

Kawo and Sabu: The Changing Face of Customary Leadership among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea

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Throughout her distinguished career, Ann Chowning has consistently exhibited a strong scepticism of grand generalisations about Melanesian societies. I came to Victoria University of Wellington in the late 1970s to work towards an M.A., flush with excitement about the then hot topic of semiology which I was certain would bring about a revolutionary transformation of the anthropology of Oceania. I confess that I did not at first much appreciate Ann's cautions and corrections, gentle though they were, of my bold attempts to decode the hidden reality of Melanesia. There was always another tribe whose customs contradicted my model or several other ways one might interpret the same set of data. Ann did not discourage my interests in signs and symbols, however, and in time I came to appreciate that her refusal to endorse sweeping generalisations was born out of a profound fascination with the astonishing cultural diversity of the region, an aspect of Melanesian reality that she felt had to be grappled with directly and not obscured by enticing theory. This was a perspective she had come to the hard way, through intensive ethnographic fieldwork in four cultures and wide reading in a variety of literatures dealing with the region. Her knowledge of ethnographic facts was prodigious and, for a novice Melanesianist, both intimidating and inspiring.

Ann's fascination with ethnographic detail has often led her to perceive critically important aspects of social and historical process in Melanesian societies overlooked by her contemporaries. Over the years I have repeatedly returned to two of her contributions which provide the inspiration for this essay: "Recent acculturation between tribes in Papua-New Guinea" (1969) and her important review "Leadership in Melanesia" (1979).

More specifically, my brief for this essay is a discussion of changes and continuities in customary leadership among the Maisin of Oro (Northern) Province in Papua New Guinea. The Maisin are among a group of widely scattered societies, mostly located in coastal regions, that formally distinguish between peace and war leaders (Chowning 1979:74). European observers during the early years of contact write of encountering powerful "chiefs" among the Maisin as do outside visitors today. An examination of the available evidence, however, shows that the outward form of customary leadership has changed over the past century, sometimes radically. What has remained more or less constant is a social ideology used to legitimate leaders, an ideology that has been shaped and continues to be reinforced through interactions between the Maisin and neighbouring socio-linguistic groups.

Forms of Leadership among the Maisin

Around 2000 Maisin speakers live in four multi-nucleated settlements along the southwestern shores of Collingwood Bay in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. First contact occurred in July 1890. By the 1920s, the villages were well integrated into the colonial system; most young people had attended a few years of village school and been baptised by the Anglican mission, and virtually all young men spent at least one 18 month stint as contract labourers on plantations and in mines elsewhere in what was then the Australian colony of Papua. Primarily because of their long acquaintance with the mission, Maisin were among the first to have access to the secondary and tertiary schools that opened following the Second World War. Many of the graduates secured well-paying jobs as professional teachers, medical staff and bureaucrats as Australia rapidly expanded the civil service in preparation for the colony's independence through the 1960s and early 1970s. Nonetheless Collingwood Bay remained an economic backwater. Lacking good harbours or a road, it was and is too expensive to get most products to market (the exception being tapa, bark cloth, for which Maisin women have long enjoyed a small niche in the artefact market). Most local people survive through basic subsistence activities: fishing, hunting, gathering and, above all, gardening in the extensive low-lying bush area behind the beach villages. Over the past quarter century, these subsistence activities have been increasingly subsidised by remittances of cash and goods from relatives in paid employment.

The Maisin population is divided into a number of patrilineal clans, some of which are scattered in different locations, but most of which live together in named hamlets within multi-nucleated villages. As long as they remain physically vigorous, senior men exercise the most authority within their own clans. Maisin also recognise a more general category of customary leadership that extends beyond individual clans. They refer to these men as *kawo*, as 'big men', and by the English word *chief*. These men are often the first to speak out during public meetings and are accorded a measure of respect by all, although their practical authority is quite limited. Their influence derives from a number of criteria, the most important being the size and status of their clan, their organisational abilities and their prowess as orators.

Chowning (1979:66) opens her survey of Melanesian leadership with a caution. In all but a few cases, anthropologists have studied societies in which "indigenous patterns of leadership [have] been drastically altered" through the direct intervention of administrative officers,

missionaries and labour recruiters, as well as through the introduction of new forms of political organisation. This is certainly true for the Maisin. The imposition of colonial control diminished the powers of customary leaders, by eliminating warfare and reducing the opportunities for inter-tribal feasting and by introducing new forms of village and regional-level leadership. While customary leaders remain important symbols for the Maisin; for the most part, they are today specialists and on a par with church and village government leaders, whose main concerns are limited to the organisation of customary activities such as mortuary ceremonies.

Although the outward forms of leadership have changed and diversified, the ideological assumptions that legitimatise authority appear to have remained relatively stable over the decades since first contact. I shall review the evidence for this claim in the next section. My task for the remainder of the present section is to describe this ideological system as it operates in the present.

The *kawo/sabu* Distinction

The system is based in the first instance upon a number of oral traditions. In brief, Maisin say that their ancestors emerged from a hole or cave located along the western edge of the Musa River basin far to the west of their present location.¹ They emerged as named patrilineal clans, each bearing a distinctive set of insignia (such as particular designs drawn on tapa bark cloth or carved in wood and dance ornaments), totems and prerogatives (such as certain types of sorcery). These emblems are collectively known as *kawo*. As well as referring to objects and customary prerogatives, the term *kawo* also regularly appears in the names of groups, designating an identifying trait. As they emerged from underground, the clans formed themselves into two or, according to a few of my informants, three clan confederacies. The confederacy known as Wo ari Kowo (upper *kawo*) is said to have travelled from a location on the upper reaches of the Musa River overland to their present location on Collingwood Bay, while the other grouping, Mera ari Kowo (middle *kawo*) came by sea from the lower Musa (as did, in some accounts, the much smaller third group, Yung Fofo (water at the bottom) from the mouth of the river. During their migrations and afterwards prior to the arrival of Europeans, both Mera ari Kowo and Wo ari Kowo picked up small non-Maisin clans along the way whose descendants remain among them. All of the clans are said to have originally settled together near the present site of the largest Maisin village of Uiaku. Later conflicts caused some clans and families to establish other villages nearby. Most clans maintained their integrity, settling into named hamlets in multinucleated villages. Periodically the clans coalesced into the two larger confederacies as “food enemies”, engaging in competitive food exchanges that resembled the Abutu festival on Goodenough Island (Young 1971). Although the food competitions have long ceased, Maisin continue

to identify strongly with their clans and associated confederacies.

The system is based in the second instance upon a distinction between two ranked types of clans, known as *kawo*² (*kawo* here designating seniority and a wealth of customary insignia) and *sabu* (translated by Maisin as ‘servant’ or ‘follower’). Within each confederacy, the *kawo* clans enjoyed the higher rank. In the old days, only the *kawo* men could speak during public gatherings, and it is still the case that they are the first to speak during exchanges and ceremonies occurring within the villages (although not on the neutral grounds of the school and church grounds). Their main prerogative is the right to hold feasts and sponsor ceremonial dancing in the bare earth plazas within their clan hamlets. In the past, such events provided the public means of confirming alliances between Maisin clans and outside groups. Feasts were elaborate events, often entailing weeks of feasting and ceremonial dances. During this time, the plaza was marked as a taboo area by the presence of a special house, known as the *kawo va* (*kawo* house), displaying the emblems of the sponsoring clan. In light of their leading role in feasting and forming alliances, *kawo* clans are also referred to as holders of the drum (Ira ari Kowo) or as peace-makers (Sinan ari Kowo). The positions of *kawo* were further strengthened by their association with other clans that owned powerful forms of sorcery (Barker 1983). As a group, *kawo* clans possess a number of prerogatives that indicate their superior status. These include symbolic markers such as the wearing of rooster plumes in headdresses, the use of large lime gourds and elaborately decorated lime spatulas (using in chewing betelnut) and trimmed edges on the thatched roofs of their houses.

According to oral traditions, each of the confederacies was headed by two *kawo* clans. Thus the Wo ari Kowo confederacy is also known as Gafi-Simboro, after its two leading clans. The confederacies also included a number of lower ranked *sabu* clans, associated with one or the other *kawo*. Maisin often describe *sabu* clans as ‘servants’ in reference to their duties during feasts of providing their *kawo* with food and dancing before their houses. *Sabu* as a group do not possess distinct emblems and generally possess fewer clan insignia than their *kawo* counterparts. However, they have the right to lead during times of warfare. For this reason, their key symbol is the fighting spear (*ganan*), and they are alternatively referred to as Ganan ari Kowo.

The origin traditions, reinforced by the system of clan and *kawo* markers, provide a charter for social organisation and political leadership within Maisin villages. All Maisin agree on the basic elements of the system—but it is not a blueprint. Almost all of the particulars are open to dispute: which clans have rights to specific insignia and ancestral names, the exact membership of each of the confederacies, and even whether certain clans are *kawo* or *sabu*. Thus, while an

individual may protest that his or her natal clan is not really *sabu*, despite what the neighbours say, he or she still accepts that *sabu* as a class operate in certain ways that distinguish them from *kawo* and vice-versa.

Dualisms and Social Morality

Similar hereditary class systems have been identified in several parts of lowlands Melanesia, from Mekeo in the south to Manam Island on the northwestern coast to Makira (San Cristobal) in the Solomon Islands (Chowning 1979:70). The distinction between peace and war groups and their associated leaders is even more common regionally—indeed has been reported for many parts of the world. Although the discriminations made by Maisin are far less elaborate, Sahlins' (2004:58) recent description of the eastern Fijian system as “a scheme of two intersecting forms of dualism” applies nicely. The first, a form of diametric dualism based upon reciprocal relations, is embodied in the opposition between peace and war clans and the two confederacies, facing each other as “food enemies”. The second, a form of asymmetric dualism, is embodied in the hierarchical relationship between senior *kawo* and junior *sabu*.

These dualisms map more generally upon intersecting moral logics that equally turn on a distinction between reciprocal and hierarchical relationships. Maisin often speak of the ideal form of social relationship as one of perfect balance between parties in exchange relationships. This is most easily achieved within the household characterised (in good times at least) by an easy give and take. Achieving a similar balance, and the state of social amity that goes with it, is more difficult with distant kin and non-kin, but that is still the aim of the extensive series of exchanges occurring between families linked by marriage through the life cycle.

The leaders of *kawo* clans, as they are imagined in oral traditions, form a critical exemplar of the principle. They brought peace, it is said, by hosting feasts and exchanging gifts of food, tapa, spouses and valuables with erstwhile enemies, making them friends by bringing them into a state of balanced reciprocity. Social morality, however, also depends upon the maintenance of respect and support between people within hierarchical relationships. Parents and older siblings are said to “care for” children and younger siblings by providing sound advice as well as care and nurturance when they are young. This serves to control and channel the raw energy and impetuosity of youths into useful pursuits. Similarly, the *kawo* of old are said to have calmed the passions of their fierce *sabu* with fine words and good advice, allowing them to give way to their violent natures only at times of war.

As I have documented elsewhere, the logics of reciprocal equivalence and hierarchical control form a pervasive feature of Maisin moral and political discourse (Barker 1998, 2003, n.d.). The emphasis people place on one or the other shifts, depending on the circumstances or the interests they may be trying to advance. What

is true of the present is likely also true of the past. As Sahlins says for Fiji, “the two [forms of dualism] are alternate structures of historical action, appropriately salient in different situations” (2004:58-59).

Leadership, Past and Present

There are two types of evidence for the antiquity of the *kawo/sabu* distinction. The first and fullest is comparative. All of the documented socio-linguistic groups residing along Collingwood Bay possess nearly identical systems. Like the Maisin, the Korafe, the Miniafia, the Ubir and the Oyan peoples all distinguish between higher and lower ranked clans on the basis of very similar sets of insignia, prerogatives and a contrast between peace-makers and warriors (Gnechi-Ruscone 1991, Stephens 1974, Wakefield 2001, Liz Bonshek pers. comm.). All of these groups regard themselves as recent migrants into the area, with some like the Miniafia coming from the east and others, like the Maisin and Korafe, coming in from the west. The system would thus appear to have resulted from a process of localised acculturation that has also resulted in the mixing of vocabularies and, in the case of the Maisin, of some Austronesian and Non-Austronesian grammatical features (Capell 1976, Chowning 1969). The emergence of a regional system was likely abetted by the highly unsettled situation in Collingwood Bay prior to 1900, due to the invasions which resulted in the dispersal of refugees often far from the main body of their own linguistic groups. There is much evidence of competing leaders forging alliances across linguistic boundaries as well as organising raids (Barker 1996). Maisin today talk of having relatives and allies living in non-Maisin villages as far as 80 kilometres away, connections made before the arrival of Europeans and renewed by occasional visits ever since. The Maisin distinction between *kawo* and *sabu* is thus an expression of a regional system that took form in late pre-colonial times and continues to be reinforced through interactions with neighbouring peoples.

Recorded observations by European visitors make up the second form of evidence. Unfortunately, this evidence is quite indirect. During the first decade following contact in 1890, prior to the establishment of police control over the area, European administrators and missionaries wrote of encountering “chiefs” during their brief visits to the Maisin villages, but not of the underlying system which would have been invisible to them. The most compelling clues come from the writings of Percy John Money, the first missionary to work with the Maisin. While Money never made an ethnographic study, he was a keen observer who managed to gain some fluency in the language in the course of setting up a mission station and periodically living in Uiaku between 1902 and 1910. One of his letters records part of a speech given by Godima, on behalf of his father Beremu who was the leader of a large *kawo* clan next to the mission station. Beremu was ill with an abscess in his thigh. A large group of villagers had

gathered around his house to keep vigil, a custom that continues to be practiced. Godima tells them to go back to their regular work, making it clear that he knows one of their members had ensorcelled his father. Speaking for Beremu, he continues:

My ancestor came up out of a hole in the ground, he came up with his lime gourd and stick and his hair threaded through rings of shell: I, therefore, take precedence of you all. I am your superior, for all other clans came after him. I am their eldest brother, that is what they call me. I am a great chief, why then should I meet with sorcery? The priority is mine for I was the first to ascend and therefore I became chief and this my chiefly dress was given me to wear. (Money 1906a:31)

The key elements of the asymmetric opposition are here: the mythological charter, the tokens of *kawo* status, the opposition between elder and junior “brothers”. Indeed, the same speech could easily be made today by any senior member of a *kawo* clan.

Leaders under Colonial Rule: Bogege and Wanigera

The forms of leadership generated by the underlying system, however, have changed significantly over the years. Early European visitors made many references to “chiefs” during the first decade of contact prior to pacification (Barker 1987). In 1891, M.H. Moreton, the Resident Magistrate for the Eastern Division based in Samarai, exchanged names with Bogege, whom he identified as a chief of the people living in and around the present-day village of Sinapa. Bogege appeared regularly in government reports, especially towards the end of the decade, when he was accused of masterminding attacks on trading vessels and conspiring to launch an ambush on the first Resident Magistrate appointed to Collingwood Bay in late 1900. Unfortunately for Bogege, his target was C.A.W. Monckton, a trigger-happy adventurer who immediately led a punitive expedition in which at least three Maisin were killed and an unknown number wounded. Perhaps recognising a kindred spirit, Monckton appointed Bogege a village constable after the Maisin begged for peace (Monckton 1922:199-203). Government agents and missionaries were far more impressed by another “chief”, Wanigera of Uiaku. The Europeans regarded him as a key ally, lavishing him with gifts of steel tools, tobacco and clothing. They appear not to have been mistaken in their measure of the man. Many years later, Money learned that Wanigera had overruled an ambush that Bogege had planned on a missionary party. In 1898, Wanigera and several other men were ambushed and killed during a raid on Uiaku by an inland enemy tribe. His death was marked by a massive funeral involving hundreds of people from all of the language groups in Collingwood Bay and several

interior peoples. Although Wanigera was dead by the time Monckton arrived, he devoted a section of his memoirs to an account of Wanigera’s greatest military victory and included a photograph of the warrior’s grave (Monckton 1922:74-75).

Eight years after Wanigera’s death, Money provided a more complicated picture of his status in Maisin society. Wanigera “was not a chief by descent, but he was a great warrior and born leader, and ruled the whole tribe from the head chief downwards” (Money 1906b:2). Indeed, such was his power that he once beat the “old chief”, presumably Beremu, “because he was not inclined to fall in with his views”. Both Beremu and Wanigera were *sabu*, although from opposed confederacies. It is likely that their prominence during the early contact period reflected the expansionist nature of Maisin society at the time as much as the dangers of enemy attack. Money’s observations, however, make it clear that Maisin also recognised *kawo* leaders (although his assumption of a high chief was probably mistaken).

The evidence might suggest that *sabu* at this time held a dominant leadership position over everyone else, including *kawo*. I suspect, however, that most Europeans were simply unaware of the underlying distinctions between *kawo* and *sabu* leaders, and were generally more impressed by the activities of war leaders than feast-makers. Significantly, references to “chiefs” disappear from the archival record after Money’s departure, although there is plenty of evidence of large-scale inter-tribal feasts that would have been the province of the *kawo*. Rather than a reversal of the asymmetric opposition between *kawo* and *sabu*, the conditions of the early contact period suggest a heightened emphasis upon diametric dualism, a situation in which *kawo* and *sabu* exercised an equal but different type of authority. The fact that Wanigera and Bogege belonged to opposed confederacies also suggests a diametric dualism.

The projection of police control in Collingwood Bay brought raiding and warfare to a swift end, and with it a decline in opportunities for *sabu* leaders. It is of no small interest, however, that almost all of the village constables appointed for the Maisin came from *sabu* clans, a pattern that Liz Bonshek (pers. comm.) has also found in the non-Maisin community of Wanigela to the north. At the same time, the conditions of peace may have stimulated activities organised by *kawo* leaders. Very large inter-tribal gatherings hosted by the Maisin were recorded by local missionaries and government officers into the 1930s. At least two of these involved the ceremonial breaking of war spears between traditional enemies. Over time, however, the changes gradually undermined the power of local leaders, especially the ending of warfare, the temporary and, following W.W. II, permanent migration of young people from the villages to take up paid employment, and the introduction of new specialised offices into village society.

Customary Leadership In Recent Times

When I first arrived in Uiaku in 1981, nobody could personally recall the days of Wanigera. The large inter-tribal feasts with their weeks of dancing and special *kawo* houses were a rapidly diminishing memory. All adults had attended school and were familiar with government law and the penalties for breaking it. Almost all large festivals now took place on church feast days and on the grassy field beside the school and church. A variety of organisations had long operated in the village, each with its own leaders, including the church council, a village council, a Mothers' Union for women, a youth club and a business cooperative, among others. Villagers spoke of having three types of leaders with different spheres of responsibility whose power, in principle, was supposed to be balanced: church, government and customary leaders. My informants identified the latter as clan elders and senior figures in the confederacies, but there was little agreement as to which specific individuals occupied these categories.

If the role of customary leaders had diminished by the 1980s, the *kawo/sabu* ideology remained central to the way that most Maisin understand authority regardless of the category of leadership (Tietjen and Walker 1985). A good part of the authority of the most respected church or government leaders rested upon their status as elders within their own clans and their performance as customary leaders in, for instance, exchanges or in handling local disputes. Further, Maisin often framed the idealised relationship between village councillors and villagers, for instance, in ways that recalled the asymmetric opposition of *kawo* and *sabu*. Church leaders were most explicitly likened to *kawo*. Their association with the Christian god gave them a higher ritual status than ordinary villagers. More specifically, they were said to be peace-makers whose teachings calmed the warrior passions of the Maisin while guiding their better nature, "taking care" of villagers much as an elder brother should care for his junior (Barker 1993). The actual power of any of these leaders, however, was sharply limited by a widespread insistence upon moral equivalence. Leaders who pushed the people too hard or seemed to benefit from their positions, were quickly brought down by gossip and thinly veiled hints of retaliation through sorcery attack.

During the 1980s, a rhetoric of equivalence dominated public discourse about leaders. The Maisin had many types of leaders then, none of whom possessed much independent power. Much has changed, however, since the mid-1990s in the wake of a highly publicised decision by the people to prevent industrial logging and mining in their lands. The Maisin villages lost their former obscurity as they hosted a steady stream of environmental activists, documentary filmmakers and journalists while international organisations sponsored Maisin delegations to Australia, Japan, the United States

and Canada to publicise their cause. The people added a new layer of political organisation with the introduction of an integrated conservation and development organisation which had a governing council and representatives from all Maisin villages (Barker 2004).

These recent changes have had a marked impact on the status of customary leaders. Visitors to Maisin villages today hear much talk about "chiefs"—as the protectors of ancestral lands, as spokesmen in the fight against loggers, as voices of calm and reason who quieted the passions of young Maisin who wanted to take up arms against loggers (and the national government) when their lands were threatened. While occasionally a *sabu* leader might refer to himself as a "chief", Maisin usually restrict the term to senior *kawo* leaders. In part, talk of chiefs no doubt reflects the interest that outsiders display in what they assume are authentically traditional forms of leadership. But it also reflects shifting opportunities. The influx of visitors, including the powerfully symbolic visits by foreign delegations like the Greenpeace flagship, *Rainbow Warrior*, has encouraged Maisin to revitalise a wide range of indigenous ceremonies marked by lavishly decorated dancers, feasting and ceremonial speeches in which *kawo* leaders take the leading roles.

Few visitors stay long enough to learn that the power actually exercised by "chiefs" is very limited, or that there is often contention over just who is and isn't a "chief". Politics in Maisin communities today remains a matter of drawn out discussion, gossip, quarrels, compromise and, perhaps, a hard-won consensus between adult men who regard themselves most of the time as equivalent in status. Yet, it seems to me that there has been a decisive shift in emphasis favouring asymmetric dualism in recent years. Senior men have been increasingly vocal in arguing for their moral and political authority over youth and women,³ for instance, on the grounds of "tradition". As in many parts of the Pacific, leaders are drawing upon widely shared notions of traditional chieftainship to shore up their authority (White and Lindstrom 1997). It is surely significant that the founder of the new pan-Maisin association also headed the senior lineage of a *kawo* clan.

Conclusion

Chowning (1979:66) notes that early accounts of Melanesian leadership are of limited reliability. Often European observers awarded titles such as "chief" or "king" to local leaders without providing details as to their actual authority. The implication of Chowning's cogent observation is that anthropological understandings of customary leadership must arise from a triangulation of sources: the archival record, oral testimonies and contemporary observations.

In this essay I have argued that the actual form Maisin leadership has taken over the past century has been quite

variable. Early archival records suggest that *sabu* war leaders, and very likely *kawo* leaders as well, enjoyed considerably more power in the past than today in their respective spheres. The early colonial period provided opportunities that members of *kawo* and *sabu* each exploited—as hosts for inter-tribal feasts and as village constables respectively—but the authority of individual leaders declined in large part due to the introduction of new village-wide forms of political organisation and offices. The present revitalisation of tradition has elevated customary leadership in popular consciousness. While this has tended to intensify competing claims, it is possible that certain individuals will in time be able to concentrate authority by convincing fellow villagers that they bear the attributes of “peace” or “war” leaders.

In the face of all of the variability and ambiguity, Maisin *perceptions* of the customary basis of leadership have remained fairly consistent. A relatively gentle experience of colonialism and the reinforcement of give and take with neighbours sharing the same basic system no doubt accounts for much of this stability. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the revitalisation of customary leadership among the Maisin is inspiring a similar self-conscious turn to “chiefs” among neighbouring language groups, part of a long history of inter-tribal acculturation. As Charles A. Valentine has noted for big men in Melanesia, the traits that have produced Maisin leaders “have been highly adaptive under modern conditions requiring change” (quoted in Chowning 1979:84).

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Notes

1. Most groups in Oro Province share versions of this origin story (Williams 1928:118-19).
2. As will already be clear, the term *kawo* conveys a variety of meanings. Besides the higher ranked type of clan, *kawo* may refer to a term of emblem, clan emblems in general, a customary leader, the Christian god, respect and, at its most general, heritage or custom.
3. As in most Melanesian cultures, Maisin women have a very limited public role. They are not recognised as leaders in their natal or adopted clans (Maisin are patrilineal) and rarely speak during community meetings. All the same, women can and do influence public opinion—indirectly through husbands and male relatives and more directly through gossip and, for a few elderly women, through their role as healers and historians. The Anglican Mothers’

Union, introduced in the 1950s and thriving in the late 1990s, provides the main public venue within which women can formally occupy leadership roles. Given the space limitations of this essay, the focus of this discussion is upon the male roles in customary leadership.

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