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Bilum Chic

Story by Zen de Guzman-Alaluku

When fashionable women go shopping for something cool, sexy and different to wear this summer on the French or Italian Riviera, they will discover in the exclusive boutiques of this playground of the rich and famous a line of clothing and accessories with a Papua New Guinean pedigree. Alongside the usual high fashion labels will be a collection of resort-wear made of 'looped bark string textile' produced in a country so far away from Europe — in both geographical and developmental sense — that people there are likely to ask, 'where is that?'

The body skimming sheaths, tops and skirts, with matching bags, belts, scarves and jewellery are, as designer Sharon Brissoni (*photo on right*) proudly proclaims, 100 per cent hand-made in Papua New Guinea. From their raw material, the bark of trees grown in remote mountain regions of the country, collected and dried by village women, to their craftsmanship, by urban settlement women, it may be said that the clothes have been born and bred in Papua New Guinea, like Brissoni herself. Indeed, they are a cultural legacy that has not only travelled across time and continents, but has also crossed taboo lines and psychological barriers of traditional society.

Brissoni has chosen simple, classic designs, the better to show off the net-like fabric that moulds and moves with the body. Depending on what is worn underneath the clothes, the effect can either be daring or intriguing. The fabric is woven from one long, sturdy string produced by rolling and twisting bark fibres on the thigh and lengthened by adding more fibres, then repeating the same process. The string is then looped by hand, using a technique said to date back to the Stone Age, although nowadays it is often done with the aid of a length of plastic packaging tape as a guide and a needle made from an umbrella wire tip. The weaver releases the string by winding and unwinding it with the other hand in a continual, seemingly tireless twisting motion.

The real skill is manifested in the fact that the clothes are made in one piece, with no seams or zips, by women who learned the looping technique from watching their mothers or grandmothers or aunts.





Model Iva Rex wears a dress adorned with seeds.

They have had no training in modern dressmaking — nor indeed has Brissoni. Using samples of the type of clothes Brissoni had in mind, they then translated them into her designs. The bark fibre's natural colours — shades of brown, beige, green, red — give the fabric its subtle striping. The only trimmings are shells and seeds commonly found on Papua New Guinean beaches and bush areas. The weavers are given a free rein in adorning the clothes and the accessories according to their imagination. The result combines traditional skills and creativity with contemporary styling.

Papua New Guineans will instantly recognise the material, for it has been part of the daily and ceremonial dress and activities of the diverse cultures that comprise their nation. But they know it in its most familiar form — as a *bilum*, the most versatile bag on earth, the string bag that holds and transports anything from food to pigs, from babies to spirits, and which is used by both men and women. It may be worn as a cap like plumage and to keep the mountain chill out of one's head or as an apron to go with traditional dance costume. To call the Brissoni collection '*bilumwear*' would be quite apt, except that it would not mean a thing to its European buyers.

The entry of *bilum* clothes into the world of European high fashion is the culmination of a year-long research by Brissoni and experimentation with her team of weavers. It began when Brissoni returned to Papua New Guinea after working with the fashion magazine *Vogue Italia* and later with an Italian couture house in Milan. There she learned all about the fashion industry. It became clear to her that it wasn't outstanding design that was driving the industry. 'Everything has been designed', she said, 'but the potential (for creating something new) is in the use of fabric.'

Noticing that the designers in Europe were interested in new fabrics, she became fired up with the idea of finding a distinctive Papua New Guinean textile that could be made into high fashion clothing, something natural and hand-made, qualities that she said would appeal to the European market. She looked at the *tapa* (bark cloth) and screen-printed fabrics with modern renditions of Papua New Guinean motifs, and decided that neither fitted what she had in mind. 'Then I noticed the *bilum*, not the multi-coloured ones, but the traditional fibre *bilums*. I thought, now that's a very interesting textile that I haven't seen anywhere else in the world.'

She then embarked on a search for the right *bilum* fibre, soft enough to wear. In taking up the challenge, this young Italian-Australian woman found for herself something else that she was looking for: something worthwhile to do while she's in the land of her birth. 'My family, thank God, always believed in this project.' They encouraged her and backed her with financial and moral support. Some of her friends, not seeing any future in the idea, thought she was crazy leaving Europe and a good job, for what?

The 'what' led to a series of journeys into the Papua New Guinean hinterlands. Accompanied by friends or her family company's workers who came from the areas she visited, Brissoni, a fluent Tok Pisin speaker, went to the villages, asking the women about their *bilums* and what material they used. In the end, not only did she learn about village life but she also got to know of different types of fibre native to particular regions. However, at first she got no easy answers to her enquiries. There was reluctance, there was scepticism, and there was fear.

'When you touch the artistic

Simple, classic styling sets off a striking necklace.



Weavers display their own colourful bilums.

culture, the traditions, people are always a bit scared of what can happen', says Brissoni. 'And because there are a lot of women involved, this project was initially seen in the wrong way, like trespassing certain traditions and certain aspects of the culture. Nobody has ever made clothing out of this textile, so it's like violating their normal view of it.' Even her workers were initially frightened by the thought of venturing into the 'unheard-of'. To make dresses out of something they had used to make bags was hard to comprehend in the beginning. 'They thought I was young and what I was doing was something make-believe, or a hobby just to pass my time. They didn't think it was going to lead to anything else.'

Unschooling and living in squatter

settlements, they tended to be self-disparaging and saw themselves as having little value. Brissoni perceives this thinking as being reflective of the obstacles that women often encounter in society and of the way many women view themselves.

It took a lot of patient explanation, over a period of time, to allay people's fears and change their attitude towards the project. The villagers now supply her with the fibre she requires; moreover, what they used to gather from the bush, they now cultivate. As for the workers, Brissoni's task was to convince them that they were skilful, creative women whose work was of interest to people overseas.

Brissoni's first trials were unsuccessful.



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'I produced terrible samples — very itchy and tight. I was using the wrong fibre, the wrong bark.' She continued experimenting until she found a combination of bark fibres that was ideal for clothing. The second step was to find designs that could be made from one piece, as the nature of the weave is such that it cannot be cut and then sewn together. Again, it was a case of continually trying and discarding. The weavers had to break away from the bilum-as-bag mentality and to learn to use their skills to produce a dress, modern and high fashion. Says Brissoni, 'It didn't happen the first time, they made mistakes, we made corrections. When they finally got it right, it was a very happy moment.'

Fabric and design found and a whole collection created, it was now time to see how it would fare in the fashion world. There were a number of considerations. 'I knew this textile was ideal only for summer, and being a hand-made product, it's going to be costly. We're not industrial, we are artisan, a cottage factory, and we need time to produce. So, where in the world can we find a market and encounter people who are understanding of a cottage industry and why they have to pay so much for it, being natural and hand-made?' Brissoni decided to introduce it to Italy where she had developed a network of contacts. 'I know Italians like new things every season and are willing to pay for it.'



She then arranged to take the collection to a trade show in Milan and to have it worn on the catwalk by a bevy of international models, including exotic-looking Papua New Guinean Iva Rex. Brissoni and her team also created a spectacular floor-length *bilum* poncho to give the collection a dramatic entrance and exit. Listed in the New Designer category, the *bilum* designs were much admired for their uniqueness and caught the eye of buyers.

Will they sell? Will a product of the ages survive the seasonal nature of fashion? An impassioned Brissoni is confident that there are women out there who will buy her *bilumwear* for its special value. 'They're not just buying a dress or a bag, it's like acquiring an artifact, a piece of history, a piece of culture, an ethnic testimony of a society, a tradition that they would never find in a Versace or Valentino gown.'

Sharon Brissoni is already thinking of new designs for the next summer season and looking at new markets. The *bilum's* cultural evolution marches on.



Below left: *Jenifa Hane demonstrates the age-old looping technique.*

Below right: *Ruki Eno puts the finishing touches on high fashion string bag.*

