men who brought them to throw on the armor and pose with the long spears. (Reproduced from Augustinus Kramer, Hawaii, Ostindienreisen und Samoa [1866], following p. 272.)

Binoka were extraordinary. Together they achieved a feat unique in the history of the Pacific Islands: in the face of European cultural pressures that had over run the whole of Polynesia and Micronesia they maintained the political, economic, and social integrity of their territory from the beginning of European contact to virtually the end of the twentieth century, selecting and accepting from the European only such ideas and material goods as appeared to them of value, and these strictly on their own terms and not those dictated by the dominant race. (Maude 1970:223-224)

**Stevenson and Tem Binoka**

Robert Louis Stevenson first visited the Gilbert Islands in 1889, on the second of his three South Sea cruises. On 24 June 1889, Stevenson, his wife Fanny, her son Lloyd Osborne, and the Stevensons’ Chinese cook left Hawaii on the Equator, a small trading schooner headed for the Gilberts. After stopping for six weeks on Boturiki (Fig. 7), the party reached Abemama on 1 September.

The main objective of the Stevensons’ voyage to the Gilberts was to visit the notorious Tem Binoka. Tem Binoka was by that time in mid-fourties and near the end of his life, but his fame was undiminished. "There is one great personage in the Gilberts’ Tembinok’ of Apeamana: solely conspicuous, the hero of song, the butt of gossip. Through the rest of the group the kings are slain or fallen in tutelage. Tembinok alone remains, the last tyrant, the last erect vestige of a dead society" (Stevenson 1891:290).

When the Equator anchored in the lagoon, Tem Binoka’s own lad-time, take a chair, and talk and eat with the old family friend. [His manners were] plain, decent, sensible, and dignified. He never played long nor drank much, and copied our behaviour where he perceived it to differ from his own. It was plain he was determined in all things to bring profit from our visit, and chiefly upon etiquette. (Stevenson 1891:334-335)

As time went on, Tem Binoka told Stevenson the story of his family. He described his grandfather, Tenkorai (Torake), a chief ‘when Karia and Apara were yet independent’ and Apeamana itself the arena of devastating feuds.

Through this perturbed period of history the figure of Tenkorai stalks memorable. In war he was swift and bloody. . . . In civil life his arrogance was unheard of . . . . He was feared and hated, and this was his pleasure. He was no poet, he cared not for arts and knowledge. ‘My grandpa has one thing: he is a damned scoundrel, a bloody beast,’ observed the king. (Stevenson 1891:364)

His grandson remembered Tenkorai as an old man: he was tall and lean and ‘walked all the same young man.’ According to Tem Binoka, the body of Tenkorai was burned and sent to the ship; he subjected the party, one by one, to an intense, silent scrutiny. At the end of that time, wrote Stevenson, ‘I was informed abruptly that I had stood the ordeal. ‘I look your eye. You good man. You no lie,’ said the king: a doubtful compliment to a writer of romance’ (1891:312).

The party was able to come ashore, and Tem Binoka had assembled for them a little town, the four houses, which stood on stilts, being simply walked into place on the shoulders of islanders. The Stevensons lived in ‘Equator Town’ for two months. They got to know the ‘commons’ of the island hardly at all, and Tem Binoka’s style of life totally. [When he was called on him in his house, and he came to call on them]

"I very sorry you go . . . . Miss Stevens he good man, woman he good man, boy he good man; all good man . . . . I very sorry. My patha he go, Miss Stevens he go all go. You no see king cry before. King all the same man: feel bad, he cry. I very sorry." (Stevenson 1891:367-368)

Robert Louis and Fanny Stevenson and their friends Nan Tok and Natakau on Boturiki in the Gilbert Islands. (Reproduced from Fanny Stevenson, The Cruise of the ‘Janet Nichol’, following p. 6)

Robert Louis Stevenson’s three Gilbert Island corvettes (F324 A.B.C.) Heavy and rigid, these provided effective protection against shark’s teeth corf. The hitch back of F324B (center), is braced by two short sticks rising from the shoulders, and reinforced by two long sticks bound along the outside edges. The black diamonds and stripes on all three corvettes are human hair (F324A, H. 76 cm; F324B, H. 102 cm; F324C, H. 55.5 cm).
The next day Tem Binoka sent to Stevenson

a present of two corselets, made in the island fashion of plaited fibre, heavy and strong. One had been worn by Temkoroti, one by Tembaitake; and the gift being gratefully received, he sent me, on the return of his messengers, a third—that of Tembinatake [Fig. 8]. My curiosity was roused; I begged for information as to the three wearers; and the king entered with gusto into the details already given. (Stevenson 1891: 368)

Like his father and uncle before him, Tem Binoka was a poet, and on the occasion of Stevenson’s departure from Abemama the two men agreed to “celebrate [their] separation in verse”:

Let us, who part like brothers, part like bards; / And you in your tongue and measure, I in mine, / Our vow is only a solemnize.  
(Stevenson 1911:180)

Stevenson’s poem “The House of Tembinoka,” written at sea on the schooner Equator, repeats in verse the history of Tem Binoka’s family.

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Robert Louis Stevenson’s three Gilbertese corselets lie, dusty and mute, in the storerooms of The University Museum. As it happens, we know quite a lot about them. We understand something about the friendship between Stevenson and Tem Binoka, and how the gift was made. We can picture the jagged wounds inflicted by rows of sharks’ teeth, the long complexity of binding scores of bundles of fiber into a substantial defensive garment, and the incredible discomfort of wearing a full suit of fiber armor into battle in the blinding heat of an equatorial atoll. The names of the three men who made and wore these corselets are known to us, and we can even ask ourselves, which belonged to whom? Is P3294C, with its fine texture and many small torn spots, older than the other two, and was it, therefore, worn by the arrogant old warrior Teng Karotu? No matter how far we push, however, some frustration remains, and perhaps this is part of what draws us to an ethnographic and archaeological museum. Ffirmly in the here and now, we can never really know what it was to make and use the exotic objects that surround us, but we come, nevertheless, to look and learn and speculate.

Adria Katz is Keeper of the Oceanian collections in The University Museum. Her interest in the weaponry of the Pacific dates from 1973, when she undertook a catalogue of Solomon Island war clubs, spear clubs, and axes in the collections of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

Bibliography


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