Photograph courtesy of John Watson

Lizzy Leckie and Kaetaeta Watson weaving the overalls, 2016.

and working up and around. They followed this technique as if they were made in one piece starting at the bottom historic armour revealed the techniques and processes used. The artists hoped to protect and awaken the knowledge within the original materials used to make the armour, looking at the collections in New Zealand. Their research sought to identify further explore, in detail, Kiribati armour found in museum Watson drew on the knowledge from existing records to reconfirm this. Scanning electron microscopy and light microscopy showed that the cuirass was definitely made from coconut fibre string, and decorated with human hair. Further DNA analysis of the hair could also give clues about the location and lifestyle of the donor of the hair. Conservation: the historical records also have to be limited and in order to be able to understand the weaving techniques used in the production of the armour we approached another discipline. Artists Chris Charteris, Lizzy Leckie and Kaetaeta Watson drew on the knowledge from existing records to further explore in detail Kiribati armour found in museum collections in New Zealand. Their research sought to identify knotting and weaving techniques that would allow them to make their own suit of Kiribati armour. Besides reconfirming the original materials used to make the armour, looking at the historic armour revealed the techniques and processes used. For example, the artists could tell that most cuirasses looked as if they were made in one piece starting at the bottom and working up and around. They followed this technique toward the armour. It also went well with the natural colour of the coir, which were made from sail tying twine, chosen for its availability, flexibility and the slightly hairy nature of the fibre. For the core of the cuirass instead of the plaited coir, the artists used a commercially brought from manila rope, commonly used today for boating, and chosen for its firmness and strength. Patterns were added to the cuirass using polyester slinging twine used for attaching ropes to fishing nets, and this was also dyed. The process of making the new armour has been a long and time-consuming one. It has revealed the amount of time, strength, perseverance and community involvement needed to complete the armour, and it very much reflects Kiribati life: the working together of the whole family to achieve an objective. The rapid decline in production of this type of armour is generally attributed to the influence of both missionaries amongst the islands and the arrival of the British in the 1800s, which means awakening the knowledge. In making this armour the artists hope to protect and awaken the knowledge within it. In Kautoa Rakau it was decided to use the traditional coconut fibre string as it is very precious and hard to source in New Zealand. The artists wanted to use materials that were available around them, just as makers in Kiribati would have done. They also wanted to show their own contemporary version or interpretation of the armour. The cuirass is made from a twisted polyethylene twine used for fishing nets, and was dyed brown as it represented their feeling of respect for its power and strength and the renewed interest will hopefully awaken Kiribati to discover more about their history and skills of our ancestors (Watson 2014).

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Cover image: One of the senior students at Rongorongo training college, Beru. Photographed by Reverend George Hubert Eastman, ‘The Island Warrior: Coconut Fibre Armour From Kiribati’ (2016).166

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The Island Warrior exhibition is a case study for considering the limited materials available around them to produce these fearsome objects.

What do we see when we look at objects? For one person an object such as a cup might simply be a means of drinking your tea, whilst to another person it might be a family heirloom, or for someone else an example of the use of porcelain. There are many different ways of looking at objects and understanding them. The Island Warrior exhibition is a case study for considering the multiple ways of seeing objects, and the benefits of bringing these many ways together. The exhibition brings together the perspectives of a conservator, a museum researcher and three artists in a way of understanding a specific object: Kiribati armour.

The historic armour (Z 7034, Z 7035) and weapons (E 1907.603, Z 7052) shown in the exhibition would have been made sometime in the 1800’s on one of the islands that makes up the Republic of Kiribati, a group of thirty three coral atolls and reefs spread out over 3.5 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean. Insular, as an island group, thelanders would have used the limited materials available around them to produce these fearsome objects.

The research for this exhibition started with what was already known about the objects taken from historic texts written by whalers, explorers, missionaries, government officials and colonial officers, as well as oral histories from Kiribati people. From these sources we know that the suits of armour would have provided protection from the dangerous shark’s teeth edged swords, spears, daggers, and coconut swords carried in battle. Each suit is made up of a set of overalls and sleeves made from coconut fibre, with a coconut fibre EINVAL worn over the top. The distinctive cuirasses have high backboards to protect from attack from behind, and are often seen with shark’s teeth made from gastrocoacouc fibre or dried ray skin to protect the vital organs. The cuirasses are usually decorated, either with human hair, feathers or shells. Warriors sometimes wore hand armour also made from coconut fibre, and mail with shark’s teeth along the rivulets. The warriors would also wear fearsome looking helmets made from porcupine fish skin, which dry hard in the sun and provide another layer of protection for the head. These helmets would usually have been worn over a coconut fibre or woven pandanus leaf cap. It is not known when and where this armour was developed in the islands but it has come to stand as uniquely Kiribati, with its influence spreading to the nearby islands of Nauru and Tuvalu also.

Coconut fibre string, a material still used today, is the main material used for the armour, chosen not just for its availability but also its strength and flexibility. The fibre comes from the husk of the coconut, buffed between the inner shell and the outer skin of the coconut. These fibres are soaked in the water of the lagoon for two to three months, then rinsed and dried. Several fibres are rolled into small strands, which are then rolled together to create long cords. The process of making the armour would have taken a powerful ritual associated with it, instilling in the armour the power and strength of the raw materials used to make it. The warriors would also go through a ritual before going into battle in order to turn them into fierce fighters.

The armour would have been worn in conflict resolutions between individuals or groups of people, and generally the fighting would have been related to land claims or retribution. In all contests the aim was to wound your adversary, not to kill them, as that wound would be adequate retribution. If someone did die during the battle then payment to the wronged party would have needed to have been made through the gift of land. Wartins in armour would have carried a shark’s teeth spear tipped with a stingray barb but would never have tooth spear tipped with a stingray barb but would never have

Detailed of the repairs to the trousers (Z 7034)

Hand guard (2017.13)

Suit of Armour (Z 7034 Z 7035)

Detail of the repairs to the trousers (Z 7034)

Detail of porcupine fish helmet (Z 7031)

Sample of human hair from Z 7034 using light microscopy. Photograph courtesy of Jennifer Bates

Sample of coconut fibre from Z 7034 under a screening electron microscope. Courtesy of Catherine Kneale and Trish Biers

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