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The Mothers' Union goes on strike: Women, tapa cloth and Christianity in a Papua New Guinea society

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This paper explores the story of the formation and subsequent activities of a church women's group in Maisin villages and women's experiences of Christianity more broadly, in relation to the changing production and uses of traditional bark cloth (*tapa*), a signature women's product which has become a marker of Maisin identity. While the influence of the local Mothers' Union has waxed and waned over the past 60 years, tapa cloth has had a continuing influence upon its fortunes. Tapa cloth has been the chief means for church women to raise funds to support their activities and the local church. However, we argue that, more fundamentally, tapa has shaped women's gendered Christian identities, experiences and history, mediating relationships with men, between generations of women, and with various sorts of 'missionaries' who have often justified their intrusions in terms of improving women's lives.

Keywords: Maisin, Christianity, gender, material culture, tapa cloth

INTRODUCTION

One of the most intriguing developments in recent writings coming out of the Pacific and elsewhere is a convergence in the fields of material culture and historically sensitive ethnography. In particular, focusing upon specific objects operating within networks of relationships at various social scales opens fruitful lines of inquiry and reveals often surprising linkages. Thus phenomena as apparently different and unconnected as Fijian and Tongan tapa cloth, Vanuatu sand paintings and Maori carvings, are refracted back to their respected makers as 'cultural property', colliding with deeply grounded local traditions, abetting transformations in local identities and practices as well as international legal regimes (Ewins 2009; Addo 2013; Geismar 2013).

A focus on objects holds special promise for those of us interested in Melanesian Christianity, particularly for insight into what Annelin Eriksen has called the 'silent story' of women's role in conversion and the subsequent conception of Christian spaces, practices and values (Eriksen 2008). A number of studies have examined how sewing classes and the adoption of approved forms of Western clothing, notably 'Mother Hubbards', served to promote missionary ideals of 'civilised' family life while

at the same time creating a space for Islander women's agency (Jolly 1991; Douglas 1999; Colchester 2003; Choi & Jolly 2014). In this paper, we examine the place of Indigenous cloth in women's experience of Christianity in a Papua New Guinea society.

In separate publications, we have explored the significance of painted bark cloth (*tapa*) in the lives of the Maisin people (Barker 2008; Hermkens 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014). Maisin today often declare themselves to be 'tapa people,' reflecting the importance of the cloth to the local economy and, as with female facial tattoos, the most distinctive marker of cultural identity. Tapa gained prominence in Maisin lives from the 1950s onwards, due first to a growing market in PNG artefacts and later as an international symbol of their defiance of commercial loggers. Yet this current prominence rests upon a solid cultural and historical foundation. As Hermkens observes, Maisin tapa is deeply bound up 'in formations of gender, personhood, clan and tribal identity' as these have been informed in the context of wider historical shifts over the past century (Hermkens 2013: 18).

More specifically, this paper explores the story of the formation and subsequent activities of a church women's group in Maisin villages from the 1950s to the near present. While the influence of the local Mothers' Union has waxed and waned over the past 60 years, tapa cloth has had a continuing influence upon its fortunes. Most directly, tapa cloth has been the chief means for church women to raise funds to support their activities and the local church. However, we argue that tapa has had a greater influence as a 'silent' component shaping women's experiences and history, particularly in its mediating influences upon relationships with men, between generations of women, and with various sorts of 'missionaries'—religious and secular—who have often justified their intrusions in terms of improving women's lives (Barker 2004).

We begin with an incident in 1997 when the Mothers' Union briefly went on strike in protest of their treatment by the resident priest. We then outline the importance of tapa and tattooing in defining women's social position and agency in Maisin society before turning to a fuller account of the establishment of the local Mothers' Union and its subsequent history, leading up to the years of its greatest popularity and influence during the anti-logging campaign of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the final section, we note factors that are contributing to the mutual decline in tapa production and support for the Mothers' Union.

THE MOTHERS' UNION GOES ON STRIKE

March 1997. Word travelled through the pathways and plazas of Uiaku village with preternatural speed. The Mothers' Union is on strike! Easter was only a week away. Perhaps there would be no celebration!

At the time this occurred, the Mothers' Union (MU) enjoyed unprecedented visibility in village life. Clutches of women wearing the MU's distinctive blue skirts seemed to be everywhere. Local MU leaders were making regular trips to regional and

national gatherings. Most impressively, the MU had purchased a large dinghy from funds raised from their annual Ladies Day celebration and tapa sales. Environmental activists, who were then regularly visiting the Maisin villages, gave fulsome praise to the Mothers for their efforts to create a viable tapa cloth industry as an alternative to the initiatives, promoted by a handful of Maisin men living away in the towns, to open the forest lands behind the villages to commercial logging.

The boat provided the immediate source of conflict. Supporting the local clergy in their work is one of the MU's chief functions. The priest at the time, a young Maisin man, was delighted when the MU purchased its own dinghy, as this meant he would no longer have to undertake the time and expense to organise a boat and crew from the several private owners in Uiaku when he went on patrol to villages up the coast. He now could make more regular trips, especially to the second large Maisin church in Airara, as well as non-Maisin villages up to the Milne Bay provincial border to the east. Problems arose when he refused to compensate the Mothers for the use of the boat and cost of petrol. The Mothers' Union, he said, existed to support church outreach. They had no cause for complaint that the priest was making good use of the boat.

Few things are as contentious for Anglican congregations in rural areas as 'stewardship': donations to pay clergy salaries and more generally support the work of the local church. While the principle of supporting the church is understood and accepted, money is always tight and there are plenty of reasons to resist giving funds to the priest. The problem is partially situational. Uiaku folk resent that although (as they suppose) they pay the bulk of the priest's salary and costs, he serves outlying villages. In their turn, members of outlying parishes resent paying stewardship for priests who spend the bulk of their time on the Uiaku station. Inevitably, however, talk turns to the personal, with rumours circulating that the priest uses the donations of his congregants mainly to benefit his own family. Suspicions are especially intense in the case of Maisin priests, whose extended family members are present in the village for all to scrutinise. Given such pressures, Priests rarely last more than a few years before requesting transfer to a new parish.

While priests and Mothers had experienced tensions before, this had never escalated into open conflict and many villagers were quite shocked. Cooler heads quickly prevailed. The MU quietly received some compensation and agreed to forego the rest. The church was cleaned and decorated. Easter happened. The priest headed off on his next patrol paddling an outrigger canoe. A year later, a new priest was in charge.

TAPA AND THE WOMEN'S SOCIALITY

Around 1500 Maisin speakers live in four village clusters along the southwest shores of Collingwood Bay in the Northern (Oro) Province. Following a decade of brief periodic exchanges, the Maisin were forcibly brought under control of the colonial administration in 1901, with an Anglican mission station established in the largest village of Uiaku the following year (Barker 2005b). By the late 1920s, the bulk of the population

had accepted baptism and the villages had provided a generation of migrant workers for plantations and mines elsewhere in the colony. Early access to schools proved advantageous in the years following the Second World War when much of a generation of young people, particularly from the two largest villages of Uiaku and Airara, left to attend newly opened high schools and colleges and then secured jobs in the towns and around the country. By the time John Barker and Anne Marie Tietjen arrived in Uiaku, in late 1981, village men had long ceased to sign up as unskilled labourers on distant plantations and mines. Most cash circulating in the villages entered in the form of remittances from working relatives. Collingwood Bay remained an economic backwater, connected to the outside world only by small coastal vessels and an irregular airplane service to a grass strip at Wanigela, north of the Maisin territory. All attempts at cash cropping had failed and villages remain to this day largely dependent upon subsistence gardening, hunting and fishing for food, and bush materials for their houses and canoes, supplemented by cash and gifts of commodities from working relatives.

Tapa cloth is a partial exception to this fairly standard picture of a coastal PNG community. Prior to the colonial takeover, tapa was an important item in regional trading networks, particularly in exchange for clay cooking pots from Wanigela (Key 1968). This trade continues, but beginning in the late 1950s tapa gained a far greater importance as a commodity that could be sold for cash or credit. Maisin began selling tapa occasionally to coastal traders after the Second World War.[1] By the mid-1970s the Anglican Church had become the local buyer of choice by offering credit towards high school fees and transportation costs in exchange for tapa. Over the years, individual Maisin have sold tapa directly to artefact shops in Port Moresby, while in the villages a succession of short-lived private and cooperative outfits have formed to market cloth, often with the assistance of small government grants or non-government organisations dedicated to sustainable local economic development. Most of the tapa sold presumably ends up on the walls or in the collections of expatriates and overseas consumers, but there is also an internal PNG market for the cloth. People from different areas in PNG require tapa for ceremonial dress as they no longer make their own; in addition, tapa is gaining momentum in the fashion industry, as several PNG designers have started to refashion Maisin tapa into cocktail dresses as well as high heeled shoes. Given all the variables, not least the ever- increasing expense of shipping tapa from roadless Collingwood Bay, it is impossible to estimate how much money Maisin villagers have earned from tapa sales over the years. A handful of highly skilled tapa designers were earning thousands of Kina during the boom years of the early 1980s and late 1990s, but the income generated for most households has certainly been far less, even when the market has been at its hottest. Still, the money has been very welcome indeed.

Traditionally, tapa was primarily used as clothing: wrap around skirts for women and loin cloths for men. It remains the required clothing—along with shell and bead ornaments, feathers and paint—in ceremonial dancing, and for widows and widowers in end of mourning ceremonies (Hermkens 2007). Yet tapa has a much deeper

cultural significance. It provides the most common and visible surface upon which are painted inalienable clan designs, the most important of which are said to date back to the original emergence of the ancestors from an underground location far to the west. Tapa is also a key object of exchange. Most major exchanges, including bridewealth, initiations for first-born children, and welcoming ceremonies for important visitors, entail gifts of tapa bearing 'ordinary' (non-clan) designs—ideally many cloths (Barker 2008: 1–2). Since at least the 1930s, tapa has adorned the altars and walls of churches and occasionally been made into vestments for clergy. In more recent years, tapa has acquired a new importance as a symbol of Maisin identity. During the resistance against schemes to log Maisin forests, protest signs were created out of tapa cloth and tapa designs adorned the websites of the various NGOs supporting the Maisin effort (Barker 2004).

Tapa is not strictly 'women's wealth' in the sense that Annette Weiner (1976) proposed for the banana leaf fibre bundles exchanged in memorial rites by women in the Trobriands.[2] Both women and men wear tapa and may give gifts of tapa in exchanges. Yet the cloth is intimately associated with women's labour and personhood and, along with mats and stringbags, a typically feminine exchange gift. In the past, men's involvement with tapa making was limited to the production of the basic tools: black palm anvils and beaters. As tapa gained in value a few men started to paint designs, and one Uiaku man has developed some lines of tapa products such as purses and neckties. Men's main involvement has been to attempt to control sales of tapa. The actual production of the cloth remains largely the domain of women. Women plant and tend the paper mulberry plantations, make the dyes and design and paint the large majority of cloths. Women exclusively carry out the heavy and highly skilled labour of beating bark strips into usable cloth (Hermkens 2013: 74–79).[3]

Beating tapa is a solidary pursuit, as is (for the most part) developing designs. The final stage of tapa-making—applying red dye between the parallel lines of the black design—is often done by groups of women sharing a single pot. Indeed, frequently women complete someone else's tapa. Virilocal marriage is the norm for Maisin. Most villagers, however, marry near home. Sharing the *dun* (red dye) pot provides one of the most regular occasions for women to get together with kin and friends beyond the household. Further, unlike most other group occasions at which women are busy preparing food, painting tapa is a leisurely activity that permits lots of opportunity for gossip and joking (Barker 2008: 111–12).

Men don't intrude when they see a group of women seated around a pot of red dye bubbling over a fire. Within the memories of the oldest generation there was a stronger tabu, based upon an association of the red dye with women's blood. Women prepared the red dye with hushed voices in the privacy of houses, referring to it as *tambuna* (red blood). Mirroring prohibitions against women stepping over men's hunting spears, men and children were not allowed to witness either the preparation or application of the dye as this would 'spoil it' by thinning out the red colour (Hermkens 2013: 83–85). This association between women, designs and blood also occurred in the now abandoned practice of female tattooing. Up until the mid-1970s or so,

virtually all girls received facial tattoos around the time of puberty. The procedure visibly marked girls as ready for sexual activity and eventually marriage, while also symbolising personal strength and ideals of feminine beauty. A group of girls would live in seclusion in the house of a master tattooist for a period of a month to six weeks. In 1982 when Anne Marie Tietjen witnessed the tattooing of one of the last group of girls to undergo the procedure, the girls covered their heads with towels whenever emerging from seclusion. We were told, however, that in the past the girls would have worn a full-length tapa blanket draped over their heads and shoulders, often fully painted in red with no designs. In former times, when the tattoo was complete and the girls were ready to go 'on display' to the village in full decorations, they would descend from the tattooist's house wearing a solid red tapa skirt (Barker and Tietjen 1990).

Up into the 1940s, a decade or so before the formation of the first Mothers' Union chapter, Maisin women practiced another more secret form of tattooing. During the dry season, particularly the annual collective hunt when village men left en masse for an extended time to fence in and then burn off the grasslands in the bush, young women went off in groups or pairs (accounts differ) into the privacy of the bush to tattoo each other's thighs (Hermkens 2013: 59–61). Maisin consider a woman's thigh to be highly erotic and private. Indeed, so private that Barker only learned of the former practice when, having admired a design an old man had carved into his lime stick, was told that it was of the thigh design of a former girlfriend!

We would finally mention a strong association between aesthetic ideals, the constitution of femininity and notions of authority among women. Formal leadership roles in Maisin society were reserved for men, including the right to speak at public gatherings. While women have (grudgingly) been permitted a more prominent role in village affairs in recent years, their generally subservient role continues to be symbolised by such customs as lowering their heads in the presence of senior men and crossing shelter platforms on their knees to serve them food or drink during meetings. As in other Melanesian societies, women do the bulk of hard labour and are subjected to verbal and occasionally physical punishment from husbands and in-laws. However, middle-aged and older women are not without power. As well as exercising authority as mothers-in-law, many do not hesitate to share their opinions on village matters with their husbands and brothers. Some senior women enjoy considerable respect for their knowledge of clan histories and traditions, not least of clan designs in their natal and husbands' families. Most of the most respected, in our experience, have also been superb tapa artists and master tattooists. A number have also been traditional healers. All of this elite group have been members of the Mothers' Union.

THE MOTHERS' UNION

In the late 1930s, the wives of teachers in training at the mission headquarters at Dogura formed a chapter of St. Mary's Guild. Soon after, chapters were formed on twelve mission stations, including Wanigela. Members, who had to be baptised Christians, held regular prayer meetings, provided aid to sick and swore to 'constantly keep

the rules and ideals of the Guild before other members less fortunately placed than themselves,' particularly the strict Anglican rules about marriage (Rankin 1945). The Japanese invasion of the northern coast for a time put an end to the Guild. Following the War, the Anglicans introduced two new orders: the League of St. Mary for unmarried Christian women and the Mothers' Union (MU) for the married. Founded in England in 1876 as a support group for new mothers, the MU enjoyed enormous popularity within the Anglican Church, spreading throughout the Empire.

Female missionaries—ironically, most unmarried themselves—were tasked with forming the women's groups and providing guidance.[4] Maisin elders interviewed by Barker in 1983, however, recalled that Maisin women took the main initiative. In 1947 or 48, five women approached the Papuan teacher-evangelist in charge of St. Thomas Church to ask to set up a chapter. After a year's training, a delegation visited the district missionary at Wanigela to request permission to join. A meeting was held to recruit members. On March 25th 1949, a large contingent attended a 'Ladies Day' celebration at Wanigela, returning a year later to receive a blessing from the Bishop and their probationer cards. Three decades later, Ida Elsie Aibu recalled the Bishop's words:

> My daughters, you wanted to form the Mothers' Union and so you have done. You must follow the footsteps of Mary all the way. I don't want you to go backwards. Go forwards! Look after the church. If any strangers come to your place, take care of them.[5] Help the old and sick people (Interview notes, Uiaku, 9 March 1983).

For the next three years, the Mothers made weekly visits to Wanigela for worship and to receive guidance (*giu*) from Sister Helen Roberts. At the end of that period, they were given permission to independently conduct their own weekly services making use of a handbook translated into Maisin by Sister Roberts.[6]

The injunction to aid the sick and elderly resonated with indigenous values and practices, but other aspects of the Mothers' Union marked a departure from the past. At a moment when occasions for women's gatherings were being abandoned —notably the mutual tattooing during the dry season—and the spiritual association between tapa painting and women's essence weakening, the young mothers joining the MU now enjoyed a more regular opportunity to gather, worship and share the news of the day. Further, membership provided a licence to intervene in community affairs. In his logbook entry for June 19th 1949, the district missionary excitedly reported that the Mothers had accompanied him to pray over two women who had 'reverted to Heathen customs' of mourning, while exhorting them to 'seek restoration to the Church' from which they had been excommunicated, likely because they had been in a polygamous marriage.[7] It is impossible to know how frequent or forceful such interventions were, but judging from the persistent complaints of the district missionaries, they appear to have had limited influence on marriage practices. Regardless of the effectiveness of such interventions, all the women interviewed by Barker in the 1980s emphasised the importance of the Mothers' work on the marriage front.

While the formation of the local Mothers' Union chapter marked a major innovation at the time and in the lasting memories of its founders, it was less a moment of rupture than reformulation of pre-existing values in light of new circumstances and opportunities. We note three dimensions that would have lasting consequences. The first and most foundational concerned the relationship between members of the MU and church authorities, including the Christian god. In the early years, the Maisin and the missionaries worked within a direct exchange relationship, with mission clergy and teachers giving gifts of tobacco and trade goods for labour and food. As villagers converted, the relationship shifted increasingly to one of asymmetrical exchange. Strongly influenced by Anglo-Catholic teachings, the bishops and senior clergy of the Anglican mission envisioned their role in paternalistic terms of raising child-like people to the faith. This ideology resonated strongly with indigenous idealisations of the asymmetrical relationship between seniors and juniors: parents and children, older siblings and younger siblings, high ranking (*kawo*) and lower ranking (*sabu*) clans,[8] and so forth. Thus the Mothers perceived themselves as giving gifts of obedience and 'respect' (*muan*) to the missionaries and God in return for 'advice' (*giu*) that improved their lives and assured their salvation (Barker 2012).

This brings us to the second dimension: the aesthetics of women's bodies. Along with spiritual advice, the mission offered several practical gifts for the Mothers, not least sewing lessons and, in time, machines. As elsewhere in the Pacific, women took up the opportunity to work with manufactured cloth with great enthusiasm (somewhat to the dismay of some missionaries, who regretted the shift from native clothing occurring at this time). Perhaps more significantly, the women Barker interviewed in the 1980s credited their new relationship with the church for allowing them to resist and end a variety of restrictions on married women's appearance and participation in ceremonial occasions. Before the MU, Barker was told, women shaved their heads upon marriage and kept their hair cropped short. At the 1949 gathering in Wanigela, the Bishop was said to have advised women that they could grow their hair out if they wished. In later years, the first indigenous Papuan bishop, George Ambo, encouraged village people to wear traditional dress in church, particularly on feast days, and to celebrate with traditional dancing. While now joining in traditional dances, the Mothers took prominent role in church processions during Easter, saints days and the annual Ladies Day gatherings, dressed lavishly in traditional regalia (Hermkens 2007).

The third dimension was the organisation itself. The mission and the colonial government promoted village councils in the 1920s and 1930, made up of male representatives from various hamlets (equivalent to clans and clan sections). These do not appear to have been very active. Upon their return as labourers for the Australian forces during the War, young Maisin men were fired up by the possibility of bringing the material riches enjoyed by Whites to their own communities. An experimental Christian cooperative set up by an Australian priest in the village of Gona in 1946 inspired copies across the (then) Northern District, including the Maisin villages. The co-operatives worked to coordinate the labour of villagers to develop and market trace gold panned from local streams and bêche-de-mer, before settling upon copra as well

as opening trade stores in competition to those run by expatriates in a few coastal locations. While initial capital was raised through donations ('shares') from participating villagers, the schemes turned on the asymmetrical relationship between Maisin and the mission. The district priest blessed tools, buildings and the coconut groves and set up pass book accounts for the operations—all feeding into Administration suspicions that the mission was encouraging nascent 'cargo cults' (Barker 1996).

The structural similarities with the organisation of the Mothers' Union are striking. In her interview with Barker in 1983, Ida Elsie Aibu laid special stress on the fact that the MU 'got a president and secretary. They signed their names in a book and they started working here. . .At the end of the year, they would take the money earned in Uiaku and give it to Sister Roberts. She would work it out and have it deposited in a bank.' In short, in the recollection of Aibu and others, the MU operated very much on the template of a Christian cooperative. The autonomy of the MU, however, was quite limited compared to their male counterparts. Aibu went on to say that the district priest and Sister Roberts worried at first that the Mothers wanted to start a trade store in the village. 'But they said: "no, the money is for supplies or for building a new church and classrooms"' (Interview notes, Uiaku, 9 March 1983).

While the male co-operatives floundered, the MU enjoyed relative stability and success, perhaps because it was more deeply embedded in the church. It is unlikely that the Maisin's most successful collective project of the post-War years would have succeeded without the Mothers. In the early 1950s, one of the returned labourers rallied support across the Maisin villages for the building of an iron-roofed church on the Uiaku mission station. Not only would this be the first semi-permanent church in the whole of Collingwood Bay, the villagers hoped it would encourage the mission to provide the Maisin with their own priest. Working closely with the district priest, the villagers made a concerted push to prepare and sell copra. This was mainly men's work, but the women pitched in by providing building materials for the copra shed and food for the labourers. And, in time, they also contributed money, increasingly from tapa sales. The tapa was initially sold to white traders who had opened trade stores at Wanigela and the sub-district headquarters at Tufi, some 40 km north of the Maisin villages. They also began selling tapa to the mission itself, thus beginning what would eventually become their most important commercial relationship. The new church of St. Thomas was consecrated in the late 1950s, with a Papuan priest appointed in 1962 (Barker 1993).

Because members have to be in 'good' Christian marriages, it is unlikely that the MU, even in the early years, was very large. The church regards marriage as a sacrament and thus prohibits divorce. Most Maisin go through several relationships before settling down with a partner. Hence people tend to avoid church weddings in favour of 'living in sin', only having their marriages blessed by the priest after children have arrived and bridewealth has been given (Barker 2008: 97–102). The Mothers face additional impediments to recruiting new members. Husbands, and often mothers-in-law, resent the loss of labour to the household when younger women try to join. Few

younger women do, however, even if they qualify, simply because they do not have additional time or energy to spare.

In 1981–83, the Uiaku MU had perhaps a dozen members who regularly attended the weekly prayer service, out of a total village population (inclusive of neighbouring Ganjiga) of more than 500 people.[9] The small number, however, is misleading. The Mothers could command and organise considerable numbers of women when need called, not least for the annual district's Ladies Day celebration during which participating women perform songs, dances and skits, share food, and discuss problems associated with family life, such as alcohol abuse and adultery. At home, the Mothers maintained their own paper mulberry plantations, providing an independent source of funds, not only for church stewardship but in support of MU gatherings. Finally, being a Mother provided a source of prestige for senior members. Several of the most skilled tapa artists and all of the remaining tattooists at the time were members. So too were two of the most respected (and feared) spiritual healers in the region, who attributed their powers mutually to faith in God and kinship with ancestral spirits.

Deeply (if mostly silently) embedded in the everyday operations of the local church, the Mothers enjoyed a certain authority and independence. This derived from their influence as senior women within their own households and kin networks as well as their ability to sell and hold onto the money earned through tapa sales. As a young priest would learn in 1997, the Mothers could not be regarded as simply servants at the command of the (male) clergy. At the same time, the conditions that set the stage for the strike also served to reinforce male hegemony.

THE MOTHERS' UNION DURING THE ANTI-LOGGING CAMPAIGN

While it has always been primarily a pastoral organisation, Anglican missionaries also intended the Mothers' Union to materially 'improve' the lives of Papuan women, albeit within the confines of an idealised Western Christian marriage. Education of girls was a second key initiative undertaken by the mission. From the start boys and girls attended village schools together, sitting (as in church) in segregated rows. After a residential advanced school was established for boys by the Anglicans in 1948, it was perhaps inevitable that a girls' school would follow a few years later. Many girls, most from the Uiaku elementary school, graduated to Holy Name School for Girls at the mission headquarters in Dogura. Many of the graduates went on to train as nurses and teachers. Most did not immediately return to the village, instead marrying and settling down with families elsewhere in the country. Meanwhile, the international Mothers' Union was transforming, enlarging its vision from support of Christian marriage to the welfare and empowerment of women and children. These new ideas began to seep into the national MU organization in PNG and to be encountered by Maisin women who joined chapters in the towns.

By the mid-1980s migrant Maisin were returning in steady numbers to the villages to care for aging parents and to raise families away from the increasing violence of the towns. The largest MU chapter, in Uiaku-Ganjiga, took on a different complexion as

returning women assumed leadership positions. While still composed mainly of older women, the chapter grew in size and visibility, increasing its devotional and fundraising activities in the villages. At the same time, it was noticeably more plugged into wider MU networks, with delegations of Maisin Mothers regularly attending meetings at the diocesan and national levels. These changing conditions set the stage for the strike of 1997, yet only in part. An equal or greater influence on the fortunes of the MU came neither from changing demographics or philosophies but from an unanticipated direction: the sudden catapulting of the Maisin into international prominence as intrepid Indigenous conservationists, a campaign that would focus on women as tapa 'artists' and the salvation of their communities (Barker 2004, 2008).

During the early 1990s villagers were enraged as they learned of agreements that a handful of Maisin men in the towns had allegedly signed permitting clear-cut logging of the forests on ancestral lands and their replacement with mono-crop plantations. The threat sparked an unusual degree of unity between the villages and with many urban Maisin who hoped to retire to the villages. The leaders mounted a savvy campaign, paying for full-page ads in the *Post-Courier* newspaper and building alliances with national and international environmental non-governmental organisations working in PNG. The response was immediate and, although very much welcomed by the Maisin, staggering in relation to the size and relative isolation of the villages. Spearheaded by an energetic Greenpeace activist, a steady stream of outsiders arrived in the villages offering expert legal advice, workshops on small-scale development and strategies for building national and international support against the logging schemes. With the aid of a variety of organisations, the Maisin launched a law suit in the National Court to rescind licences that had been granted to the logging companies. Meanwhile, a 'Maisin Integrated Conservation and Development' (MICAD) organisation was constituted to provide oversight and a nascent form of governance across the Maisin villages. MICAD was twinned to a new NGO based in Port Moresby, Conservation Melanesia, which managed the funds flowing in from international donors like the World Wildlife Fund and coordinated the activities of various experts working with the Maisin communities. The publicity campaign developed quickly, with a visit from the Greenpeace vessel *The Rainbow Warrior* in 1997, followed up with the arrival of documentary film crews from Australia, CNN International, and Canada in quick succession. Meanwhile, delegations of Maisin made their way to the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia and Europe to participate in art shows and publicity events.

From the start, tapa figured centrally in the campaign, dubbed by Greenpeace as 'Painting a Sustainable Future'. The cloth had two attractive features for activists. First, it was a distinctive and attractive Indigenous art form that, with proper marketing, might provide Maisin with an alternative and sustainable source of income rather than selling off their ancestral lands. Second, it was made by women, at a time when one of the few things international development and environmental agencies agreed on was the necessity to promote projects that improved both the economic lot and political clout of women in their communities. While Greenpeace and its allies worked assiduously to create an international demand, MICAD, assisted by a Peace Corps

couple stationed in Uiaku for two years, worked to create a viable tapa-producing cooperative. The outsiders also insisted that women have equal representation on the MICAD executive board and participate in overseas trips. Visitors routinely held separate meetings and workshops with women. Most strikingly, the male leaders of MICAD gave way to the insistence by their external allies that women participate as equals during community planning meetings, sitting with men (albeit separately) on shelter platforms rather than on the ground below and encouraged to speak up.

These initiatives had contradictory effects. Most women were flattered by the sudden attention and elevation of their status. This was particularly true for older women whose knowledge of Maisin traditions in general, and tapa designs in particular, gained a boost in respect. Yet younger women also felt empowered by the new opportunities. Upon returning from a residency at the Fabric Workshop museum in Philadelphia in 1998, one young woman founded a successful trade store with her husband and another organised a breakaway Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Ganjiga. Many women also materially benefitted from rising household incomes as money flowed in from tapa sales and 'room and board' charges imposed upon visitors. At the same time, however, women's workloads increased dramatically as tapa production was ramped up, while more food needed to be grown and prepared for seemingly endless waves of visitors. Women's effective presence on the MICAD board was limited from the start and soon their numbers were cut. Meanwhile, the monopoly MICAD attempted to impose upon tapa purchases diminished women's control over the sales and proceeds of their production, with much of the profits eaten up to fund the travels of male executive members to and from Port Moresby. The well-intended interventions by outsiders provoked much resentment among men, who claimed that they went against Maisin 'traditions'. Out of sight of outside allies, they insisted that women resume their mostly silent role in community meetings, sitting on the earth below the men. Most disturbingly, a number of husbands beat their wives in retaliation for participating in workshops or overseas delegations.

The Mothers' Union chapters in Uiaku-Ganjiga and the eastern villages of Airara-Marua embodied the contradictions of this period. The return of migrants with strong connections to the large MU network, along with greatly enhanced opportunities for fundraising and encouragement of the Maisin's anti-logging allies, boosted the membership, activities and general fortunes of the chapters. The presence of the US Peace Corps volunteers, who ran the tapa business on behalf of MICAD, assured that producers received a more generous cut of the profits than had been the case in earlier attempts at cooperatives (all controlled by men). In general, the Mothers were more careful with their money, investing some of the profits in a dinghy and new sewing machines while contemplating larger projects. These achievements provided MU members with enough autonomy and influence to demand and receive assistance from men and relatives to support ever-larger events, most notably the annual Ladies Day celebration, and to pull off a labour strike against a recalcitrant priest.

Yet the Mother's Union remained a conservative organisation, with its senior leaders insisting upon traditional gender relationships that ceded ultimate authority to

men. This was particularly blatant in the case of the Airara chapter (Hermkens 2013: 298–302). In 2001, the senior Mothers invited a male church elder to act as their advisor and manager, at the same time reappointing a man as treasurer who, two years earlier, had left for Port Moresby after being accused of misusing MU funds. The appointments were made over the objections of some younger MU members and criticisms of other villagers, including some men. A husband of a younger Mother complained to Hermkens:

> In general, I don't want women to speak up. They will still be put down by our custom. But MU women, they should be independent and run their own organisation. But with the MU, men are running it, and this is a problem. I think women should run it and decide for themselves. Now [the elder] is running the MU and maybe he has too much control. Maybe he does things that are no good for the women. The other thing is that he comes from a *kawo* [customary high ranking] clan. Women might find it difficult to go against him.

The female president of the Airara MU, on the other hand, welcomed the male administrators pointing out that they were free to travel to meetings to take care of business easier than most women who were unable to leave their families. While males were absent from the Uiaku chapter, a similar informal alliance between the senior Mothers and male leaders worked against the empowerment of younger mothers, upon whom much of the hard work involved in beating tapa and other activities devolved. As a result, overburdened younger women were reluctant to become Mothers. When they did or when they assisted the Mothers, their husbands often expressed resentment over the loss of their wives' labour and cash from the tapa they produced.

The contradictions were even more profound in terms of the continuing asymmetrical exchange relationship with the church, represented by the parish priest. The Maisin priest whose actions triggered the strike had immediately requested a transfer. His replacement, who was not Maisin, quickly grasped the potential of the tapa boom. During the Ladies Day annual celebration in March 2001, he urged cooperation between MICAD, two local tapa cooperatives that had between initiated after the departure of the Peace Corps volunteers and the MU to enlarge tapa sales as a way of increasing household incomes, funding church building upkeep and, not incidentally, paying his salary. One of his projects was to establish a tapa market in Korea, where he had contacts. A delegation made up of a MICAD business representative, the Uiaku MU president and another Uiaku-based member travelled to Korea to promote tapa. While the endeavour improved the relationship between the MU and MICAD, in the end no market was established as the Korean partners regarded the tapa prices as too high.

The following year, a MU delegation, which included members from Port Moresby, visited Airara in February to join in the opening of a new Mothers' Union year. After being welcomed by village women decorated in traditional regalia, the Mothers discussed possibilities for marketing their products in Port Moresby. The Port

Moresby visitors, strongly encouraged by the priest, suggested that the Maisin MU chapters send pandanus leaves and bush fibre cords to the city where their counterparts would use them to manufacture mats and string bags. The Maisin Mothers, however, were more excited by the possibility of using this connection to visit Port Moresby themselves and directly sell tapa to the artefact stores and other buyers instead of relying upon untrustworthy middlemen. In December 2002, a delegation made up of the Uiaku president and several Mothers from Sinapa and Airara villages travelled to the city with a large quantity of tapa made by themselves and collected from other Maisin women. Having no money or marketing contacts, they were completely reliant for support upon the Port Moresby delegates they had met almost a year earlier. Fortunately, one of the delegates ran the Provincial Women's Business Association, but even with her help the Maisin women were only able to raise enough funds to pay for their return airfares.

Both projects laid significant burdens on the Mothers with little to show for their efforts. Their failures contributed to a negative attitude, particularly on the part of men, towards the expanded activities of the MU. In Airara, for instance, men complained that the MU trips, like the ones sponsored by outside groups in collaboration with MICAD, unfairly benefited only a few men and women. More generally, the activities of MICAD and the MU, particularly travel in PNG and beyond, generated extensive gossip among those left behind, not least suspicions that participants were funnelling tapa profits to their own kin rather than for the benefit of the other community. It did not go unnoticed that Uiaku had overwhelmingly benefitted from the campaign as the first, and too often only village visited by activists and as the headquarters for MICAD. Nor did it help that even within Uiaku, the MICAD board was dominated by members of closely related clans. Complaints and gossip threatened to spin out of control—a condition Maisin refer to as *tauk ramara sii* (bad living)—damaging support for MICAD and the MU while undermining the hard fought unity of the anti-logging cause.

DISCUSSION

Tapa cloth has always been strongly associated with women in Maisin society. Not exclusively, of course: both men and women wear distinctive types of tapa and the most valued designs are the inalienable property of patri-clans. The gendered quality of tapa lies first in its production, which continues to be performed overwhelmingly by women, particularly the skilled and physically demanding process of beating bark into cloth; and second, in the aesthetics of traditional designs passed down by generations of women. Commercialisation of cloth has encouraged changes in basic tools and techniques as well as innovations in shape and design. The more profound changes, however, have been far less visible, reflecting shifts in the cultural construction of gender and the conceptualisation of tapa.

Testimony from elderly Maisin suggests that as late as the 1940s, tapa and the related practice of facial and bodily tattooing bore an internal relationship to women's

essence, specifically women's blood. Passed down from mothers to daughters, tapa and tattooing provided an aesthetic marking and clothing of women's bodies while the making of tapa, particularly the application of the red dye, provided one of the rare occasions for women to gather outside of the supervision of men. The subsequent commercialisation of tapa weakened such associations without entirely eliminating them. The opportunities for making money encouraged the abandonment of taboos that impeded production, beginning with those surrounding the red dye and cumulating with a handful of men designing their own cloths. As the market for tapa grew, village men increasingly attempted to exclusively manage the production and sales of cloth through various cooperative and private business ventures. Meanwhile women's skirts began to morph into 'paintings' of varying sizes, convenient to hang on walls. Meanwhile some foreign activists promoted the idea that Maisin women—and increasingly men—who painted the most attractive pieces should be understood as individual 'artists' and acknowledged accordingly.

Such trends have been important but mustn't be exaggerated. Even at the height of the tapa boom of the late 1990s, women produced the vast majority of cloth and the cloth they produced came mainly in the form of women's and girl's skirts with traditional patterns. Nor were women powerless in decisions about marketing tapa or the use of the proceeds from sales. Against the individualising and gender neutering trends listed above, we note a couple of developments reinforcing women's association with tapa. First, as the commercial value of tapa rose so too did its value as a gift in ceremonial exchanges, easily converted into a commodity by the recipients. During the 1980s tapa, for a time, became a sort of 'women's wealth' (see further Hermkens n.d.) in ceremonial prestations where women lined up to lay scores of pieces before or on initiated first-borns as well as visiting bishops and the occasional researcher (Barker 2008: 5–6). While the quantities given have declined, tapa remains a signature female gift. The second development occurred during the anti-logging campaign, when GreenPeace and other external allies explicitly recognised and promoted tapa as a female craft and 'sustainable' development alternative to male-associated industrial resource extraction. This discourse was appreciated by many women and formed a companion discourse to the promotion of tapa as a universal symbol of Maisin culture and political autonomy.

To sum up, tapa remains strongly associated with women in Maisin society, but the nature of that association has shifted since the 1940s from an *internal* identification of cloth with women's bodies towards an understanding of tapa as an *external* product of women's labour. While tapa remains a key female product, as externalised objects women's skirts have become vulnerable to recapture as alienated commodities, as gender neutral paintings and symbols of Maisin cultural identity, and as the artistic creations of skilled individuals, both female and male.

The Anglican Church in general, and the Mothers' Union in particular, played pivotal roles in these transformations. The earliest use of women's skirts as decorative paintings likely occurred in village churches no later than the mid-1930s. The mission played an even more direct role by facilitating the marketing of tapa, beginning in the

1950s. For at least two decades, ending only in the late 1980s, the Church was the most reliable customer and recipient of gifted Maisin tapa. From her post at Wanigela, Sister Helen Roberts quietly did more than anyone else to establish the reputation of Maisin tapa and build a market for it, providing the foundation for later village-based efforts and the boom in sales during the anti-logging campaign years. Not without some tension, this partnership benefitted both parties. Maisin women received cash and credit towards school fees, while a share of the profits and gifted tapa added to the coffers of a chronically financially stressed Church.

Elders in the 1980s recalled the founding of the Mothers' Union as a moment of social transformation more than rupture. Formed to promote the Anglican idealisation of Christian marriage, the MU provided married women with their own association, paralleling the Christian cooperatives then being formed by men. The growing market for tapa provided the Mothers with an independent revenue stream. Most of the money earned, as with the labour provided by the MU, has gone to support the local church, including clergy salaries. Yet the fact that they earn and ultimately control the use of their funds (if not completely and not always wisely) has given the Mothers a degree of autonomy and a source of pride. Despite the small size of the membership, the Mothers influence is reflected in their ability to command the labour of younger women in mounting Ladies' Day and other celebrations on the church calendar and the occasional act of resistance against male clergy who take their support too much for granted.

For the most part, however, the Mothers' Union has been a conservative force in Maisin society (which is not to say an unchanging one). The hierarchical structure and ethos of the Anglican Church resonated strongly with Maisin understandings of asymmetrical exchange between the generations and the relative power of women versus men. Senior women can enjoy considerable authority over their daughters and, particularly, daughters-in-law. And such understandings were transferred at large to the Mothers, albeit at the cost of some resentment on the part of young women and their husbands. There is also evidence that the Mothers played a key role in the expansion of traditional feminine aesthetics into new domains. According to some elders, with the advent of the MU women ceased cropped their hair upon marriage, retained decorations and joined in ceremonial dancing. When Bishop George Ambo called for parishioners to integrate traditional dancing and costumes into major church celebrations during the late 1960s, the Mothers were the first to take up the call (Johnston 2003). It is no accident that the most respected and influential Mothers in past years have also been expert tapa makers, tattooists, custodians of clan and genealogical histories and healers. Yet it remains the case that the Mothers' Union is at heart a pastoral body dedicated to support of the family, that has been hesitant at best to challenge the overriding political authority of men in the village or the patriarchal church. When it has done so—as was generally the case with women advantaged during the anti-logging campaign—it has faced intense criticism and sometimes retaliation.

Given that tapa is so bound up in Maisin conceptions and experiences of womanhood, it comes as little surprise that its fortunes have also been intimately connected to those of the local Mothers' Union. The changes we have explored are profound, yet they do not readily lend themselves to analysis in terms of binaries such as rupture versus continuity, Christianity versus indigenous culture, individualism versus relationalism, and so forth (cf. Robbins 2007; Mosko 2010). This is not to claim lamely that history entails both change and continuity. Rather it seems to us to follow from the Maisins' particular experience of Christianity: less as a confrontation with the ways of the past and more as a set of moral precepts that encompasses *both* ancestral and introduced aspects of present-day life, albeit often uneasily. Profound changes may thus quietly convey less visible continuities with incipient possibilities that emerge over time. To give one example, we have suggested that the ongoing shift from an internal to externalised relations between women and tapa historically began with the hanging of 'gender neutral' tapa paintings in village churches in the 1930s. But what if we think instead of the gorgeous large pieces of tapa that adorn the altars and back walls of Maisin churches as women's skirts? That suggests in a quiet manner the interior of the churches have been gendered as intrinsically feminine, reviving the older association. Recent reappraisals of the gendering of church spaces elsewhere suggest that such possibilities deserve serious consideration and exploration (Eriksen 2008).

EPILOGUE: FUTURE OF TAPA, MAISIN WOMEN AND THE MOTHERS' UNION

In 2002, the Maisin won their three-year battle in the National Court and regained title to their traditional lands.[10] With the immediate threat removed, the international NGOs who had allied themselves to the Maisin turned their attention elsewhere while funding for Conservation Melanesia and MICAD quickly dried up, breaking the vital connections necessary to market tapa overseas. By this point, however, the tapa boom was already over. In the intense years of the anti-logging campaign, village women found themselves too occupied with making tapa and providing food for endless meetings and ceremonies for visitors to make time to sufficiently replant and care for the paper mulberry plantations, which were further damaged by an introduced invasive weed and, especially in Uiaku, a rising water table. The delegation to Korea had been able to gather less tapa than hoped for. By 2002, only Airara and Marua were still producing cloth.

In June 2007, John Barker and Anne Marie Tietjen returned to Uiaku. The month was marked by major ceremonies marking the deaths the previous year of the first-born son and two elders of a high-ranked clan in Uiaku, a widow's end of mourning (*roi babasi*) ritual, and the celebration of the annual patron saints day for St. Thomas Church. Large numbers of Maisin from other villages and the towns, as well as relatives and allies from across Collingwood Bay, converged upon Uiaku. The days were marked by large feasts, for which extensive gardens had been prepared nine months earlier, several nights of traditional dancing, a mass conducted with drums and in full regalia, and a fundraiser in support of a new church building. The mourning

ceremonies entailed generous gifts of raw and cooked food, mats, clothing, clay cooking pots, and money — greatly exceeding anything witnessed during ceremonial events 25 years earlier. *Yet no tapa was exchanged.* Nor did any tapa hang from the walls or the altar of the church. The gardens near the villages had become too boggy to grow paper mulberry saplings, although people to the east of the Maisin territory were now filling in some of the gap by making their own tapa and selling it to the Maisin villages. In November 2007, garden lands across Collingwood Bay were submerged and buried under silt in a devastating flood that affected much of Oro Province, forcing the people to live on government rations of rice and the contributions of working relatives until the gardens could recover.

Given the importance of tapa in exchanges and as a marker of clan and cultural identity, we find it hard to believe that Maisin will not continue to make cloth. Indeed, even in the aftermath of the terrible flood in 2007, Maisin women who had married into other language groups in drier parts of Collingwood Bay continued to beat and design tapa (Hasselberg 2012: 155–57). More recently, we have received reports that tapa production has resumed at least in Airara and possibly in Uiaku as well. Yet it seems unlikely that the boom days of tapa production will return anytime soon. The decline in tapa has accelerated a trend already apparent during the 1990s in which tapa-making is becoming a specialised individual rather than a generic female skill, albeit one practiced mainly by women. In 2007, Barker and Tietjen for the first time encountered a significant number of adult women in Uiaku, most but not all of whom had grown up in urban areas, who had never made tapa.

The future of the Mothers' Union is harder to divine. It remains the only women's group in the villages, but younger women and men alike are finding new options for association such as small Evangelical sects and a popular Anglican youth fellowship movement with charismatic overtones. At the time of the St. Thomas patronal festival in 2007, the Uiaku-Ganjiga chapter had reverted from its peak in the late 1990s to a small club made up of elderly women. Yet the Mothers who proudly processioned into the church in richly adorned costumes remain highly respected for their expertise as tapa makers and custodians of traditional knowledge. The revival of tapa will very likely remain tied to the fortunes of the Mothers' Union, at least in the near term.

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NOTES

1 From first contact in 1890 up to the outbreak of the First World War, Maisin traded quantities of tapa for trade goods offered by visiting and residential government agents and missionaries. The cloths, many of them bearing inalienable clan designs, were subsequently sold or donated to museums in Australia, Austria and England. For detailed accounts, see Barker (2001), Bonshek (1989) and Hermkens (2014).

2 For a further discussion on tapa as women's wealth, see Hermkens (n.d.).

3 Barker (2008) and Hermkens (2013) provide detailed accounts of tapa production.

4 Single female lay missionaries formed an exceptionally large component of the Anglican workforce in colonial times. According to David Wetherell (1977: 86), more than 60 out of the 100 missionaries who arrived in Papua between 1916 and 1942 were women. Most served as nurses and teachers under male supervision, but a few were placed in charge of their own stations despite the prohibition (still in effect) against the ordination of women to the priesthood.

5 This is an overt reference to the Maisin's warlike past and the mission's role in imposing peace. The term for 'stranger' and 'enemy' are the same.

6 This reconstruction is based primarily upon interviews conducted by Barker with Ida Elsie Aibu in Uiaku Village, 1983 and Sister Helen Roberts in Wanigela, 1983 and 1986. The dates were confirmed in the Wanigela Mission Log Book.

7 Wanigela Mission Log Book. Anglican Archives, New Guinea Collection. Michael Somare Library, University of Papua New Guinea.

8 In common with several coastal groups in Papua New Guinea, Maisin distinguish between 'peace' or 'alliance' clans, which held key ritual prerogatives including the right to speak first in gatherings and to organise inter-tribal feasts, and 'war' clans, who held the right to throw the first spear during fighting and provided service during ritual occasions to high ranking clans. While warfare and competitive feasting are long things of the past, Collingwood Bay people largely continue to recognise and respect this distinction and associated prerogatives especially on ritual occasions such as church celebrations (Gnecchi-Ruscone 1997; Barker 2005a).

9 Today, the organisational structure of the MU consists of three levels. At the top are the national (PNG) executives: a national president, treasurer, worker, and trainer who are spread over PNG. Next are the boards of each Anglican Diocese. At a grassroots level, each of the five dioceses is organised around parishes, which all have their own Mothers' Union boards. The Diocese of Popondetta encompasses Uiaku parish, which includes the villages of Yuayu, Ganjiga, Uiaku, Sinapa, Sinipara, Koniasi, Airara, Marua, Reaga, Gegerau, and Kuwansasap.

10 Unfortunately, this victory only provided a respite. As we write these words, the Maisin have returned to Court to contest a logging company's claim to have acquired title to Collingwood Bay lands. While local environmental NGOs have been helpful and sympathetic, the latest emergency has not attracted any attention outside of PNG in dramatic contrast to the situation 15 years ago.

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