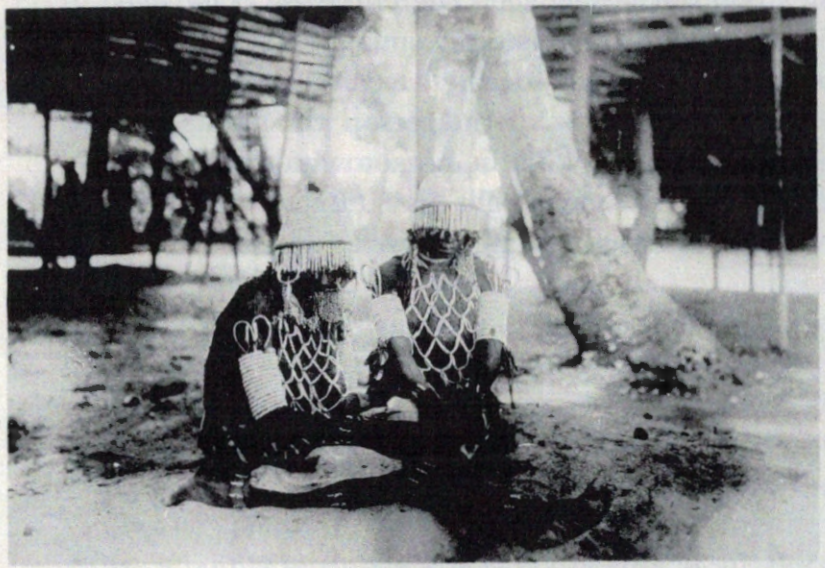

Two widows in full mourning, relicts of the same man.

All photographs: Maisin widows, Papua New Guinea, c.1902–1910. Photographer Percy John Money.

Vestoy: The Journal of Sartorial Matters.
Issue 5, pp. 189-97 (2014)

FASHIONING REBIRTH

On Mourning and Memory in a Papua New Guinea Village

By Professor John Barker

The British Museum is famed for the magnificent collections from ancient

Mediterranean and Near Eastern civilisations which fill its front halls. Those willing to venture further discover equally arresting treasures from Asia and Africa. On the way, visitors pass through a connecting gallery, often pausing to have their photo taken in front of a stern-faced *moai* ancestral statue from Rapa Nui (Eastern Island), the most remote of the far flung Polynesian islands in the South Pacific. Few pay any attention to the artefacts on display nearby although, for Oceanic people, these remnants of their rich cultural artistic heritage are as significant as the Egyptian mummies or magnificent ancient Greek sculptures that draw the crowds. This modest gallery with its display of rather ordinary looking objects (with the striking exception of the *moai*) misleads in a different sense. The Oceanic collection at the British Museum is massive, perhaps the largest in the world. Among the founding collections at the Museum, dating back to Captain James Cook's famous voyages in the eighteenth century, all but a handful of objects are stored permanently in warehouses in the greater London area.

The sailors who brought back the oldest clubs, carved gods, painted bark-cloth, among other things, called their souvenirs 'curios'. I imagine that the few tourists who pause to glance at the Oceanic displays regard them as little more than curious. Pacific Islanders have a very different response. Along with oral traditions and fading photographs, these few objects are often the only link they have with an ancestral past that has largely vanished. They hold an inner power, aptly described by the Polynesian word *mana*.

This May, my wife and I felt the tug of *mana* as we toured the Oceanic display. For more than three decades, we have worked in a remote coastal area of Papua New Guinea documenting the lives of the Maisin people. The British Museum holds more than 300 objects purchased from the Maisin and their neighbours by Anglican missionaries working in Collingwood Bay around the year 1900. I had seen most of these objects in the British Museum stores before – intricately designed bark-cloth skirts, dancing ornaments, plumed headdresses and everyday items like fish nets. Nothing, however, prepared us for the emotional charge we felt as we came upon one of the most significant of the Maisin pieces on open display: a bark-cloth cap and vest covered with strings of fine grey-pearl Job's Tears seeds.

In the late 1890s, a bereaved woman sat quietly in a secluded corner of an in-law's house, hidden by a bark-cloth curtain, quietly preparing her widow's costume (which also included seeded armlets and earrings). Upon the death of her husband, she had wailed and sung dirges with her sisters in his memory, lacerated her breasts with obsidian and burned her chest and arms in her grief. She lost everything. Her house had been pulled down, her food gardens destroyed, her children turned over to her husband's kin. Time stopped… and then reversed. The widow was symbolically reduced to an infant at the total mercy of her in-laws. They had to show her how to drink, how to eat, how to sew, how to speak, and so forth. And she remained invisible to others. When she needed to relieve herself, she was covered in a bark-cloth blanket and made to crawl to the toilet following a line in the sand drawn by a sister-in-law.

The widow's return to full life could take years, marked by a gradual change in her appearance. When she first emerged from seclusion, her body was covered and face obscured by heavy Job's Tear seeds. She was made to sit under her in-laws' house, a silent sentinel to death. As the weeks passed, she was allowed to remove layers of beads, reflecting the gradual lightening of the burden of loss felt by her and the community. Eventually, she quietly removed her costume and resumed ordinary daily life, her bereavement marked only by her unkempt hair, downcast eyes and lack of adornment. Meanwhile, villagers avoided the areas most frequented by her dead husband so as not to irritate his lingering spirit. There were almost certainly some strains between her people and her husband's extended kin, given pervasive suspicion that most deaths are the result of sorcery. A year or more after the death, the husband's people held a feast to remove the final mourning restrictions and to signal the restorations of good relations with the spouse's kin. Time which had at first stopped and then gradually gained momentum now resumed its regular pace.

The Anglican missionaries who came to Collingwood Bay in 1898 were relatively tolerant of native customs for the period. All the same, they were appalled by the mourning practices and worked hard to suppress what they perceived as the cruel treatment of widows. Yet they left a precious record by selling widows' costumes to several museums and writing letters to supporters describing the customs. When my wife and I first came to Uiaku village in late 1981 to spend the next eighteen months living with the Maisin, we soon learned that death provided the major ceremonial occasion in people's lives apart from church services. But much had changed. Only a few very old people recalled the widow's mourning costume or bore the self-inflicted scars honouring a death. Many associated customs had lapsed and the mourning practices had been modified to better conform to church teachings. Yet the core idea that a

widow or widower reverts to a dependent child remained at the heart of the Maisin way of responding to death. In fact, this idea has become stronger. Over the decades, there has been a shift in emphasis from the initial emotionally violent moment of the passing of life to the gradual rebirth of mourners and the healing of the community. And despite the fact that the Maisin have long accepted Western clothing as their daily wear, the transition from death to rebirth is still conveyed in the appearance of mourners.

In 2006, my good friend Rufus passed away. His passing was announced to the village by the mournful sound of a conch shell blown three times. People gathered around his house, the women wailing in their grief and the men sitting silently, eyes downcast. An elder stood at the door, calling out for Rufus' spirit to be at peace and not bring sickness to the village. A few minutes later, the priest arrived to lead a procession to the cemetery where the burial rite was read out. Three days later, the community gathered to share a meal, 'putting up the smoke' to mark the end of community mourning. Time stopped for Rufus' three wives, who went into deep mourning. However, as opposed to times of yore, today their in-laws quickly gave them permission to appear in public and resume daily living as soon as they themselves felt fit. They marked their continuing grief by wearing dark clothing, remaining silent and not cutting or combing their hair.

A year later, my wife and I attended the *roi babasi* ('face-cleaning') ceremony marking the end of Rufus' youngest wife Mary Ann's mourning. In the morning, Rufus' people took her to a bathing spot, removed her dingy clothes, washed and then dressed her in a new brightly painted bark-cloth ('tapa') skirt. They led her back to the village and settled around her on a large mat, as villagers gathered around to watch and chat convivially. A couple of senior women trimmed Mary Ann's hair, adorned her with fine shell ornaments and sprayed coconut oil on her skin to make it glisten. They surrounded her with gifts of clothing, cooking pots, mats and money. Maisin don't think of the life process as something merely 'natural' which happens on its own. It requires the constant care of others, particularly one's close kin. For a second time, Mary Ann had been nurtured through the slow process of birth and maturation. She was again for the moment a beautiful young girl, free to seek a new marriage. That evening, she enjoyed the feasting and dancing that celebrated Rufus' memory and the release of death's hold on the community.

Like other rural Papua New Guinea communities, the Maisin have experienced immense change through the colonial period and into the present. The establishment of churches and schools familiarised people with the discipline of the clock and calendar and provided an entry point to the new world of cash and employment. Yet to a remarkable

FULL MOURNING

A MAISIN WIDOW.

HALF MOURNING.

extent, village life continues to resonate with ancient conceptions of deep time. The nine month maturation of taro, the key crop, recalls pregnancy and birth. The public decorating of widows at the end of the mourning period recalls the moment adolescent girls undertaking the puberty rite of passage emerge from seclusion with tattooed faces, glistening skin and resplendently adorned bodies on display for all to admire. The magnificent dances which mark important occasions in the life cycle and church high days recall a deeper temporality. While each costume is unique and ephemeral in the ways that individual dancers combine tapa, shells, feathers, fragrant plants and paint, they also mark distinctions between clans, each of which holds rights to specific timeless insignia such as barkcloth designs. The pounding of the drums, the rhythmic shuffling of feet, the gentle swish of the costumes, the chants in an ancestral language that no one today understands – as all of this whirls and blends deep into the night, the dancers merge with their ancestors at the moment of creation when the clans emerged from the underground.

Maisin continue to adapt to modern conditions. They no longer tattoo their daughters and rarely hold the once mandatory first-born initiation ritual. Yet they remain committed to their ancestral heritage. A number of years ago, when I brought a film crew to the villages, I was surprised and delighted to watch village women perform a play depicting the old mourning practices, passing on the memory to the next generation. The missionary who purchased the widow's mourning costume now held in trust in the British Museum was no doubt motivated not just by the profit he made in selling it, but equally by the thought that he was hastening the demise of a 'barbaric' custom. Ironically, he helped preserve its memory. For Collingwood Bay people who visit the British Museum and other institutions holding the *mana* filled objects of their ancestors, the widow's vest is as foundational to their ongoing and evolving civilisation as the Parthenon marbles are to Europeans and their descendants. ◼