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“Maisin is Tapa”: Engendering Barkcloth Among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea

Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between gender and barkcloth, or tapa, among the Maisin people living along the shores of Collingwood Bay in Papua New Guinea. Tapa features in Maisin economic, political, social, and spiritual life as an object of wealth that is both alienable and inalienable. It constitutes beliefs and values about gender relations and identity, mediating relations between the individual and the social. At the same time, tapa connects the living with the ancestors, God, and the church. In short, tapa is intertwined with all aspects of Maisin life. While in earlier publications I have detailed the gendered manufacturing and use of tapa in various settings, in this paper I bring this work together, highlighting how barkcloth is not just a gendered object, but crucial in creating gendered embodiments and performances, and, as such, experiences of gender identity.

Keywords: *tapa, barkcloth, Maisin, Papua New Guinea, textiles, gender*

Introduction

While doing fieldwork on the significance of barkcloth among the Maisin people in Collingwood Bay, Oro Province, in Papua New Guinea from the beginning of 2001 until mid-2002, and again in 2004, both men and women would frequently state: “Maisin is tapa!” This statement not only indicates the importance of tapa for Maisin people, it also points to how the Maisin identify themselves with this cloth. As an object of wealth that is both alienable and inalienable as discussed by Annette Weiner, tapa features in Maisin economic, political, social, and spiritual life.¹ Sold at national and international markets as an object of Indigenous art, it contributes significantly to Maisin livelihood. This commercial tapa is alienable, just like the tapa that is used in barter and most ceremonial exchanges. However, tapa decorated with particular clan designs is inalienable clan property—it may not be given away outside the clan or sold. Inalienable tapa is often used as festive and ceremonial dress, playing an important role in church festivals and life-cycle rituals including marriages and mourning. Moreover, tapa constitutes beliefs and

values about gender relations and identity, mediating relations between the individual and the social. At the same time, tapa connects the living with the ancestors, God, and the church. In short, tapa is intertwined with all aspects of Maisin life.

The intimate relationship between tapa and Maisin sociality comes as no surprise. According to anthropologist Jane Schneider, the spiritual properties of cloth and clothing “render these materials ideal media for connecting humans with the world of spirits and divinities, and with one another.”² Among Maisin and elsewhere, both cloth and clothing are very much intertwined with gender, social, and ethnic identity, thereby giving material form to social categories and hierarchies.³ In particular, clothing is one of the most visual and dominant materialised gender codes in our world.⁴

While on the one hand clothing is so malleable that it can be shaped to construct appearance and transform identity, one’s lived experience with cloth and clothing is also dependent upon how others evaluate the performance of the clothed body.⁵ In fact, clothing infuses the human body with meaning and determines its behavior, often beyond personal preference. It may be controlled by others, or, as anthropologist Lissant Bolton argues regarding clothing in Vanuatu, by “systems of rights and privileges and by ritual proscriptions of various kinds.”⁶ Moreover, as I will show in this article, clothing may not only change our skin and transform our physiology, it may actually define it by restricting our body movements. In these cases, the body is shaped by cultural order, interweaving cloth, cosmology, and physiology in what religious scholar David Morgan calls “an embodied experience of belief.”⁷

Among the Maisin, tapa is related to norms and values about female sexuality, about how women should behave, and how they should physically move. It is linked with the life stage and identity of the girl or woman who is wearing a particular tapa loincloth.⁸ Similarly, ornamentation such as earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and facial tattoos reflect a woman’s clan identity and life stage. This shows how closely material forms and cultural norms affect the person and personal identity.⁹

Practices of decorating and performing the body are also related to social relationships. In fact, decorating the body, especially within the context of life-cycle rituals, is intertwined with practices of giving. The use of tapa as both ceremonial dress and as a gift exemplifies this. According to anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, in Papua New Guinea objects actually circulate within relationships in order to make relations in which objects can circulate.¹⁰ This implies that both people and things simultaneously create and are created through the

relationships within which they are situated. This view of Papua New Guinean relations and identity is often associated with gift exchange, whereas commodity exchange is identified with Western forms of exchange and sociability. However, this theoretical division also essentializes forms of exchange that occur simultaneously in one ethnographic setting.¹¹ Maisin people, like many other people in Oceania, have multiple understandings of exchange, using tapa both as a gift and a commodity in various types of transactions. This implies that agency is distributed through a series of objects and acts which are separated in time and space.¹² As a consequence, people's identities are not only relational, but also "distributed" in both their social and material surroundings. The constitutive outside of one's identity encompasses other people, ancestors, concepts, and materialities such as tapa.¹³ As discussed in the next sections, among Maisin people tapa effectively constructs gendered forms and experiences of self, as well as of others. This efficacy of tapa is grounded in its gendered production as well as its use in various ritual and ceremonial performances.



Figure 1. Alienable tapa with a general, or random, four-panel design, made by Helen (a non-Maisin woman married into Maisin), 2001. Barkcloth made from paper mulberry, 133 x 70 cm. Photograph courtesy of A. Hermkens

Making the Barkcloth

Among the Maisin, all women—even those from other areas who have married into the Maisin community—are expected to learn how to beat, design, and paint barkcloth. They are responsible for making barkcloth into “women’s wealth”—in particular, into *embobi* (loincloths for women) and *koefi* (loincloths for men).¹⁴ The female garment is rectangular in shape and wrapped around the hips with a girdle, covering the thighs and the knees. The male garment is a long, narrow piece of barkcloth worn between the legs and wrapped around the hips, with one end covering the genitals and the other hanging over the buttocks. Among the Maisin, these loincloths are decorated with black-outlined designs, which are subsequently filled in with red pigment. The result is a vivid display of meandering red and black designs on the off-white barkcloth (Fig. 1).

Today, Maisin tapa is made from the inner bark of the domesticated paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), locally called *wuwusi*. In the past, Maisin women also made tapa from wild ficus tree species. Depending on the type of barkcloth that is needed, the *wuwusi* tree is cut when its diameter measures some five or more centimetres. Taller *wuwusi* are used for manufacturing the long, narrow *koefi* for men, while shorter and thicker *wuwusi* are used for making quadrangular *embobi*.

In general, Maisin women begin the arduous work of beating the bark as soon as it has been removed from the tree trunk.¹⁵ Considerable strength and endurance is needed to beat the bark into a smooth, flat piece of cloth. Sitting with their legs folded underneath them, or stretched out together sideways, they single-handedly beat the scraped bark with a narrow wooden or metal mallet on a heavy wooden log. As soon as the fibres are starting to spread, they take a broader wooden mallet to pound the bark over the wooden log. This seated position, which they maintain for several hours, causes strain on the women’s bodies, especially their backs, shoulders, and arms.

It can take several days or even weeks before a woman finds the time or an occasion to start applying designs to her beaten barkcloth. In the meantime, she keeps the barkcloth folded in a pandanus sleeping mat. Sleeping on the mat removes the barkcloth’s wrinkles, making it smooth. Thus, women’s bodies are not only connected with barkcloth through their beating and pounding it; they further process the barkcloth (straightening and softening) by sleeping on it. As one woman expressed, by sleeping on it, women imbue the barkcloth with “a little part of ourselves.”¹⁶

In a similar manner, each drawing that is applied on the barkcloth “contains” a part of the woman who designed it. The designing of barkcloth requires skills different from those used in the preparation of the barkcloth; one needs creativity, technical skill, and *que* (a steady hand). The Maisin refer to these skills as *mon-seraman*, a term that addresses both the mental (*mon*) and physical or technical (*seraman*) capacities of making good barkcloth. The Maisin recognize each other’s work and have preferences, and although they silently acknowledge that not everyone is equally skilled in making and designing barkcloth, they claim that all women are equally capable of making and designing barkcloth and no hierarchies exist between experienced and “young” barkcloth designers. Despite this, women who are uncertain of their skills often will turn their work upside down as a gesture of respect when more experienced barkcloth designers come to have a chat and a look.



Figure 2. Drawing a panel design with *mi*, Airara village, 2001. Photograph courtesy of A. Hermkens



Figure 3. Molly painting her clan design, Airara village, 2001. Photograph courtesy of A. Hermkens

When designing barkcloth, most Maisin women create a mental picture of their design and subsequently draw it on the barkcloth surface, although some women draw designs in the sand first, to test them without spoiling valuable cloth. When drawing, they use four fingers; these stand for the four black lines that meander and curve parallel to each other and create three “veins” of which the central is left unpainted and the outer two are filled up with red pigment (Figs. 2–3). The black designs are drawn with *mi*, a pigment made from river clay (*yabu mi*) and the leaves from a vine called *wayango*. Sometimes burned coconut husk or the ink of an octopus is added. These ingredients are mixed with fresh water and can be kept for quite a long while, their odour of decaying organic material

becoming stronger each day. The *mi* is applied with a little stick called *nasa* that is broken off from the dry filament of the white palm and sharpened to obtain a more precise drawing point. In general, each woman has her own bowl of *mi* and *nasa* sticks that vary in thickness, to be able to make both thin and broader lines. Women draw the black lines by either supporting their drawing hand with one finger or keeping the hand from resting on the cloth and letting only the *nasa* touch it.

Tapa Designs

Maisin women make three types of tapa designs: clan, general, and those related to Christianity. Each patrilineal clan has its own tapa designs. The Maisin believe that when emerging from a hole in the ground, each clan ancestor brought his own clan emblems (*kawo*). Clan emblems vary—from those evoking types of magic or social conduct to fire, drums, dancing gear, and tapa designs. The tapa clan designs, referred to as *evovi*, have individual names and are often figurative designs that represent mountains, animals, or specific artifacts that relate to the clan ancestor's travels and his claims to land, animals, and artifacts. As such, clan tapa conveys information about ancestral journeys, land claims, and relationships between specific clans.

While Maisin men control the journey narratives associated with particular landmarks as well as designs, knowledge concerning the manufacturing of clan designs is in the hands of women, who transfer this knowledge and craft to their daughters and daughters-in-law. Women are crucial in designing a clan's identity; they control the knowledge of the designs and their manufacture through which the clan itself is reproduced. Gendered forms of knowledge, power, affiliation, differentiation, and identity are not only intertwined and expressed through particular types of tapa, they are also "manipulated" through tapa. The prohibition on wearing another person's clan design exemplifies this, since doing so would denote a claim on land.

Although many generations of Maisin women have applied the *evovi*, the designs are fairly rigid, having hardly changed since the last century. In some cases, however, new ones may be created. Women who have a strong vision or a recurring dream about a particular design may submit their design to the clan elders. If the clan elders approve of her design and its meaning, it may be accepted as *evovi*. In this way, women can be more than just the transmitters of clan knowledge and identity as embedded within *evovi*—they can create it as well.

In addition to the relatively static clan designs, Maisin women deploy two styles of general or random designs, which are referred to as *a moi kayan* (“just a design”). These are the so-called “panel” designs and the twisted or meandering *gangi-gangi* (“continues”) designs. The former consist of one design that is repeated four times on *embobi* and, in general, six times on *koefi*. The cloth is folded into four or six parts respectively and the same design is drawn on each of the panels separately, often without looking at the previously drawn panel (see Figs. 1–2). This technique is always applied with clan designs and seems to have been the dominant technique and style of barkcloth designs in the past.¹⁷ In contrast, *gangi-gangi* designs, which are a more recent development, flow freely over the cloth and are not bounded by borders or panels. Importantly, *gangi-gangi* enable artists to decorate pieces of barkcloth that are too small to accommodate the traditional panel design. This development is linked with the commercialisation of barkcloth, which makes it economically worthwhile to decorate even the smallest pieces of tapa.

The third type of design applied on barkcloth is Christian-influenced designs. Since the arrival of British and Australian Anglican missionaries in Collingwood Bay in 1890, Anglican worship and its emblems have been appropriated and incorporated into Maisin ways of life.¹⁸ Barkcloth played a crucial role in these appropriations, as almost all of the five British and Australian Anglican missionaries stationed in Collingwood Bay between 1898 and 1920 collected it. Missionaries Wilfred Henry Abbot and John Percy Money, who were stationed in Collingwood Bay between 1898 and 1910, collected many pieces of decorated barkcloth and Money even decorated his house walls and table with pieces of decorated barkcloth. Their successors facilitated the collecting of barkcloth by confederates and scientific collectors such as Charles Gabriel Seligman, Rudolf Pöch, and Albert Buell Lewis.¹⁹

Making the Cloth Alive

The two stages of drawing the design and subsequently painting (colouring-in) the black designs are separated in time. When the initial black design is complete, the barkcloth is hung in the sun to dry. Subsequently, it is put between the layers of a folded sleeping mat along with other partly finished pieces. Here, it can stay for months, until finished pieces of barkcloth are needed. This could be an order for several pieces of barkcloth from a shop, or a relative in town, or a ceremonial event, which requires freshly painted tapa. As soon as this is the case, the final

stage of designing barkcloth takes place: the applying of the red pigment, called *dun*.

Dun is made out of three components: the bark of a tree of the *Parasponia* genus, locally called *saman* (bark); the leaves of a *Ficus subcuneata*, called *dun fara* (*fara* translates as “leaves”); and fresh water. In contrast to the black paint, the ingredients of the red paint must be boiled so they mix properly. When painting the barkcloth with *dun*, the pot it is being heated in is kept on the fire to ensure the pigment is warm when applied to the cloth. Application is done using the dried fruit of the pandanus (*imongiti*). In contrast to the black dye, the red paint cannot be stored long-term. Thus, women often share their *dun* with female relatives or friends, and it is a common sight to see several women gathered around a heated pot of *dun*.

In most Oceanic cultures the manufacturing of pigment is “a magico-symbolic process,” meaning it is bounded by rules and taboos.²⁰ This is true for the Maisin regarding the manufacture of and painting with *dun*. While some of these taboos have faded, both men and women are still very much aware of them. Until the Second World War, the red dye was prepared in a secluded area within the household, and mixed and boiled in a separate clay pot—one which was not to be used for cooking food. Small children and men were not allowed to look at the *dun* or come near it at any stage of its production and use, nor were they allowed to make any noise while women were preparing and applying the *dun*. The view was that men’s bodily substances were “matters out of place” that would contaminate or “spoil” the paint by making it “less red” or causing it to “dry up.”²¹ While working with the dye and secluded from the rest of society, women were not allowed to eat and drink, or to have sexual intercourse.²² They also had to speak quietly when working with the *dun* and, out of respect and fear of “spoiling the paint,” they would refer to the dye as *tambuta* or *taabuta*, meaning “red blood.”²³ As the red *dun* must be applied when it is still warm, the association with living blood is apparent.

Various symbolic connections between the red dye and women suggest that the pigment is regarded as female blood. The association between *dun* or *taabuta* and female blood becomes clear when we consider the use of a particular type of cloth in female initiation rituals, which were last performed in the 1990s. In these rituals, young girls received a facial tattoo after which they were clothed in a loincloth soaked in red dye, leaving only a white fringe on the bottom, and shown to the public. Both facial tattoos and red loincloth marked the girls’ transition from young and nonsexually active adolescents (*momorobi* or *ififi*) to sexually active and marriageable girls (*momorobi susuki*). According to John Barker and

Anne Marie Tietjen, the red cloths referred to “the blood let during the initiation,” and to the advent of the girl’s (menstrual) blood, and, as such, to the girl’s fertility and maturity.²⁴ The connection between red dye and female blood—specifically, with women’s reproduction capacities—also exists in the belief that a foetus is created out of a mixture of semen (*voto*) and female blood (*taa*). Both are seen as essential for the conception of a child. For this reason, the ancestral clan designs depicted on tapa cloth can be seen as representing the male part in the conception of clan tapa, while the red dye refers to the female blood that is necessary to complete it, to make the design (and cloth) alive. Thus, through the designing and painting process, a woman “gives birth to” an entity of cloth, thereby reproducing the patrilineal clan and its ancestral origins. This symbolized production of new life connects the ability to design and paint tapa with the character of womanhood. Only strong women—referring to initiated, and thus mature and sexually active, women—were believed to be able to handle the paint. Although men are engaged with the production of barkcloth today, they still avoid processes involving *dun*. Moreover, only women have the prerogative to draw and paint clan designs. As such, the symbolic significance of women reproducing the clan by drawing and painting clan designs on barkcloth continues.

To summarize, the making of tapa defines Maisin women’s identity by the fact that tapa results from women’s activity that is grounded in a particular gendered tradition. The utilisation and transfer of tapa techniques is achieved through the total immersion of the artist in Maisin reality, and this includes pervasive notions of gender. The specifically gendered space involved in making tapa, the arduous beating and pounding of tapa, and women’s posture while making and designing tapa—sitting for hours unsupported with the legs stretched out—are all strongly connected with notions about how women should physically behave and their responsibilities. Making tapa thus defines the female body. As such, the production of tapa can be viewed as a performative act in which identity—and, in particular, gender identity—is constructed. The production of tapa, therefore, not only produces an object that is connected with women’s bodies and their minds (*mon*), the act also produces Maisin women who produce and reenact Maisin culture.

As women’s reproductive capacities are so intertwined with the making of tapa—especially considering the connection between women and the red pigment they use to paint tapa designs—making tapa actually seems to recapitulate people’s ontogenesis, the way they are conceived. As with the creation of children, female-produced substances (the black paint and, especially, the red paint) are essential in the constitution of tapa, whereas male substances are often

regarded as dangerous in their capacity to either weaken the new-born child (by having sexual intercourse with the nursing mother), or spoil the paint used to make the designs. In particular, the creation of clan designs—and, as such, patrilineal clan identity—depends upon women. This is striking, as both scholars and local people generally believe that Melanesian women do not produce the important symbols of their community, as this is seen as the prerogative of men.²⁵ The manufacturing of tapa also engenders people, both in terms of creation and identity. However, the simultaneous engendering of tapa and people does not imply that the gender identity of both object and subject is fixed. When used and worn by specific people in specific contexts, tapa is imbued with other identities that gain new and other significances through performance.

Cloth as a Gendered Embodied Performance

Clothing transforms the body through mediating relations: between divinities and humans, and between social actors and groups. These changes in sight, physiology, and status are activated and expanded by performance, resulting in new or enhanced forms of presence and identity. Gender plays a special role in these performances of cloth and the clothed body.

Although to a lesser extent than in the past, Maisin women's lower bodies are still covered up and their movements restricted. Whereas men are allowed to wear shorts or swim nude, women must always hold their skirts close to their bodies, even if they are among other women. Whether they are bathing, canoeing, working in the garden, or sitting, their skirts must always cover their private parts and legs. When getting up, they must make sure their legs, and especially their thighs, are not visible. When leaving a group of people, they have to bend down as women cannot tower over men or walk over their legs. This is considered disrespectful, and also dangerous, since touching a man with one's *embobi* might make him weak or even sick. In the past, it was believed that a man would not be able to outrun enemy spears after having been in contact with women's skirts. As with male substances (semen) thought to spoil the red dye used in painting tapa, female substances (vaginal fluids) are regarded as what Mary Douglas called "matters out of place."²⁶ Dangerous when not controlled, these substances need to be contained by tapa, while at the same time, these same substances saturate the cloth, so to speak, with female sexuality.

The intimate physical and symbolic relationship between tapa, red dye, gender, and sexuality elucidates how clothing can be regarded as an embodied

performance of belief. For the Maisin, these beliefs concern the cosmological order between the ancestors and the living, between men and women, and between the individual and the social. As such, clothing embodies a whole set of beliefs that are part of what constitutes and forms Maisin social and cosmological lives. These beliefs are not only expressed and regenerated in daily practices, but also in ceremonial performances.



Figure 4. Maisin dancers performing at a church festival in Tufi, 2001. Photograph courtesy of A. Hermkens

The performance of cloth and the clothed body brings about an experiential dimension to both wearer and viewer.²⁷ For example, during the Gisaro ceremony among the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, dancers adorned with paint, feathers, ornaments, cloth, and leaves evoke emotional outbursts from their hosts. The dancers transcend time and place as they address, through dances and songs, their hosts' deceased relatives and land. By means of their clothing, the dancers themselves have transformed from ordinary men into figures of splendour, beauty, and pathos.²⁸ Among the Maisin, the experiential dimension of cloth for both viewer and wearer comes to the fore in church festivals and life-cycle rituals. At church festivals, religiosity, ancestral descent, gender, and sexuality are

expressed through people's clothing. Male and female dancers dress up in their traditional clan regalia to communicate their affiliation with and dedication to the Anglican Church. At the same time, dancers not only enact their clan ancestors at the time of creation, they become the ancestors through the particular clothing they wear. Moreover, the ways male and female bodies move and interact reveal that notions of gender behaviour, aesthetics, and sexuality are equally expressed and embodied (Fig. 4).²⁹

This performance of gender and other forms of identity has led some scholars to conclude that gender in Melanesian societies is just a performance.³⁰ Because in various places across Melanesia, identities are applied to and stripped from the body during ceremonies and other performances, gender is, in their opinion, something that can be changed, and as such, gender is not appropriated and reenacted upon, but rather a staged role that may change according to the context of performance. I would argue that, although among the Maisin, identities such as clan are effectively changed and performed during the course of a person's lifetime, gender identity is rather fixed. The scripting of the body and the self through discursive and nondiscursive practices is not only sex-specific, it is forceful. Gender is not just a role that can be discarded; it is appropriated, embodied, and reenacted through things such as tapa, which is grounded in a specific gendered setting.

Elsewhere, I have shown how tapa is connected with each phase of life, accompanying people from birth till death.³¹ Among the Maisin, the ritual undressing, neglect, mutilation, isolation, and physical labour of the body strips it from its previous identity, while the subsequent clothing of the body gives it a new social identity. At the same time, the individual's transition is part of the life cycle of society itself, in which social relations and relations between the living and the dead need to be established due to birth and marriage and closed due to death. In a Maisin person's life cycle, it is in particular the exchange and wearing of tapa cloth that intensifies sociality, and, in the end, terminates it. Thus, the skin-like properties of cloth have a dual quality in their ability to enhance, deepen, and transform both individual and collective identities, as well as relationships between living people and between the living and the dead.³²

Maisin practices of decorating the body both define and express notions of personhood and self. In fact, the body is used as a surface upon which clan identity is inscribed—alongside gender identity and selfhood—through tattoos, ornaments, and specific types of tapa. Life-cycle rituals entail the decoration of the body by others, who thereby materially construct a new social identity. In contrast, in church festivities, the body is decorated by oneself, revealing dominant

ideas about beauty and attractiveness. Additionally, women's choices for particular tapa reveals their relationships and how they use their bodies to identify themselves with either their husbands' and/or their fathers' clans, thereby empowering one of these patrilineal clans. In all of these contexts, the adornment of clan tapa on the body surface plays a crucial role. It signals the ceremonial transition of individual identity when applied by others, while in contexts of self-decoration the inner self is "displayed" on the outside, revealing gender, clan, and even tribal identity. In both practices, the person and their transitions are constituted by the matching paraphernalia.

The previous shows that tapa interacts with the body in such a way that gender, and other differences, are created. Even though the things involved, like tapa, appear to be static, this is a dynamic process and identity itself is fluid and changeable. Moreover, as Marilyn Strathern argues, people are constructed from the vantage points of the relationships that constitute them.³³ This implies that personhood is distributed. It depends upon relationships, but also on objects located in and on the body, as well as elsewhere in the material world. The clan identity of a Maisin man is not exclusively constructed by the fact that he actually wears the clan tapa. The relationships that he and his clan members are engaged in, as well as the ancestral claims on land, imbue his tapa—and his wearing of it—with significance and power.

Thus, things like tapa that surround people and are applied to their bodies are not external; they are interwoven with their identities.³⁴ Within the dynamics of subject formation, identities are mediated and defined through these material structures. As such, the body is not only moulded and created in conceptual and discursive practices, but also, and perhaps most strongly, in and through physical materialities and non-discursive practices.

Gendered Objects

The distinction between people and things is often based on the Western notion that things exist outside the realm of human life, which is, according to French philosopher Bruno Latour, false.³⁵ Likewise, Strathern claims that in Papua New Guinea things do not exist outside peoples' lives. Distinctions exist between persons, but not so much between persons and things.³⁶ Her line of argument is that objects such as tapa "do not reify society or culture, they reify capacities contained in person/relations."³⁷ These social relations are made manifest through action.³⁸ Among the Maisin, relationships are created through the production of things like

tapa, as well as through its use as clothing and decoration, as a gift, and as a commodity.

Since distinctions between individuals are established through relations and, in particular, the positions they occupy in relation to one another (e.g., male and female), and objects play a paramount role in these relationships, things can be considered as personified objects.³⁹ These objects define personhood because they are separated from the self,⁴⁰ or because they are inseparable and intertwined with particular human bodies. Among the Maisin, the removal of regalia such as clan tapa in the context of Christianisation, marriage, and mourning denotes the removal of a particular identity, while the application of new regalia visualizes the “transformation” into another identity. The tattoos that are traditionally applied on girls’ faces exemplify how things can be inseparable from the human (female) body and its constitution.

Objects including tapa are interwoven with peoples’ lives and thereby “marked for gender and age and as such instrumental in achieving and sustaining relationships as well as personal identities.”⁴¹ Since these values or identities are not stable, the significance of objects may also change. Things are dynamic entities: their meanings change for the participants in different contexts, depending on the specific values that come into play. This implies that “the meaning of things” not only resides in the object. Objects can therefore *not* be read like texts. They must be contextualized and reconfigured within performances and networks of people and things.

The contextualisation and reconfiguration of the various political, ritual, and other instances in which tapa is used shows us how various identities are expressed and defined through tapa. However, in all contexts, it seems that tapa embodies various dialogues, but in particular those that take place between men and women. It therefore seems that both gender values as well as the social gender order is contained in the manufacture and use of tapa. On this basis, one can argue that things like tapa are “vehicles through which social value is expressed.”⁴²

Tapa affects the properties of people and, as a consequence, their actions. The production of tapa simultaneously produces women’s bodies, re-enacting notions of gender behaviour and gender definitions, while the wearing of clan tapa does not just represent the clan ancestors; it embodies them. In addition, the giving of clan tapa and its application to peoples’ bodies in puberty rites, marriage, and mourning ceremonies signals the transformation of an individual’s social identity. But, in the context of commercialisation, tapa marks tribal—Maisin—identity. As such, tapa contains as well as constitutes many other sorts of identities, which are only revealed in specific contexts of production and use.

In daily performances, the making and wearing of tapa is related to “a complex of practices and rituals involving food taboos, birthing and infant care practices and gender etiquette.”⁴³ Maisin values regarding gender identity and gender relations as embodied in cloth and clothing signify how the Maisin conceptualise the order and hierarchical nature of the relationships between men and women. Each time women make and wear loincloths these beliefs and values are regenerated, as well as internalized and embodied. At the same time, these performances allow for interaction and re-interpretation. This dynamic may be seen in the fact that nowadays children are allowed to sit with their mothers while they are making red dye and applying the paint, and men are able to witness the entire process. In the past, this was believed to have grave spiritual consequences, causing misfortune or sickness to those who transgressed the sacred rules and boundaries.

The embodied (material) performance of gender is especially salient in life-cycle rituals. Birth, puberty, marriage, mourning, and death are considered as crises and major transformations in a person’s life cycle. Life-cycle rituals guide people through these often-difficult transitions and inform them about the cause and direction of their lives. By being performed, life-cycle rituals transform self and experience in a regenerative manner and reproduce, as well as reinterpret, the existing social and cosmological order.

Returning to the statement “Maisin is tapa,” this performative speech act depends on a densely woven web of social relations and things that themselves render it intelligible and believable. The phrase “Maisin is tapa” gains significance through the social contexts of the object’s production and use. In a similar manner, just as the wearing of wedding rings materializes and expresses a performative speech-act that has taken place, tapa *is* a series of materialized performative acts. It dynamically defines gender, personhood, and clan and tribal identity in a range of contexts. In other words, indeed, Maisin *is* tapa.

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Notes

¹ Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Anna-Karina Hermkens, “Women’s Wealth and Moral Economies among the Maisin in Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea,” in *Sinuous Objects: Women’s Wealth in the Contemporary Pacific*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens and Katherine Lepani (Canberra: ANU E-Press 2017), 91–124.

² Jane Schneider, “Cloth and Clothing,” in *The Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006), 204.

³ Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher, “Introduction,” in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford: Berg publishers, 1992), 1–7; Webb Keane, “Subjects and Objects: An Introduction,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006), 198.

⁴ Hildi Hendrickson, ed., *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher, eds., *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1992); Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

⁵ Karen Tranberg Hansen, “The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 373.

⁶ Lissant Bolton, *Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women's Kastom in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 122.

⁷ David Morgan, "The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–17.

⁸ Anna-Karina Hermkens, "Church Festivals and the Visualization of Identity in Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea," *Visual Anthropology* 20, no. 5 (2007): 347–64; Anna-Karina Hermkens, "The Gendered Performance of Cloth, Ritual and Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (London: Routledge, 2010), 231–46.

⁹ Barnes and Eicher, "Introduction."

¹⁰ Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 221.

¹¹ See, for example: John Liep, "Gift Exchange and the Construction of Identity," in *Culture and History in the Pacific*, ed. Jukka Siikala, *Transactions of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 27 (1990), 178; Roger Keesing, "Review: M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*," *Pacific Studies*, 15, no. 1 (1992): 130–31; Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, "Introduction: Money and the Morality of Exchange," in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, ed. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–32.

¹² Chris Gosden, "Showing Some Emotion: Distributed Personhood and Assemblages" (lecture, 24th Annual Meeting of the Theoretical Archaeology Group School of Art History & Archaeology, Manchester University, December 21–23, 2002).

¹³ Bruce Knauft, *From Primitive to Post-colonial in Melanesia and Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 27.

¹⁴ Hermkens, "Women's Wealth and Moral Economies."

¹⁵ If the bark is left too long before beating, it will dry out and, consequently, will have to be soaked for several hours before beating.

¹⁶ Wendy Choulai and Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris, "Women and the Fibre arts of Papua New Guinea," in *Art and Performance in Oceania*, ed. Barry Craig, Bernie Kernot, and Christopher Anderson (Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, 1999), 213.

¹⁷ As part of my PhD research, I made an inventory of Maisin barkcloth in both European and Australian museums. Based on this study, it became clear that in the past Maisin women predominantly made 4-panel designs on women's cloth (*embobi*) and 6-panel designs and men's cloth (*koefi*). Anna-Karina Hermkens, *Engendering Objects: Dynamics of Barkcloth and Gender among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2013).

¹⁸ John Barker, *Ancestral Lines. The Maisin of Papua New Guinea and the Fate of the Rainforest* (Canada: Broadview Press, 2008); John Barker, "Cheerful Pragmatists: Anglican Missionaries among the Maisin of Collingwood Bay, Northeastern Papua, 1898-1920," *Journal of Pacific History*, 22, no. 2 (1987), 66-81.

- ¹⁹ Anna-Karina Hermkens, “The Materiality of Missionization in Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea,” in *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. H. Choi and M. Jolly (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 349–80.
- ²⁰ Jehanne Teilhet, “The Role of Women Artists in Polynesia and Melanesia,” in *Art and Artists of Oceania*, ed. S. M. Mead and B. Kernot (Auckland: The Dunmore Press, 1983), 49.
- ²¹ On “matters out of place,” see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 50.
- ²² Barker, *Ancestral Lines*, 114.
- ²³ *Taa* means “blood,” and *buta* is another word for *mu*, which means “red” or “ripe.”
- ²⁴ John Barker and Anne Marie Tietjen, “Women's Facial Tattooing among the Maisin of Oro Province, Papua New Guinea: The Changing Significance of an Ancient Custom,” *Oceania* 60, no. 3 (1990): 224.
- ²⁵ Teilhet, “The Role of Women Artists in Polynesia and Melanesia,” 47.
- ²⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50.
- ²⁷ Hansen, “The World in Dress,” 373.
- ²⁸ Edward, L. Schieffelin, *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 21–5.
- ²⁹ Hermkens, “Church Festivals and the Visualization of Identity.”
- ³⁰ Cecilia Busby, “Permeable and Partible Persons: Gender and Body in South India and Melanesia,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3 (1997): 272; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- ³¹ Anna-Karina Hermkens, “Stretching the Cloth: Hybrid Meanings, Styles, and Gender Structures in Maisin Barkcloth,” *Pacific Arts* 3–5 (2007): 104–14; Anna-Karina Hermkens, “Barkcloth as Permeable and Perishable Substance in Melanesian Ontologies,” *Pacific Arts* 18–19 (2018–19): 9–21; Anna-Karina Hermkens, “Mediations of Cloth: Tapa and Personhood among the Maisin in PNG,” *Oceania* 85, no. 1 (2015): 10–23; Hermkens, *Engendering Objects*.
- ³² Hansen, *The World in Dress*, 372.
- ³³ Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 273.
- ³⁴ Chris Gosden, *Social Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 14.
- ³⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 142.
- ³⁶ Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 181.
- ³⁷ Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 14.
- ³⁸ Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 16.
- ³⁹ Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 16.
- ⁴⁰ For example, Stéphane Breton, “The Spectacle of Things: A Melanesian Perspective on the Person and the Self,” in *People and Things: Social Mediation in Oceania*,

ed. Bernard Juillerat and Monique Jeudy-Ballini (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 124.

⁴¹ Tim Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Life-styles* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 29.

⁴² Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World*, 24. See also Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 4.

⁴³ Barker, *Ancestral Lines*, 114.