

# **EM BOBI TUTU:**

## **A study of the making of**

## **Tapa cloth among the Maisin**

## **people in the Oro province.**

**by Hélène Regius**

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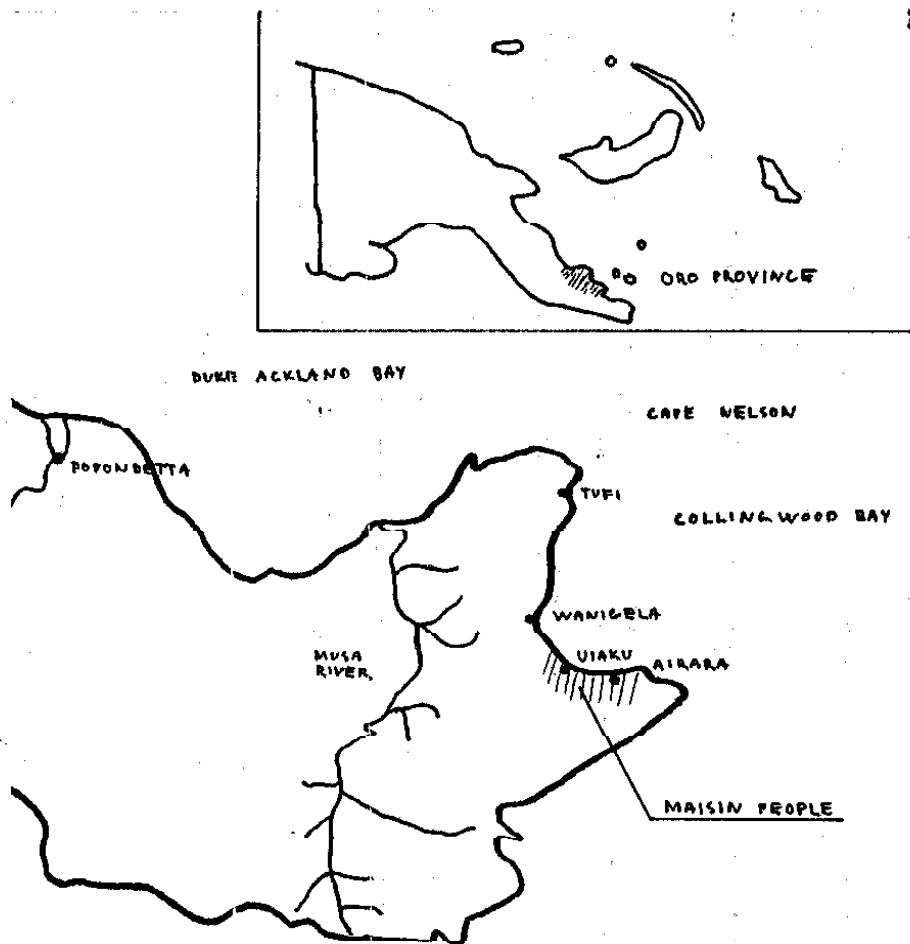
#### **Preface**

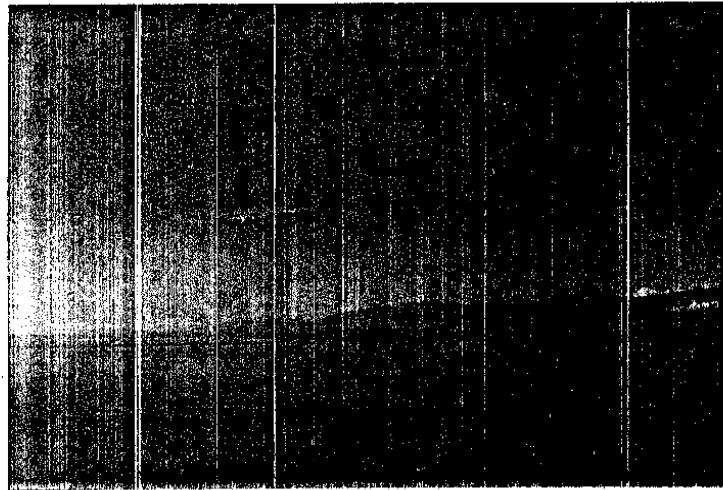
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**Bibliography**

Chapter 1  
THE MAISIN PEOPLE; AN INTRODUCTION

The maisin of Oro province has a population of about 1,200 people. They live along the southern coast of Collingwood bay in Yangui, Uiaku, Sinifara, Sinapa, Koryasi, Airara and Marua villages. The Maisin are said to originated from the western Musa river basin. There are traces of Maisin settlers in other parts of the area. ( see map )





Collingwood bay

The villages are situated along the beach. Their gardens starts not far from the shore to about an hours walk up toward the mountains. Their staple diet is taro, kau kau, bananas, pumpkins and other greens. Men fish and also hunt wild pigs in the bush.

The Maisins are subsistance famers and money is obtained by selling Tapa and copra.

The Maisin society is patrlinial i.e. counting decent on the fathers side. The status of women is fairly high. Females are not considered impure during menstruations as in many other patrilineal melanesian societies.

Traditionally this society have had male and female (tattoo) initiations and also men's houses but this have ceased some time ago. Even though girls get tattoos it is no longer valued as an initiation. Men's houses are now adopted into council houses.

The first western contact was in the late 19th century when the Maisin were said to have been great warriors.

In teh early 20th century the Anglican church started a mission in the area, thus the Maisin are now 2nd and 3rd generation Anglicans.

Although being Christians, socery still has a large influence in the society.

The Anglican church has been tolerant to traditions in comparison to other churches in this country. The outside impact has been slow and fortunately a lot of their traditions after more than 80 years have not been lost or forgotten. This is filled with a blend of old and new. The threat today seems to be the pentecostal movements that have taken worshippers from the Anglican church. This has resulted in a division in the people, the Anglicans vs Pentecostals.



The community schools are run by the Anglican church. In the village I stayed in, Uiaku, school goes to 6th grade. Some children attend high school outside the area.

Maisin today take an active part in trying to bring development to their villages. Tapa is a mean of income that pays for important things like schoolfees. There seems to be a drift of the population moving to outside jobs but I think the income from Tapa will keep a majority in the village. Tapa making is not a dying artform but is likely to go through changes and adaptation along with development in the community.

Chapter 2  
THE FIELD SITUATION AND PURPOSE OF MY STAY IN  
UIAKU VILLAGE

To gather information for my final year thesis at the National Art School I had decided to spend a few weeks in Oro province to learn about the making and meaning of Tapa cloth.

The trip was arranged with help from Dr Sheldon Weeks, ERU, who suggested the Maisin area to me. I chose Uiaku village to stay in since it was said that they were good Tapa designers.

I arrived first to Wanigela mission station where I stayed one night in sister Helen Roberts house. The day after it was arranged for me to be taken to Uiaku village.

A "tok save" had been sent to Uiaku community school the week before I arrived but there had been some misunderstanding about my arrival and purpose of stay. Nevertheless I received a warm welcome by the Uiaku villagers. People had thought I was only staying for 3 days and wanted to see the whole process of Tapa making on that short time. That was inconvenient since it was Easter celebration in the village. When I assured them I would stay longer and there was no reasons to be in a hurry, everything calmed down. I was able to follow the Tapa making process and the life of Uiaku village for 3 weeks.

My host were Father Emanuel Sari and his wife Dorothea. I stayed in their house located in the centre of the village in an area consisting of a mission with the church, community school, staff houses and a grass field used for soccer games and recreation.

On my first day in Uiaku I tried to explain why I had chosen to visit their village and what kind of information I was gathering. Because people are so keen on development in the area I suspect that they thought I was a representative from an aid program. This had primarily been the purpose of other visitors who had come. People had come to learn about Tapa for promotional purposes. CUSO are planning to send a volunteer to the area to help them marketing their Tapa. It is therefore understandable if the people were confused by my appearance and thought I was another one of them.

No major interest or research have been made on Tapa in the area until recently. A Canadian anthropologist, John Barker have been doing field work in Uiaku in 1983 on the Anglican church role among the Maisins. Barker had returned in 1986 collecting Tapa and information for an exhibition at the Burke Museum, Seattle USA and he intend to write a monograph on Maisin Tapa cloth. However information about Tapa in the area is scarce in literature on PNG art and artifacts. It is an area where research on Tapa would be necessity. It is interesting both from a social study viewpoint as well as in arts and aesthetics.

My time was to short for any major work on the subject. I followed the whole process of beating and designing Tapa by making a piece myself. People were very helpful and eager to share their knowledge with me.

I recorded information by taking notes, photographing and studied the environment through my own drawings. I also kept an extensive diary during my stay. Every day was an active correspondence with the people on Tapa and their daily life. I spent a day visiting other Maisin villages. I was taken to Airar, Koiasu, Sinifara and Sinapa to have a look at their tapa for comparison.

The pupose of my stay in UIaku was firstly to collect information relatingd to Tapa cloth and secondly to work with my own artistic expression through drawing and watercolour. The latter was important for me to understand the life of the people. By actively trying to capture the atmosphere by using a media I know best i e through artistic expression I was able to gain an understanding that mere questions and writing wouldn't have covered. A second aspect is how my involvement in doing art while studying other peoples art created a two way corresponding. I was not only the researcher but also a fellow artist.

I separated my own work from Tapa by using themes of gardens, food and survival rather then Tapa designs. I did not copy any designs to use myself in my future work.

My priority was to understand the making process and maybe the most important ideas about the design process. By watching every step a designer took while working as well as following the design on a piece of paper I was able to obtain some clues about it.

In the following chapters I would like to present the entire process of making and designing Tapa cloth along with meanings and the social aspects of it. In the final chapter I will try to sum up some of my experiences with thoughts dealing with aesthetics and culture relativism.

### Chapter 3 FROM TREE TO CLOTH; THE MAKING PROCESS

The kind of tree that is used for Tapa is the mulberry tree. The Maisin people call that particular tree WUWUSI. It is the inner bark of the tree trunk that is being beaten out and the fibers will stretch and widen to become a piece of cloth.

The mulberry tree is spread by the roots and the mother tree has to be about two years old when it starts to give offsprings. It takes a few weeks for the new offspring to come up as a new plant. The tree bears no fruit or flowers.

The WUWUSI is being planted between other plants in the gardens. Certain precautions has to be taken to get the best result i.e. high quality of bark.

First thing is to reduce the amount of off springs to let only a few be grown into tall plants. Secondly, is to break off some of the branches while the plant is still young. The latter is to allow the tree to grow tall as well avoid holes in the Tapa since grown out branches will make holes in the fibers.

A 2-3 meter tall tree trunk will give two average size Tapa cloth. To make a blanket size Tapa the tree must be about 4-5 years old. It then measures 12-15 cm in diameter and is 180-200 cm tall

Rebecca teaching me in beating Tapa cloth.

The 4th of April 1988, Rebecca Gegeyo one of my mothers in Uiaku village and I went to the garden to collect the right tree for making Tapa. The walk to the gardens took us about one hour. These were the gardens the futhers away inland. Rebecca, didn't own any Tapa tree herself had the permission from one of her in-laws to take one tree. We took the tree trunk back to the village.

First the outer bark of the trunk has to be scraped off. Special attention is taken when going over where the branches were with the knife. If scraped to hard it will make the holes bigger.

The circumference of the trunk is checked and where the inner bark is the thinnest that's where the bark is cut along.



Rebecca preparing the tree trunk.

The piece of bark is now ready to be beaten. The women measure on themself how long the strip of Tapa needs to be.

The length of tree trunk indicates the length of the piece of Tapa, while the circumference of the trunk when beaten extends and is the width of the Tapa.

The side of bark that is toward the center of the trunk is the top side and that's where the design will be painted onto later. In the process of beating [tapping] the bark this is of importance since the mallet will only be beaten on the back side, i.e. the side where the outer bark was being scraped off.

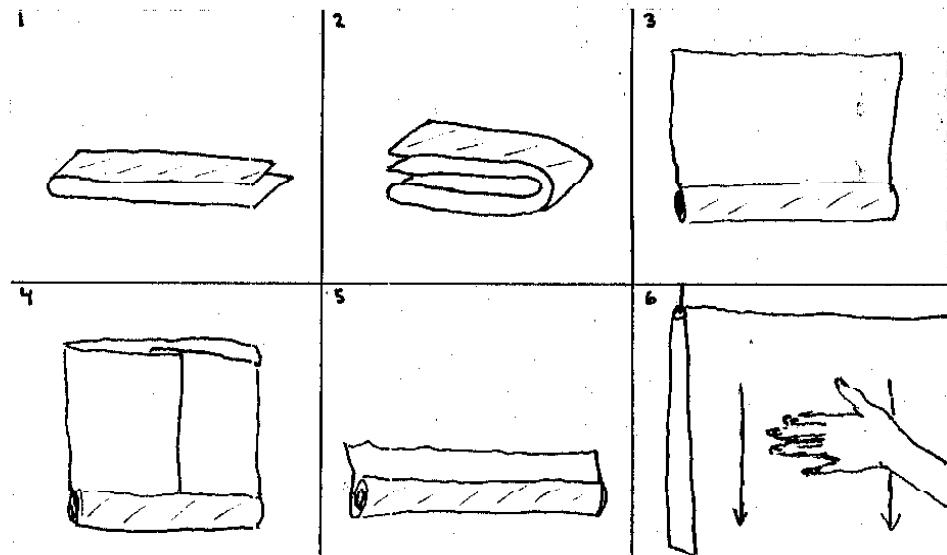
Two kind of tools are used while tapping; a log and mallets. The log "bendo", is made out of kwila wood and the Tapa cloth is beaten on to that log. The mallets "fisiga" are made out of black palm tree wood. Both kwila and black palm are hard types of wood.

During the tapping of the cloth, the Tapa maker uses different shaped mallets. In the beginning, a mallet with a smaller edge is used and when the cloth is considered soft enough, the broader edged mallet is used. The edges of the mallets are always hit on a diagonal onto the cloth. Water is put on the back side to keep the cloth moist.



The following steps are taken when beating out the Tapa cloth:

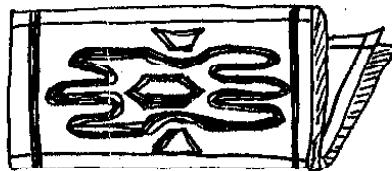
1. The bark is folded in half and beaten on a diagonal back and forth;
2. Folded in quarters and beaten;
3. The whole piece of bark is rolled up in 5 cm folds and beaten - this is done on both sides;
4. Folded in thirds and lengthwise rolled up in 5 cm folds, thereafter beaten on both sides;
5. The whole piece of bark is once again rolled up in 5 cm folds and beaten on both sides;
6. Fold the bark cloth out, hang it up and flatten the surface with the hands.



Starting with a 10 cm wide piece of bark and with constant beating it takes about one and a half hours to get a 80-90 cm wide Tapa cloth. In the beginning the fibers only stretches a little, but in the end the cloth gets wider fairly quickly. Anybody who ever tried to beat Tapa would know what kind of labourous work it is. Personally my arms and back was sore for several days after a two hour tapping session.

The Tapa is hung up to dry for at least over night. It is then folded in four parts and to flatten out the Tapa, women put the Tapa under their sleeping mats and sleep on them. Niski women referred this to 'their way of ironing cloth'.

The Tapa folded into 4 parts are the women's Tapa which functions like a lapiap. The reason given to me why it is folded in four was that while starting to beat the barkstrip, the strip was folded in quarters and is a convenient size to work in. Although the folding in four parts seems to be done regardless of size, the only exception from that rule is the men's Tapa cloth that is a long strip of eight squares. While the design on the Tapa cloth is being put on, this is done one quarter at the time.



#### Chapter 4 COLOURS-PLANTS USED AND PREPARATION OF DYES

One evening I was asking about names of colours in the Maisin language. I'm interested in how different people define colours.

In maisin there are no words for brown and purple. Blue and green is the same either named after the sea or a green lizard. While I was painting myself, school children would sit beside me and comment on what I was doing in Maisin language but using the english words for the different colours.

Maisin Tapa cloth is painted with only two colors, black and terra cotta. Both are being prepared in a traditional way from plants, but occasionally tradestore dyes have been used. The tradestore dyes are not commercially popular because people who buy Tapa want the traditional kind. For stringbags the plant dyes have been substituted with tradestore dyes.

In the Maisin language, the word for a particular color is different from the names for a plant dye.

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Colour	name of color	name of dye
Red	Mu [ripe bananas or pavpav]	Dung
Black	Gambobi	Mi

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The black on the Tapa functions as an outline of the design and is first applied on the cloth. It is made of a mixture of burnt coconut husk and a type of leaf grinded.

Women puts a pile of husks on fire and when these are burnt through properly, pieces of carbonized husks are dipped and broken up in water. Grinded leaves are being added into the paste and mixed thoroughly with the hands. The local name for the leaves are "wayangu" but another kind "karagoang" were used in the old days. It is not popular because it is said to give worms.

The wayangu leaves are found in between other plants in the garden. The paste of black dyes are kept in an old saucepan, etc., but very often you see it is being kept in a cracked claypot and the dyes last for a while, although it turns smelly quickly.

While the black dye is fairly straight forward to make, the red involves more preparation. Firstly, the process of cooking the dyes is more labourious. Secondly, it also involves some superstitious beliefs, and therefore some special rules are added.

Dung, the red dye, is made from boling bark and leaves together. The bark is locally called "dung" or "samung" and the leaves are called "dumfara"

The outer skin of the bark is taken away and the bark is torn into strips. In the pot, every second layer is bark alternating with leaves - it becomes an equal amount of the two things. Before, cold water was poured over and then the pot put on the fire. To speed up the process, women pour boiling water, and then put it onto the fire. From here on it would take over an hour of boiling for the dyes to be ready. When the bubbles are red in the pot the dyes can start to be used. The boiling process require a lot of firewood.



Although Tapa, and its social significance, has undergone a secularisation process due to influences from the outside, some of the traditional beliefs still have some value.

A major theme is the required calm and quietness of the total environment while boiling red dye. Women don't want their husbands or children to be around and noise is hushed down. If there is too much noise the dye is said not to boil properly and therefore it becomes pale. It is also of importance to separate the boiling of dyes from the cooking area, and never to use the same pots for the two things.

The change that mainly has occurred is one of a social kind: before a woman was working mainly by herself: she would prepare the barks and leaves in the night; before dawn she would prepare food for the family. The food and the children would be put outside the house and she would work alone inside the house. Nobody was allowed to see it. The knowledge and recipes for the dyes was passed on from mother to married daughter

Today you would see women working together while preparing dung, also while painting on the red dye. While discussing the social significance of Tapa, a further explanation will be suggested.

According to the biology department at UPNG the plants used for dyes might have been;

Bark - *Octomeles sumatrana* Miq.

Leaves for red dyes - *Ficus septica* rumph.

Leaves for black dye - *Merrami peltata* (L.) Merr.

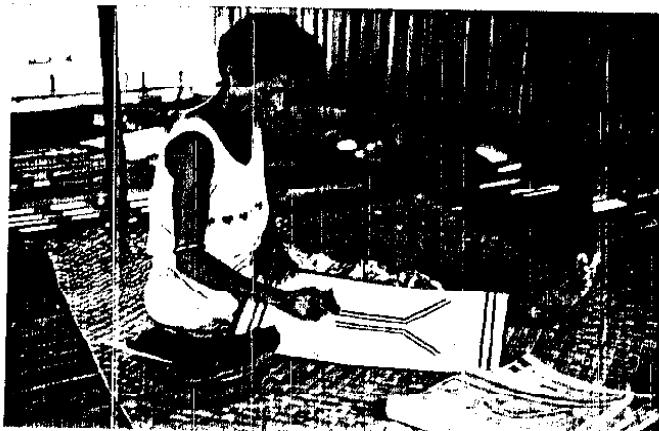
Unfortunatly I didn't bring enough specimens so there is a question mark what kind of plants they are. Identification was made from photographs by Balun Lawong, UPNG Herbarium

Samany  
dun  
wayang

## Chapter 5

## TO DREAM THE DESIGN:

## SET RULES AND INDIVIDUALISM OF THE DESIGNING PROCESS



✓ Women in the village sit on their veranda of the houses and paint their Tapa whenever there is time. Garden work and other domestic tasks occupies a great deal of the time although they don't go to the garden every day. Day before village market day, women might go out to collect clam shells to sell. There seems to be no particular time set aside for the artistic work.

✓ A woman has got pieces of plain Tapa that she keeps on putting the black outline design onto. Under her sleeping mat she might have plain Tapa, half finished or completed black outlined Tapa and finished ones with the red dye on it. Keeping them under the mat makes them flat as well as keeping them in good condition.

She sits with a folded piece of Tapa in her lap. If it going to be a women's skirt it's folded in four and man's apron is folded in eight. Traditional while painting, the folded Tapa was put directly in the women's lap but today most Tapa designers use pieces of boards to lay the Tapa on. The boards are old black boards previously used in the community schools.

While designing the outline, the woman paints one folded part at the time and when one is completed she turns over to the next folded part. This means she never sees the whole piece when painting and she has to remember what she designed on the previous part. This gives of course slight variations in the design.

✓ For the black dye, mi, a piece of stick is used as a paint brush. The sticks come from the branches of a kind of palm tree. The same type of branches are used for brooms. Painting sticks are locally called "nasa" and come in different thicknesses depending how thick the painted line is wanted.

When one folded part is being painted, the designer works on it, not by painting on the lines straightforward from one angle, but by turning it one quarter at the time. Most designs are symmetrical built up. Depending on the character of the design, some are started from the middle and out while others start from the edge and in.

After that one folded part has got it's outline, the Tapa is put in the sun to dry. Usually a woman is working on several pieces at the same time so she is continuing painting on a new one.

When one part is dry, the woman takes the thinnest "nasa" i.e. painting sticks, and adds little dots along some of the lines. The little dots, "sofifi" indicate what parts of the design that will be painted red. Every second two lines have dots and in the space between lines without dots, that is the area filled with red dyes.

A woman keeps on designing Tapa until she has got a number of finished pieces with the black design on. Then she prepares the red dye, "dung", and fills in the red on all the pieces at one go.

There are a number of variations of designs and styles as well as kind of Tapa for different purposes. Tapa can thus be divided into the following categories; commercial, clan and church Tapa cloth.

#### Commercial Tapa cloth

The commercial Tapa make up the largest part of what is being made today and exists for mainly two purposes: to be sold or to be exchanged. The term "profane" could also be applied to distinguish them from the two other categories, clan and church Tapa.

Among the commercial Tapa there are different kinds and the common ones are;

- Women's skirt is like a laplap divided in four rectangles and each quarter usually got the same design. Since a skirt Tapa's length follows the length of the tree, the thinnest part on the skirt is where the bark was close to the branches. The thinnest part is tucked underneath when worn.

- Man's apron is a long narrow length divided in eight (ten) squares were all except the squares in the end are painted. It is tied on like a combination of pants and apron.
- Blanket Tapa is like large skirt Tapa. It is also divided into four rectangles but the whole Tapa piece might take a more square shape.
- Odd bits and pieces designed on whatever size cloth that exist. These have no other function than for sale but the designs are like the "functional" ones. Have seen them used as table cloth at big dinners etc.

There are a myriad of designs on this category of Tapa, none that seems to have any special name or meaning. What is remarkable is the way a woman has planned her design. She knows how it is going to look like when all done and she has also thought out the composition.

When asking the question how a design was planned, I received the answer; "We dream our designs the night before".

The Tapa designing must then leave plenty of room for individualism. Some designs because of it's popularity are being reproduced over and over again with variations. An individual woman tends to have her own style, but apart from that there is a whole range of new combinations, innovations and adaptation of designs to the new world around.

I recorded only one major difference in the designs between the 4 Maisin villages that was also pointed out to me by the Uiaku women.

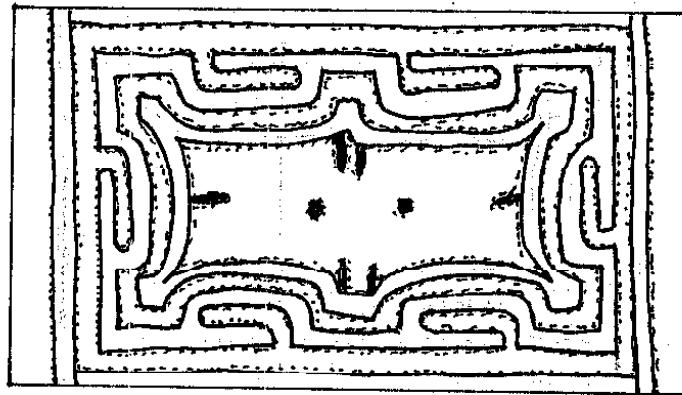
Uiaku designs tends to have a line separating the 4 folds in a skirt Tapa while the other villages makes one design continuing from one quarter to the next. But I noted while looking at a lot of pieces that the rule has a lot of exceptions. For a geometrical design a separating line is just very convenient.

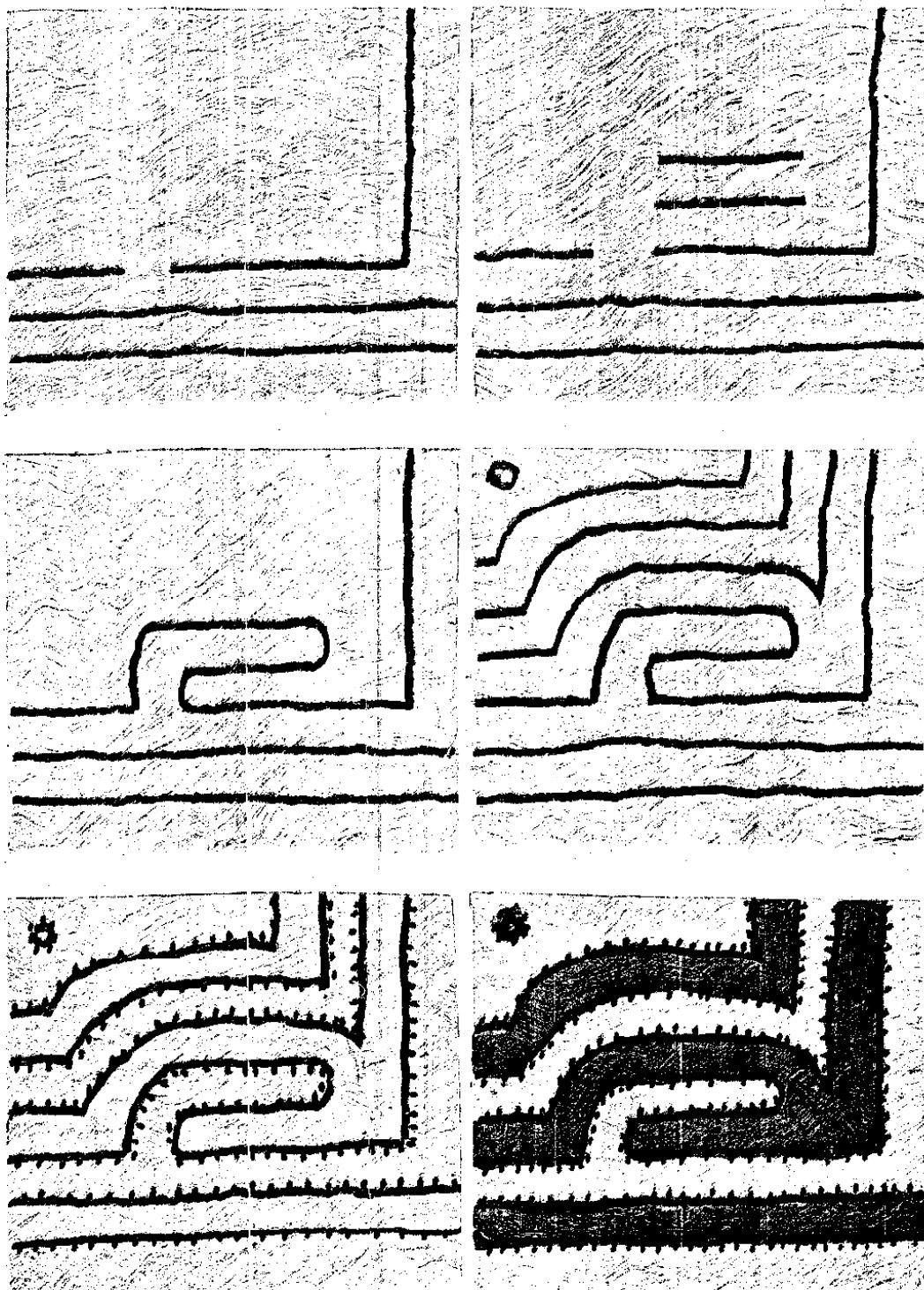


I would like to give a few examples of different styles of designs and comments on the design process. It is important to note that I spent only 3 weeks among the Maisins and my generalizations are based on short time observations. I'll comment on what I saw at that time and found to be representative for each woman, but a Tapa designer has great capacity of adopting new styles so an individual person can have diversity of styles of designs.

To understand the design process one thing to start looking for is were on the cloth the design is started; from the centre, from the edge and in, starting with a diagonal line etc.

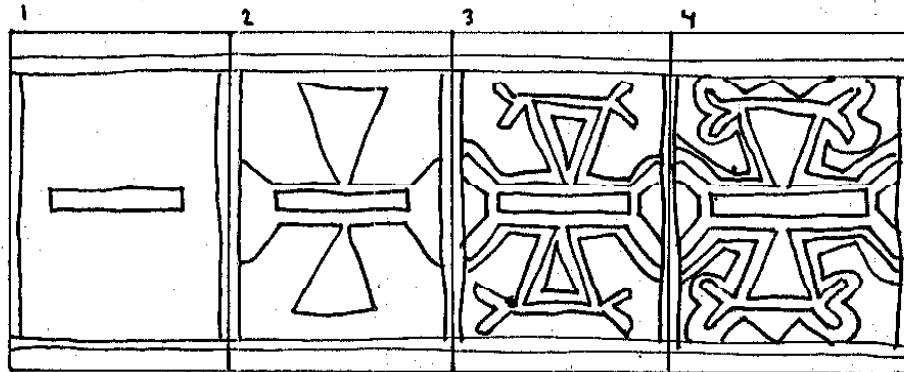
The following, are the steps that Rebecca Gegeyo took when painting up one of her designs. How lines are applied and in what order onto the cloth are the general rules for all Tapa designs. The designs is from the corner of one fold of her design.



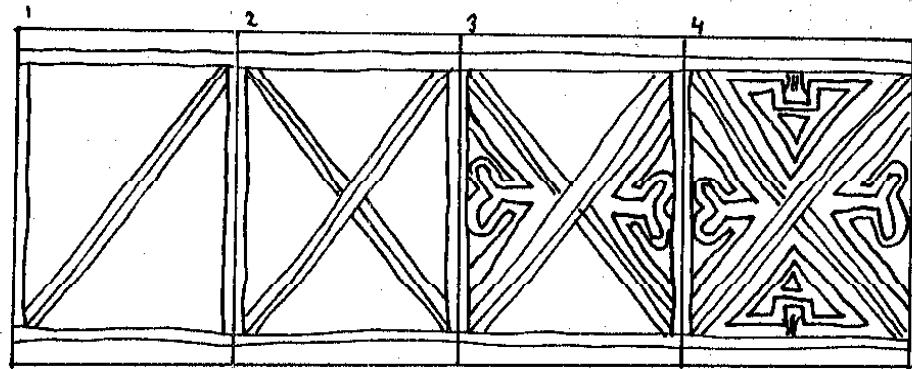


Margaret, Rebeckas mother, is an old woman. She is a very skilled designer and the designs are built up geometrically with lines and dots evenly and precisely put on to the cloth. Margaret works quickly and turns the tapa around one quarter at the time. Her black outline is quite thick (8 mm). I copied Margarets design on a piece of paper to try to understand her design concept. Here are two of her designs;

The outer lines are put on one fold. The design is started in the middle and there after the rest of the design is filled in symmetrically, moving from the centre and out.



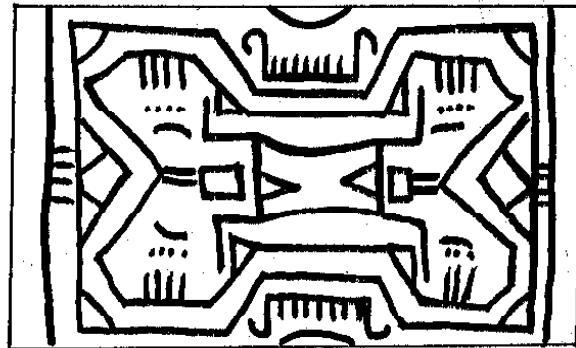
Margarets second design starts again with the outer lines and from there 3 lines are painted up in diagonal. 3 new lines are added in the other diagonal and makes an "x". The rest is filled in a quarter at the time.



Martha is another master designer, she is also the tattoo specialist in Uiaku. Maisin's facial tattoos have many resemblies to tapa designs with its curvilinear style, although it is said to have no real connections concerning designs. What is remarkable with Marthas Tapa design is that they are as precisely painted up as lines are on a girl's face. A tattooist job is to suggest designs that suits the individual girls face and the lines has to balance well in face. Martha is using a similar way of composing her designs on the cloth as if it was a girl's face.

Apart from being a skilled designer, the quality of her cloth is extraordinary fine. It is thin and evenly beaten.

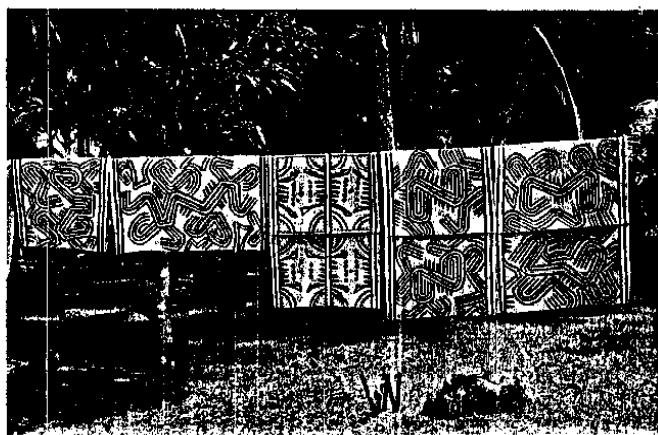
On some of her designs she uses a style of composing dots, lines and small design units from the centre and out in a symmetrical order.



On others of her designs she uses units of the curvilinear style similar to tattoos but hers are not as pronounced as other designers.  
Facial tattoos made by Martha. The woman's name is also Martha.

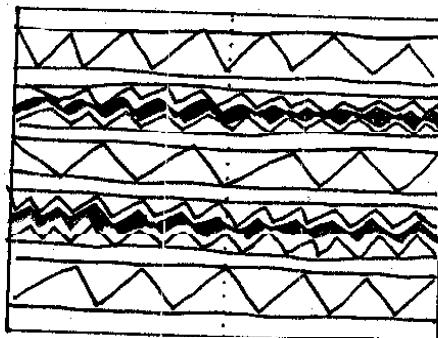


Marianne from Uiaku makes Tapa designs that are easy to recognize. The Tapa is spatially decorated in comparison with other women's designs. A common theme is a curvilinear design unit "floating" by itself in lot of blank space.  
On the photograph below are a series of Tapa designed by Marianne. The middle design has a lot resemblance to the family design invented by Marianne's grandmother. See clan Tapa.



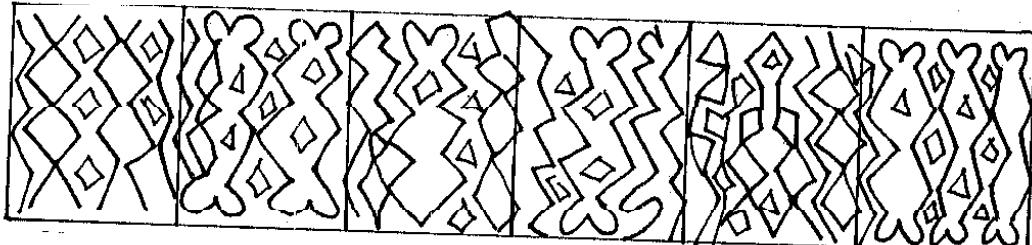
Dehlma from Uiaku was born into the Isore clan and the clan design is about the mountain Dobera. Dehlma has made her own interpretation of that design by changing the circular shapes into triangles (see further under clan Tapa). Another design by Dehlma shows a similar design process.

Lines are going lengthwise through the whole piece and along the lines there are triangular shapes. This design is an exception from the rule of designing one rectangle (fold) at a time.

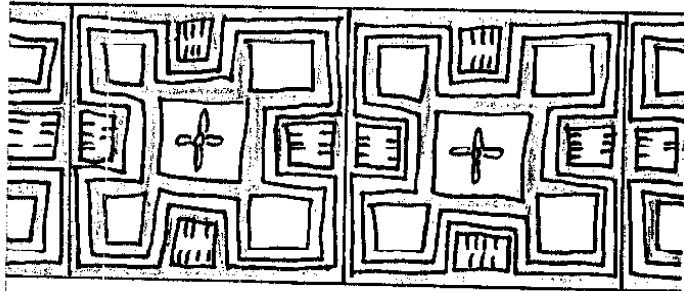


Delsy Frida from Uiaku has made the loin cloth for men shown below.

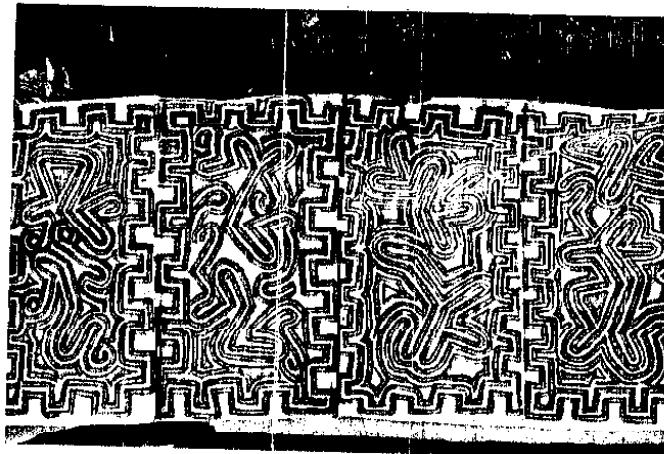
Out of 8 folds 6 of them are painted and all of them are different. It gives the illusion of a repeat pattern but is the irregular use of the following shapes and no straight lines can be found. The design has probably started with 3 heart shaped designs painted up in the middle of each fold.



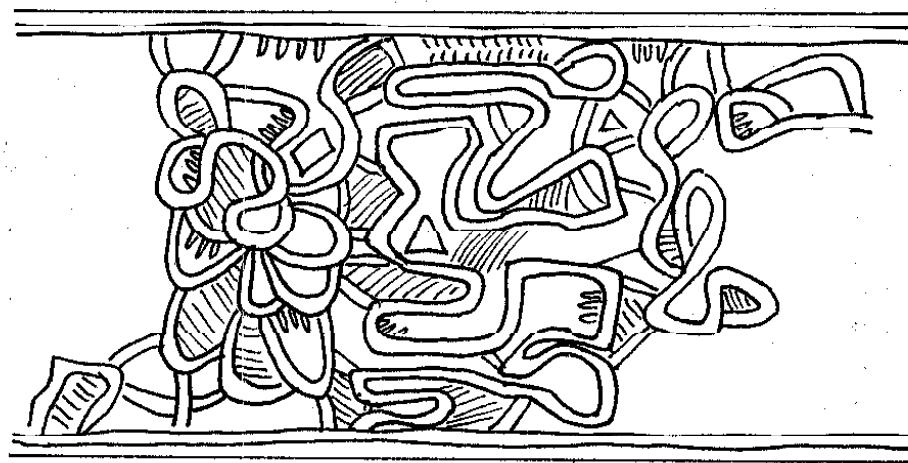
A design can be composed totally the opposite of Delsy Fridas loin cloth such as Molly's loin cloth. Molly's design is symmetrical and each fold has the same design. Only a few flaws while painting makes a slight difference. The design is likely to have been started with one square in the middle.



A common design theme of commercial Tapa and on Oro Tapa recognized by outsiders, is what I consider a curvilinear style. This curvilinear design is by Stella in Uaoku.



Vivian from Koryasi village has made a woman skirt Tapa using an intricate curvilinear design. Each fold has got different design and the design continues from one fold to the other and there is no separating line.



It is hard to tell where she has begun the design apart from the outline of the whole piece. I found this piece being different and Vivian has used an imaginative idea by filling in some areas with little lines instead of solid red colour.

As these example shows there are almost as many different designs as there are pieces of Tapa cloth and where do they come from? It might be transformations of clan designs and by being produced over and over again with external influences new variations are being created. The "dreaming" is a question of how to combine already known shapes with new ideas. Every cloth is a unique piece of art and should be appreciated as such.

A clan Tapa can be distinguished from commercial Tapa in the way the designs are spaced out. A clan Tapa do not need to have;

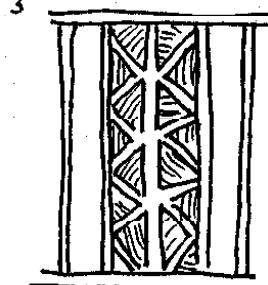
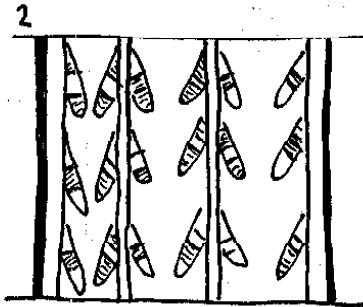
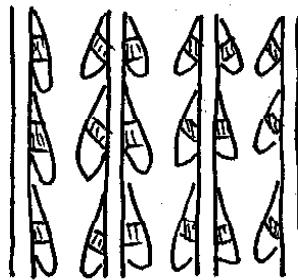
- . a dividing line between the folds.
- . to be symmetrical
- . designs that covers the whole cloth.
- . to have dots (sufifi) along the lines.

Here a few examples of clan designs.

The story behind the clan Tapa of Isore clan is about Mount Dobera that belongs to this clan. Mount Dobera erupted and fire rolled down from the top. On Mount Dobera there is also a stone in face shape that is said to talk. It is tabu to go close to it. Only one man could do it. He was an old chief who talked to the stone. The stone could foretell what's going to happen. The chief is now dead.

The story about Mount Dobera and the stone is kept by other clans as well but Isore clan has the mountain represented in their design.

1. Made by Delsy Frida.
2. Made by Dehlma.
3. Made by Dehlma.



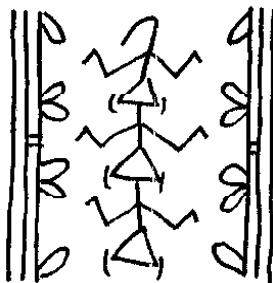
Within the clan there can be different interpretations of the design as in the case of the 3 Isore Tapas. Number 1 and 2 shows great similarities using a line with 3 pairs of elliptic shaped forms. Small variations can be contributed to the individual designer but nr 3 also made by Dehlma shows a completely different approach. This shows the interesting aspect that there are space for individuality even within a clan. Unfortunately my time in Uiaku was to short to further investigate. When asking why there are major differences within the same clan Tapa, I received the answer that Dehlma designs the way she thinks about the story about Mount Dobera

These two clan designs comes from Airara village.

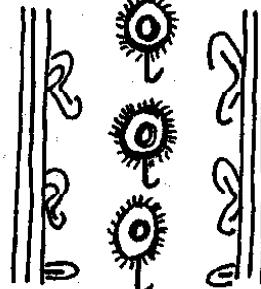
Dadumu clan has got a design depicting a part of a headdress.

Waigo clans design shows feathers tied in a ring.

DADUMU



WAIGO





Sara filling in the red dye.

It is important that a woman has planned her design well if it is to turn out well, if not she might do the black outline wrong so when filling in the red dye the result is an incorrectly spaced out design.

On a completed tapa, a curvilinear design makes up by 2 thick red lines (4 black lines) that follows each other and then the 2 lines might go in different directions. One line lies on top of the other and give a 3 dim. effect. These types of designs also have resemblance to facial tattoos.

### Clan Tapa cloth

Each clan has got a clan emblem on Tapa called "kawo". Only if you are born into that particular clan or as a woman married into the clan you are entitled to wear these clan Tapa.

Clan designs are found on women's skirts and men's loincloth. The designs on the Tapa is repeated over and over again. Only occasional variations on the themes are introduced by an individual designer.

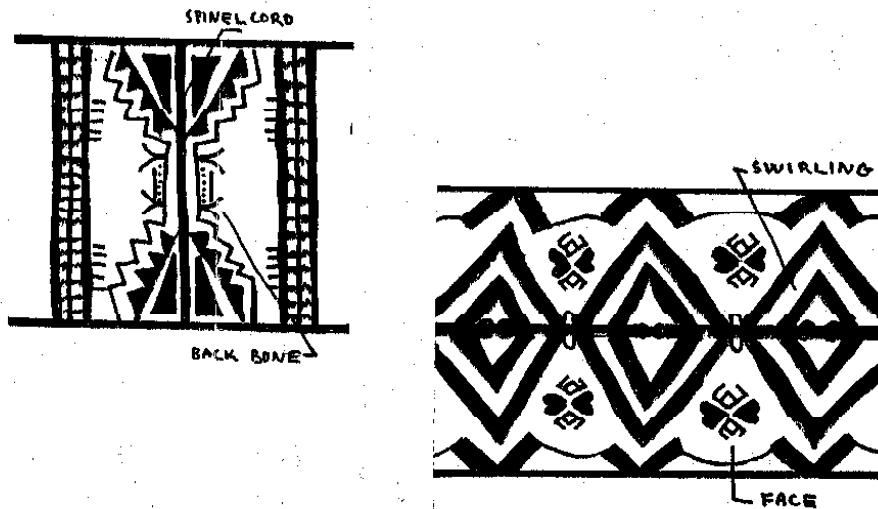
Clan designs are not totems and seldom represent a plant or animal, so whatever is depicted on the cloth do not seem to follow any restrictions about what to eat or do for the members of the clan. The designs usually represent a "thing" connected to a story. For example it could tell a story about when the forefathers went to war and killed a crocodile and ate it as the story is behind the Kaufea clan. A design can also depict an item like the lime stick or headdress. The knowledge of the designs are often passed from mother or aunty to daughter or by close relative in the clan a woman are married into. Clan Tapa is worn at all kinds of celebrations.

Delsy Frida wearing clan Tapa.



How the clan designs have been created is an interesting question. Maybe the example how a individual creates an family design could give us a clue. Tagore was a woman who invented two designs that can only be used in the family. Tagore was Mariannes grandmother (fathers mother). The first design called Totoki is how the old women imagined herself with her crooked back. It shows the spinelcord and backbones. Totoki means backbone.

Tagora was also able foresee a cyclone that was going to come so she made the Bira design (cyclone) showing the cyclone swirling as well as the face of the cyclone.



Because of the general information I have I don't want to generalize about the design process of the clan Tapa more than that it seems to leave room for individualism and creativity. When explored closely, the so called traditional art is not as static as many people believe it is.

### Church Tapa cloth

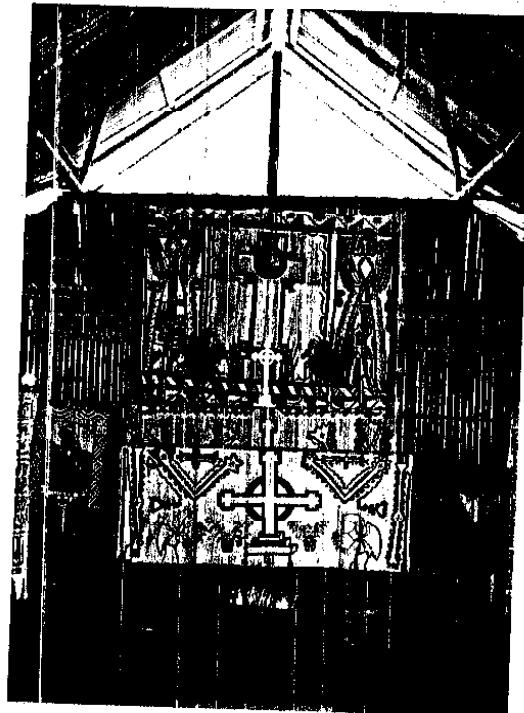
Church Tapa cloth is newly invented due to the Anglican church who was the first mission in the area. The contact with the church started in early 20th century.

This type of Tapa I have got the least information on and it is difficult to comment on the design process.

By looking at it, it is possible to see the mixture of traditional designs with liturgical motifs.

The church Tapa cloth in the Anglican church in Uiaku village (below) shows traditional designs that have a resemblance to clan designs rather than to the designs in commercial Tapa. Some designs seems to have been influenced by western decorative designs.

Some women have specifically been appointed to design these special "spiritual" Tapa cloth. Robes have been made of Tapa and designed in Uiaku for the Anglican bishop in Popondetta.



## Chapter 6

## TAPA - A FEMALE ART FORM IN THE MAISIN SOCIETY

Art produced by females, whether in a traditional or Western society, tends to receive a subordinate interest from the world around them. It might be treated as only "handcraft" or said not to carry the same symbolic value as art produced by men. In the case of Tapa making and designing among the women in Collingwood Bay, I would like to question such a narrow minded view, by pointing out the roll of Tapa in it's past, present and future context.

Women in Uiaku, Sinipara, Sinapa, Airara and the other Maisin villages are the producers of Tapa cloth in this area. They beat it, design it and sell or exchange it. Tapa among the Maisin and clay pots made by the women in Wanigela are the only artifact of any major importance in the area. Men do not carve figures or anything like that, as is found in many other Melanesian societies. Apart from small decorations carved onto daily utilities, body decorations at singsings etc., no major visual art is expressed in the Maisin villages.

The traditional use of Tapa has been the following;

- Clothing for both men and women
- Blankets for sleeping and wrapping dead bodies
- Exchange for goods with neighbouring people
- Part of brideprice payment

The present use of Tapa in addition as a result of a changing society:

- productions of Tapa for sale to an outside market; and
- decorations and robes for the Anglican church.

As mentioned before no other visual artform among the Maisin fulfill these many purposes. The Tapa cloths importance can be divided into the categories: economical, social and religios.

Chapter 7  
TAPA IN IT'S ECONOMICAL CONTEXT

Looking at the past, the Maisin women were involved in an exchange network with neighbouring people along the Collingwood Bay. Since Tapa was a material commodity used for clothing and blankets it was sought after by people in areas where Tapa is said not to have been made.

In Wanigela area, the soil was no good for growing Mulberry trees, and it is said there are too many stones around so the trees would not spread properly. Since Wanigela people did not have Tapa, they produced clay pots for exchange. Although, I received contradictory information about this, since I was told that they use to produce Tapa. It could have been a bush kind of Tapa that was used before Mulberry trees were introduced.

Maisin people claim themselves to be the only Tapa producing group in the area. That is not true since Tapa is made and designed among other groups as well. Miniafi people north of Wanigela were producing sleeping mats canoes and betelnuts that were said to have been exchanged for Tapa but they also produced it themselves and are still doing it. They exchange Tapa for clay pots with the Wanigela people. According to G. Musowadoga the people around Musa river are producing Tapa. The Maisin people are probably the most proficient producers and have the biggest commercial market for it and have become famous for it.

Without trying to explain the history of the people in Collingwood Bay we can assume that there must have been a lot of migration or moving about of the different groups. Languages are spread outside their geographical boundaries - myths and informations are contradictory and people have obviously moved caused by the eruptions of Mount Victory in late nineteen century and Mount Lamington in 1951.

Today when people are a part of a money based economy, Tapa has got an important function as a mean for an income. Tapa is sold to an outside market to bring in money to pay school fees and buy Western goods that people now require. Food is still provided by subsistence farming, but there is a need for kerosine, petrol for the outboard motors etc.



Tapa is no longer used as clothing for daily wear, but in the early 1960s tapa was still worn by most of the people. Even if the wearing of Tapa cloth for daily use has stopped, the Maisin women have continued to produce it and apart from working in the garden, a lot of time is spent with tapping, designing and preparing dyes. The Tapa is being sold through two agencies: artifact shops in Port Moresby and to the Anglican church in Oro Province. The church in Wanigela accepts Tapa as payment for school fees. Sister Helen Roberts, an Anglican sister in Wanigela, has been the person who has "bought" Tapa and then further distributed it.

The exchange of pots and Tapa has survived but it is now for other reasons. Women in Wanigela, still want Tapa for their means of income. Sister Roberts has been accepting the clay pots as part payment. One pot is worth as much as one piece of Tapa, but it is much harder to redistribute pots than Tapa, as well as selling pots in the artifact business. So to obtain an income, women in Wanigela exchange pots for Tapa that they can further sell, either to the Anglican church, to occasional tourists that visit Wanigela, or they must take to the Tufi area where there are a number of guest houses still operating. It is also important to point out that Maisin people often still cook food in clay pots and that Wanigela people use Tapa for funerals and other ceremonial purposes.

Some of the Maisin villages deal directly with dealers in Port Moresby. If this is well organized it is the best and probably the most rewarding for the Maisin women. It gives a direct income, but unfortunately it does not function as well as it should, and the market is very irregular. In the late 1970s there was a small hotel in Wanigela and it was one outlet to sell Tapa. In Port Moresby Maisin Tapa cloth can be found in every artifact or souvenir shop, and it is also being made into various things like purses, handbags etc.

This shows that at the present, Tapa production has got the following economical purposes:

- payment of school fees to the church;
- produced for an outside market as well for occasional tourists which gives an income;
- keeping the Traditional exchange.

There are no other major income generating resources in the Maisin area. There are a few coconut plantations, but the copra market has gone down drastically in most parts of PNG. In other areas other crops like cacao, coffee and certain types of fruits and greens have been introduced but the soil is not appropriate for these in the Maisin area. The Maisin villages have come to be heavily dependent on the income from the Tapa cloth made by the women. As a result of this, women's status in the society is very high.

Although women do not have any major political power, they are the major contributors to wealth. A comparison could be made with the Trobriand Islands where women produce grass skirts and banana leaves bundles for exchange. In the feast for the dead [Sagali], Trobriand women get a great deal of support from their husbands since it is the wife's effort and labour that indirectly by exchange accumulates wealth to the man. To have a wife that is a good grass skirt maker and knows her way of exchanging is equally as important for a Trobriand husband as it is for a Maisin husband to have a wife who is a skilled Tapa maker and designer. Dealers and buyers of Tapa will always be in favour for well made and designed Tapa that has got no holes in it.

Chapter 8  
TAPA IN IT'S SOCIAL CONTEXT

The exchange of Tapa for other goods can be seen, not only in it's economical context, but as a way of reinforcing social ties with neighbouring people and among the Maisin themselves. Plenty of Tapa is being exchanged within the society. It is a part of bride price payments together with pots, shellmoney, bilums and money. The Maisins have a kind of dowry exchange where the bride contributes to the new household. Tapa is also a part of that payment. There is a presentation of Tapa associated with a ceremony for the first born child.

Another aspect is the Tapa made not for exchange but within the Maisin society. This is the Tapa that strengthens the identity and belonging to a clan. The clan Tapa differs in many respects from the "commercial" Tapa. The designs are different, rules are applied as to who can design and use them and each clan has got it's own story that is reflected in the set design of the Tapa.

Tapa is no longer in use for daily wear, but only for special occasions. At traditional singings the clan Tapa is worn together with other traditional fineries. A lot of occasions for celebrating have been introduced, such as independence celebrations, but also the clan Tapa is worn at church occasions.

Producing Tapa for sale has introduced a system whereby women are being regarded as such and such Tapa maker. Women look upon themselves and other women as skilled or not Tapa maker. If this kind of stratification existed when Tapa was made only for exchange, I cannot answer, but one can assume that producing for an outside market and it's taste is much more vulnerable, and must reinforce concepts of good and bad. According to Sister Roberts in Wanigela, the Tapa has undergone a quality improvement due to the its commercialisation.

So with a concept of good and bad I would like to be brave enough to introduce the term "master" tapa maker and designer. My reason for separating maker and designer is that a designer not necessarily has made the actual cloth. A great deal of exchanging and sale of plain cloth is made among the Maisin women.

A few women in the villages that I visited, and in Uiaku where I stayed, were pointed out to me as being very skilled. They were either known for making smooth and evenly beaten Tapa, or for being creative and precise designers. Among the latter group, these "master" designers taught younger women and girls their skills.

When asking a woman who taught her the skill of Tapa making and designing, a usual answer was that her mother have done it. Girls that did not continue school after grade 6 had stayed on in the village and been taught how to produce Tapa.

If it is the mother or any woman who teaches the young apprentice, it is difficult to say, but most likely it is that the skills taught by mothers are the clan designs that are being passed on to the younger generation.

In the past certain parts of the Tapa making process were done by a woman alone, like the preparation of the red dye. The reason was the belief of the necessity of calmness to achieve a good quality dye. The social change that has occurred is that today, Tapa and processes involved are made by women working together. The preparation for making red dye that I participated in, a whole group women were doing it together, including several generations as well as women that were not close relatives. I assume that the increasing production for a market for a common goal i.e to pay school fees etc rather than producing mainly for the individual exchange; pot/Tapa cloth, have resulted in a need to work together. Communicating ideas is important for improving quality and developing new designs that suits the outside market, meanwhile the traditional beliefs are disappearing with the changing of the society.

A cooperative group of women that I haven't mention is the Mothers Union. Mothers Union is a group working to establish a "welfare system" for older people by raising money. It is women's group within the Anglican church and the money raised is to help older people who can no longer work to get kerosin and other goods. I was told that they have been making Tapa together that they sold for the Mothers Union.

What can be concluded from this is that Tapa and its production generate a system of relationships that are being followed. The relationship young/apprentist vs old/master is existing. A network of exchanges and communication of ideas among the Maisin women concerning Tapa production is constantly present.

Maisin Tapa cloth has also achieved a name for itself in the rest of PNG. Although with a lot of mis-understanding, since it today is known as Oro Province Tapa cloth or Popondetta Tapa. Maisin designs or modifications of them, are being used in a new context. Designs are produced in textile printing, new symbols in achieving a national identity in PNG. Foreigners buy Tapa, hang it on the wall and admire the "Papua New Guinean" Tapa cloth yet they never know much more about it: it is still only a few villages in the Collingwood Bay that are the producer of such Tapa.

## Chapter 9

TAPA IN IT'S RELIGIOUS AND CEREMONIAL CONTEXT

The clan Tapa as mention earlier provides a base of belonging to or identity in it's social context. It is difficult to separate it from religion and belief systems. Every clan has got it's own design that symbolizes the myth and creation of the particular clan. A story can be told about each of them and they are strongly related to supernatural concepts. Even if the Maisin people are under the influence of the Anglican church, a persons relation to his or her clan is not changing. Clan Tapa is worn at ceremonial occasions, both at traditional dances as well a newly introduced occasions such as mentioned earlier, independence day or after the church calenders celebrations. It has become a blend of old and new

The spiritual creativity has not disappeared as it might be interpreted due to the influence of Christianity and the Western world. It has been transformed into a new context - while a woman is designing a Tapa for a church she is projecting her belief and faith into her piece of art. She uses designs, incorporates new ideas blended with old - the outcome is a very true representation of a Maisin woman's reality and the whole Maisin society today.



Chapter 10

THE HARDSHIP OF ANYLYZING AESTHETICS IN A DIFFERENT  
CULTURE DUE TO SET WESTERN NORMS AND VALUES:  
A western educated artist impression

I've been trying to find an answer about universality of art in various books on aesthetics from a western anthropological viewpoint and unfortunately I've become even more disillusioned since it is only a question of definition.

Is there a similarity between me as a western artist and a Tapa designer in Uiaku ? Yes, we both are communicating something with a visual media which we both have a good command over. We are also depending on the opinion from our audience if what we have been trying to communicate is valid or not. The validity is indirectly an economic award since it is our livelihood. A western artist and a traditional artist perform in the framework of the skills we have been taught i.e. we use techniques and material in a way our respective culture have formed us. We are a product of that particular culture.

But what is then the difference between us ? Why is a Uiaku designer's Tapa regarded different from my art work?

For a moment I would like to borrow a definition from Robert Horton in his discussion on rationality - difference between a traditional and scientific thinking. Horton uses the level of "openness" in a society as a criteria for separating traditional and scientific thinking.

So is the difference between myself and a Tapa designer a question of "openness" in our different societies? If so has my society provided me with more initiative which automatically provides me with means of bringing in the "change" as an individual process while a Tapa designer lives in a "closed" society where change is always a result of an outside influence?

I have more opportunities and my "open" society provides me with a diversity of experiences that a traditional artist do not have access to. This is only partially answers the question since my examples in previous chapters shows that there are space for individuality among the Tapa designers and so individualism seems to come from within the designer.

I suggest therefore that the difference lies within the definition of the concept of art in society relating to what kind of functions it fulfills.

Something needs to be added to the "open/close" explanation.

There are 3 kinds of concepts of art; Art for arts sake, Art for social sake and Art for tourist/outsiders sake.

It is my opinion that the "art for social and tourist/outsider sake" are of the more repetitive kinds, while "art for arts sake" try to avoid repetition.

Art for arts sake provide individualism in the same way as an "open" society do but it also made for itself to give personal fulfillment to the artist. The other concepts I found do not provide that kind of personal fulfillment and are not emphasizing on "self indulgence" but rather reinforces social order in the society or to serve an outside need. The relationship to the object is different and the way it has been made.

A western artist thinks about his work as something he has to do for personal pleasure and for the need of expressing himself. The object stands by itself and the artist will make the object regardless of whom he does it for.

When art is being made for the society as an integrated part in cosmology, religion, social stratification and used on communal basis, the object is not made for its own sake.

It is neither made for its own sake when massproduced for an outside market. The artist does not have the personal relationship with the object, it is only valid as a means of income.

So when I do my own work in the village I do it primarily for my own need and fulfillment. The end result stands by itself and do not need to interrelate with other institutions in the society. A Tapa designer does work for the other two reasons; gain a material reward by selling. It is not made for only itself.

Regardless of why art is produced, it will have a system of aesthetics. The western society have left me with ideas about composition, shape-form-texture, perspectives, colours as well as qualitative ideas i.e something is well or badly done. I have certain ideas about aesthetics.

Among the Maisin there is also ideas of how to structure visual qualities. There are norms i.e aesthetic values among the Maisin provided by the society and reinforced within that society.

How then does this relate to my communication about similar values with the Maisin Tapa designer. I'll never know if my way of evaluating have any true similarities to Maisin values. I can only record what a woman says about a particular piece of Tapa but not to understand the real meaning behind what is said. What I can do is to compare my views with the woman. Do we agree on the qualities of this particular piece?

Surprisingly I found that what were said about a Tapa usually agreed with my own opinion about that piece. I did not reveal my opinion about the piece to the designers.

The following qualities and characteristics were used by the women. A tapa should be of a high quality cloth with evenly designed lines and motifs, wellpainted etc. A Tapa that has got stains of red dye on it is not highly regarded. The visual characteristics should be that it is evenly composed design, and conforms to rules in the design process. Not much attention is paid to if the designer has failed to repeat her pattern correctly from one fold to the other on the Tapa cloth.

I noticed that a design was considered good if the designer was innovative and used a new approach to her designs as long as it conformed within the few set rules that existed.

I sat among a group of women and designed a piece myself. I had only been in the village for a few days and had not followed many designs to actually have an understanding for the design process. My piece did not turn out well since it was not planned correctly. When the red dye was applied I tried to follow the rules for the filling in of red but I failed. The result became uneven in it's composition. Red lines came together where it was suppose to have an empty white space.

We were joking about that I haven't been dreaming my design properly the night before. The major mistake was that I did not start the design accurately. My design was different from Maisin although I attempt to make it look like one of theirs. It became sensational since every person came over and had a look at it. I desperately tried to avoid that because I didn't want them to believe that this is how the outsider wants it to look like.

The change in motifs on the Tapa cloth is inevitable because of outside influence. Looking at old photographs form the area there is a notable difference in the designs. Today the designs seems to be much more elaborate.

Some aesthetic norms might be a result of norms demanded by the outside market. Such things deals with the actual quality of the cloth. The women have started to patch up the holes that every piece of cloth has got due to the branches. It doesn't seem important for a woman to do so for other reasons then to serve the market what the market want.

Did the women in Uiaku reveal all their values and true meanings of their designs to me or did they say to me what they thought I wanted to hear? Well that is something I may never know. However I hope that I have in this paper been able to give a fair and correct description as possible of what I experience during my 3 weeks stay among the Maisin people.

To my mothers, father, aunties, sisters and brothers in Uiaku village.

THANK YOU BEDSI

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#### PREFACE

This paper is to be submitted to the National Arts School as my final year thesis in textile design.

The thesis are based on information collected in Uiaku village in Oro province in April 1988. Tapa cloth was chosen as the subject matter since it relates to textiles and textile design.

I was very fortunate to get the opportunity to stay among the Maisin people. I learnt a lot and gained understanding of art produced by women in a traditional society that is under outside influence.

The gain was not only in the field of research but also on a personal level. I was shown true love, care, hospitality and generosity by the people in Uiaku village.

I would first of all like to thank Father Emanuel Sari and his wife Dorothea for letting me stay in their house, Rebecca Gegeyo and the Gegeyo family for sharing their time and arranging for me to participate in all the processes in making Tapa and to all the Maisin women who have shared their knowledge with me.

Many thanks to Dr Sheldon Weeks at the Educational Research Unit without whom this paper would not have been possible for me to write. I am very grateful to Dr Weeks for all the encouragement, support and assistance with word processing. I would also like to thank Sister Helen Roberts in Wanigela, Biology department at the UPNG and all the helpful people at IASER and UPNG who have been helping me.