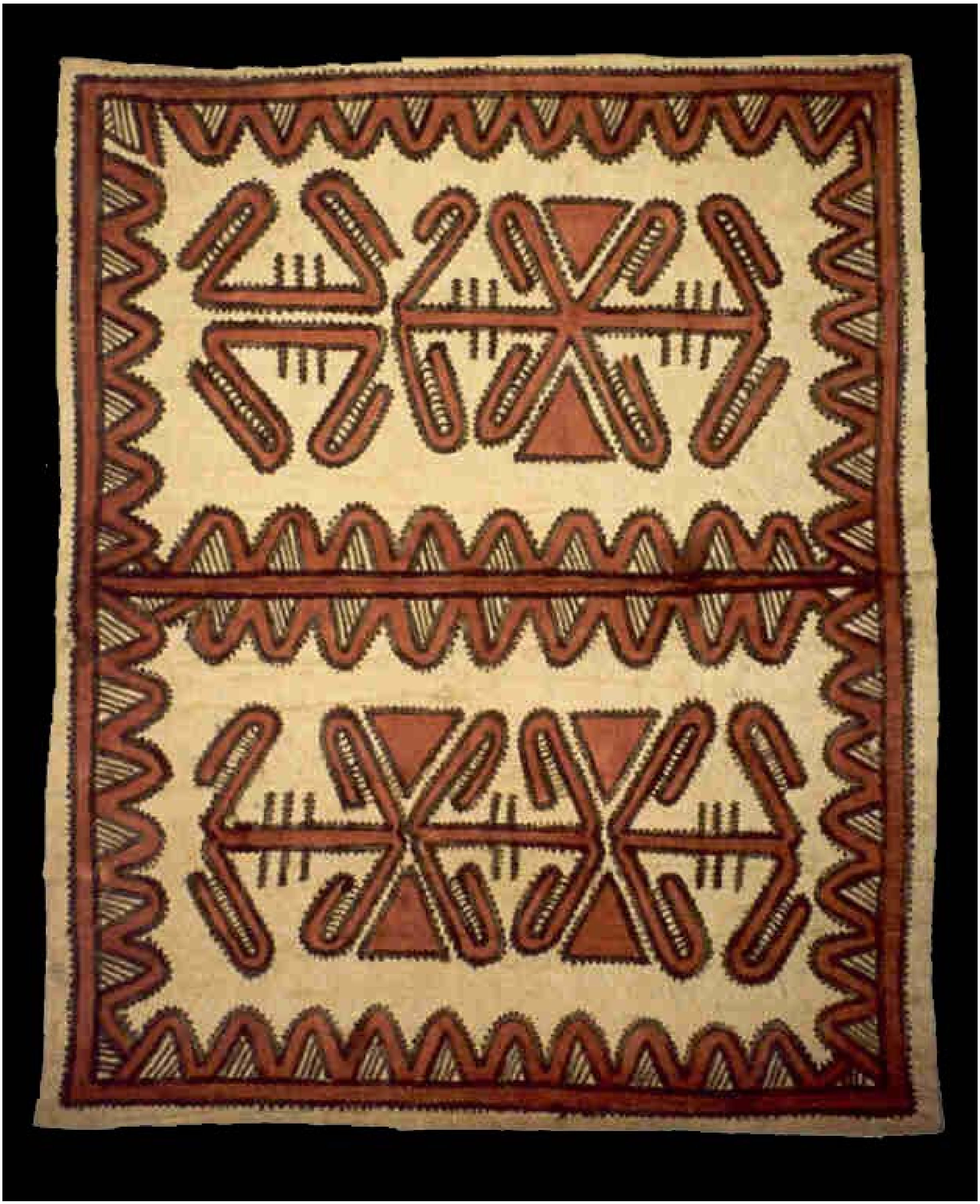
PAINTING THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

BARKCLOTH OF THE MAISIN PEOPLE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

© Anna-Karina Hermkens[1]



RMV 6009-22.

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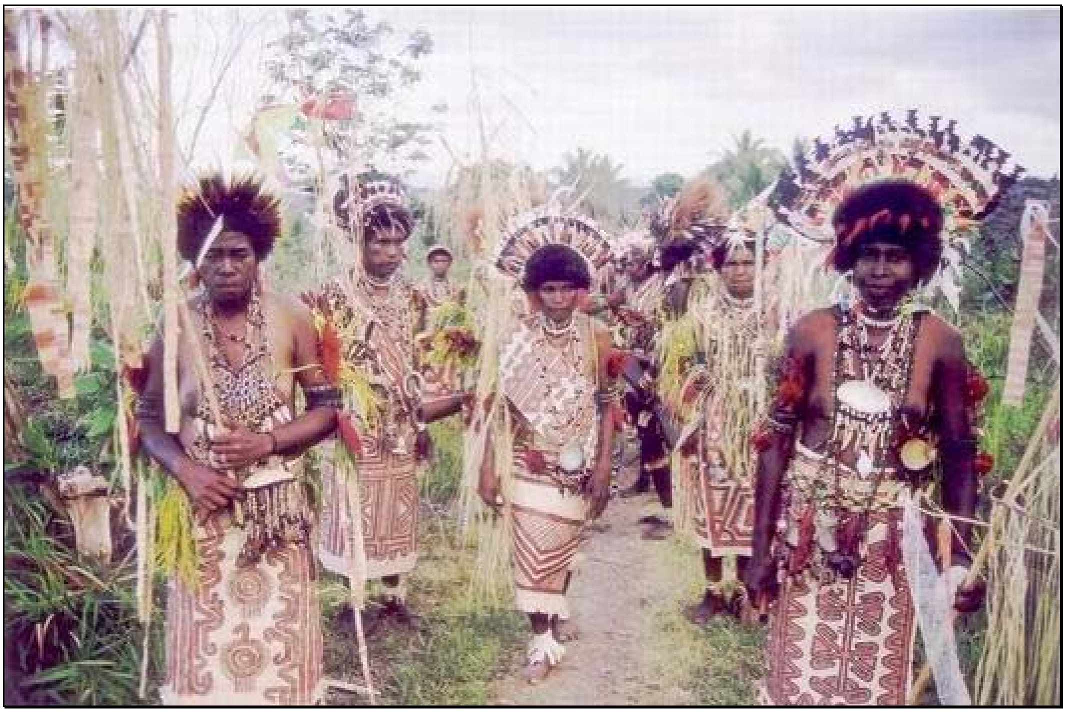
Introduction

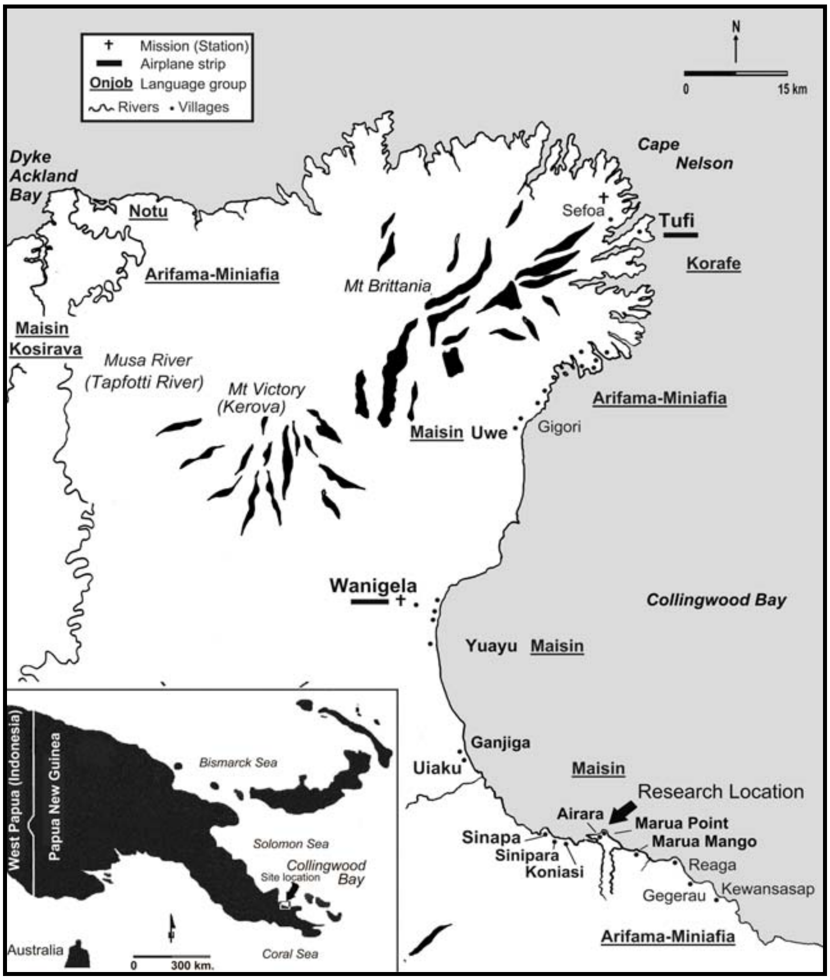
For the Maisin people, living along the coast of Collingwood Bay (Oro Province in Papua New Guinea), barkcloth, or *tapa* as it is locally called, is important. This importance is exemplified by the phrase “Maisin is tapa”, which was often said as I tried to find my way through the meanings of barkcloth among the Maisin. And indeed, especially in the village of Airara where I did my research, it was evident that tapa is not just a traditional garment; it provides a link with the past and provides dreams for the future.



Maisin women wearing skirts and decorations made from barkcloth at a Church festival held in Sefoa in 2001.

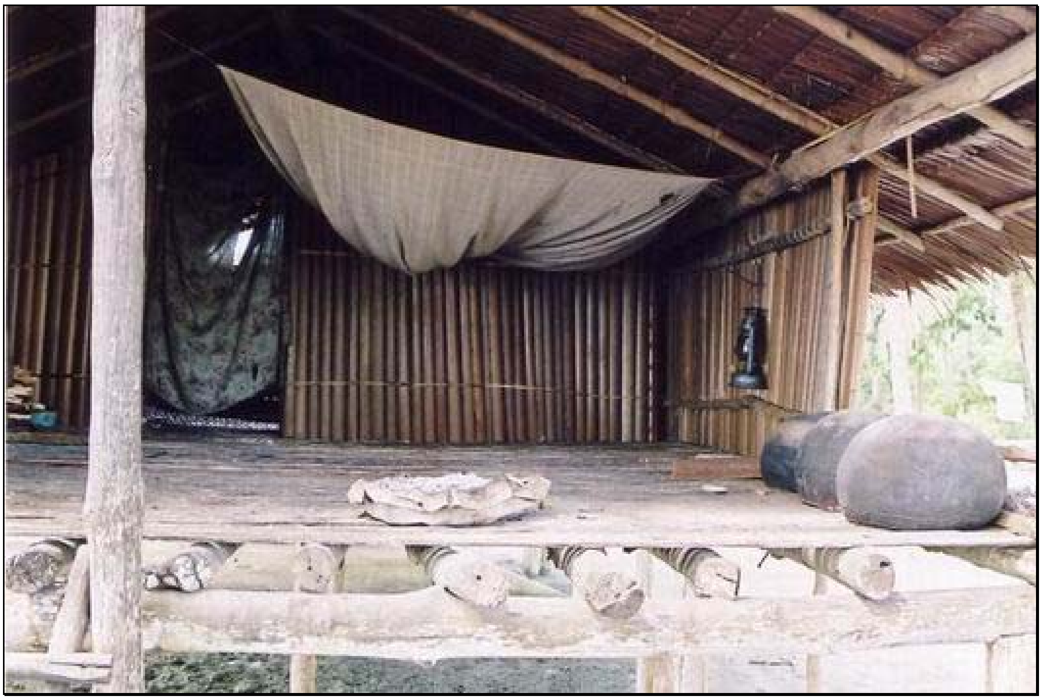
I. Maisin setting

Maisin live in 36 clans, which are dispersed over ten villages situated along the southern and central shores of Collingwood Bay.[2] Their sago-leaf roof thatched houses are located on small stretches of beach between the Solomon Sea and the Owen Stanley Range, which encompasses amongst others Mount Suckling (3676 metres) and a dormant volcano Mount Victory (1891 metres).


Mission (Station)
Airplane strip
Onjob Language group
Rivers
Villages
N
0
15 km
Dyke Ackland Bay
Notu
Arifama-Miniafia
Maisin Kosirava
Musa River (Tapfotti River)
Mt Victory (Kerova)
Mt Brittania
Cape Nelson
Sefoa
Tufi
Korafe
Arifama-Miniafia
Maisin Uwe
Gigori
Wanigela
Collingwood Bay
Yuayu Maisin
Ganjiga
Uiaku
Maisin
Research Location
Airara
Marua Point
Marua Mango
Sinapa
Sinipara
Koniasi
Reaga
Gegerau
Kewansasap
Arifama-Miniafia
West Papua (Indonesia)
Papua New Guinea
Bismarck Sea
Solomon Sea
Collingwood Bay
Site location
Australia
Coral Sea
0
300 km.

Map 1. Collingwood Bay with Maisin, Wanigela, Miniafia and Korafe villages.

The Maisin village of Airara with sago-leaf roof topped houses.



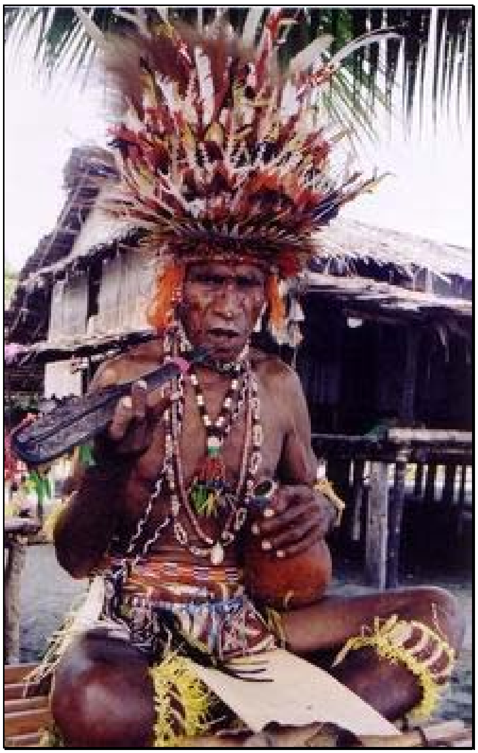
Porch of a small Maisin house, showing the clay-pots that are used for ceremonial cooking (to the right).
Maisin mainly live outside and use the interior of their houses for sleeping only.

Today, about 1200 Maisin people live in Collingwood Bay in Oro Province,[3] although local populations rise and fall due to the movement of people between the villages and towns, such as Alotau and Port Moresby. People's livelihood is mainly based upon subsistence farming – using slash and burn techniques - fishing, and hunting. Additional goods, such as clothes, rice, batteries and money, are mainly obtained through relatives living in towns, who regularly send remittances home to the villages. Other ways of making some money are, for example, through the selling of garden produce on the local markets, growing and selling vanilla and through the selling of decorated barkcloth.

Carrying foodstuff from the gardens in a large string bag. Almost everyday, women walk up to their gardens, which are located at a distance of some two hours walking from the village, to weed and harvest foodstuff such as taro and sweet potatoes, which, in addition to bananas, fish and sometimes pork, make up the main diet of the Maisin people.

Maisin clans and history

Maisin people distinguish themselves from other groups living in Collingwood Bay on the basis of their linguistic and ancestral affiliation. Ideologically, Maisin are organised on the basis of patrilineal descent and a preference for patrilocal residence in clans (*iyon*). This implies that inheritance is organised along male lines, and girls will marry and, ideally, live in their partner's clan[4]. Each clan is either a *Sabu* (warrior), or a *Kawo* (peace-making) clan.



A Maisin 'chief' (member of a *Kawo* - peacemaker - clan), dressed up in his full regalia. Only members of *Kawo* clans are entitled to wear chicken feathers and use the large lime-stick and lime container.

Maisin people have not always lived in their current settlements on the beach. It took several decades, long journeys and harsh fighting before Maisin ancestors settled down on the coast of Collingwood Bay. While one group of Maisin, the Kosira (or Kosirava) people stayed in their small settlements within the swamps of the Musa basin[5], another group decided to travel down to the shores of Collingwood Bay. Departing from their place of origin, Lower Musa River, these Maisin clans travelled in pairs down to the sea.

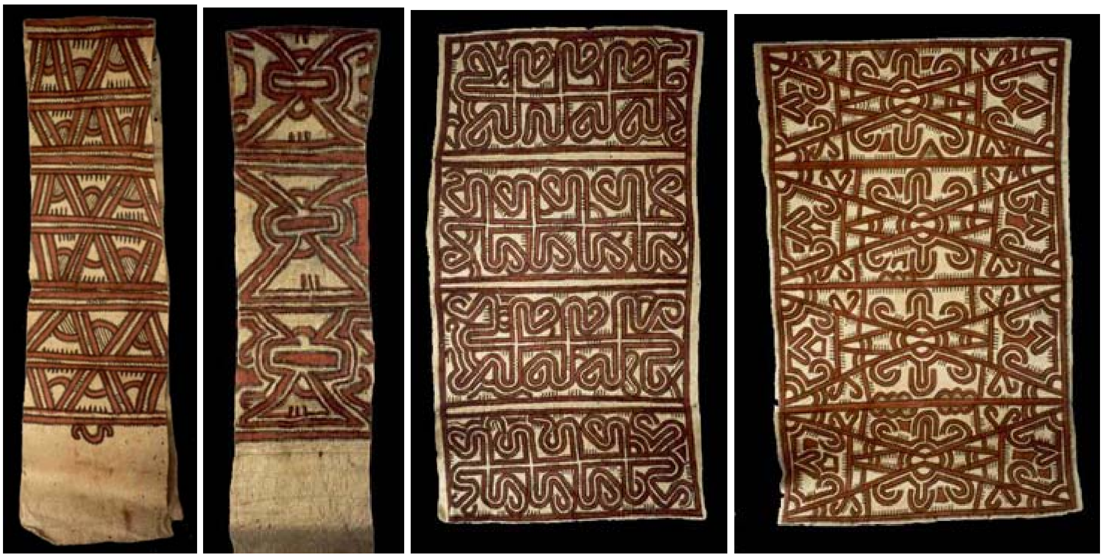
Travelling by outrigger canoe in Collingwood Bay. Although motorised dinghies are also used, sailing and paddling by outrigger canoes is, next to walking, the most frequently used way of transport.

Maisin people were not the only ones who made this kind of journey. Miniafia and Korafe speaking people were on the move as well, and on some occasions the three tribes met, fought, became friends, lived together, split up again and travelled further.

During these travels, Maisin, as well as the other groups claimed various sorts of animals, geographical features and, most important, land. These claims are embedded in the mythical histories and clan emblems of each clan. The Maisin clans show their identity and affiliations with others through these collective memories represented by ancestral and totemic names, songs, dances, stories and inherited clan emblems, such as necklaces and feathers, and clan designs that are painted on barkcloth. But who makes these pieces of barkcloth and who draws these designs?

II. Making barkcloth: a woman's job

People from Airara village grow the trees of which barkcloth is made predominantly in the gardens, which are some two hours walking distance from the village. Plots of these mulberry trees, called *wuwusi*, are planted between the crops. They are mainly planted and maintained by women, although some men help their wives in planting the seedlings. But women decide when the *wuwusi* are mature enough to be harvested and they turn the barks of these trees into loincloths for both women and men. The women's skirts are called *embobi* and the male loincloths are referred to as *koefi*.

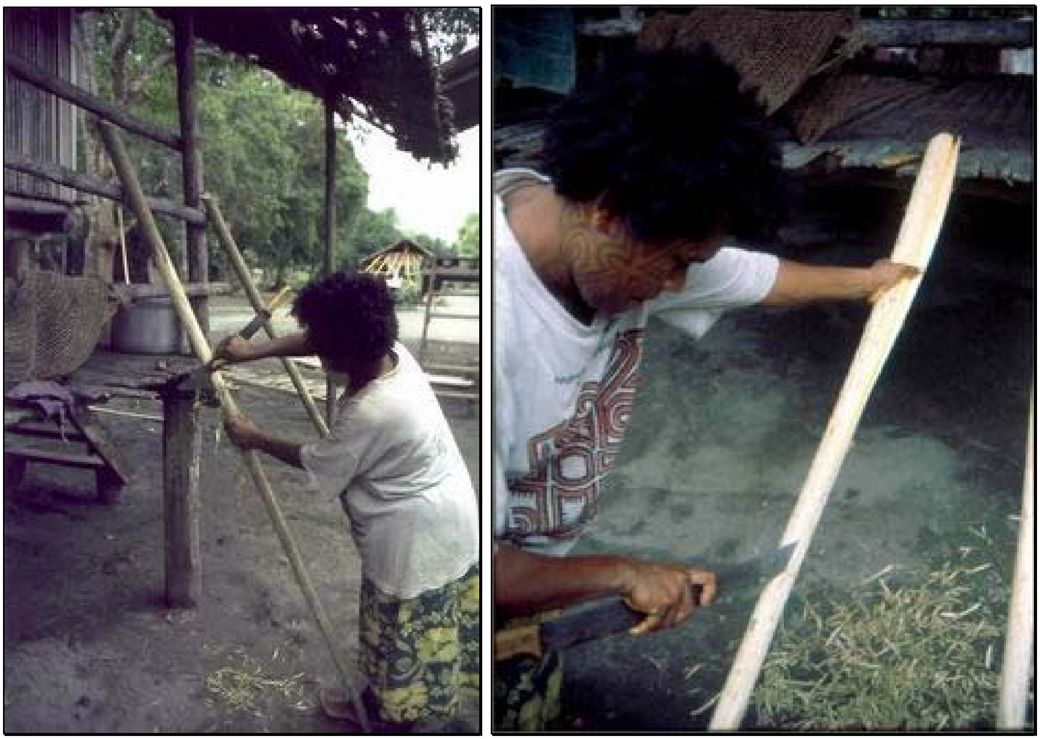


Two *koefi* (left, RMV 6009-5,7) and two *embobi* (right, RMV 6009-48, 49).

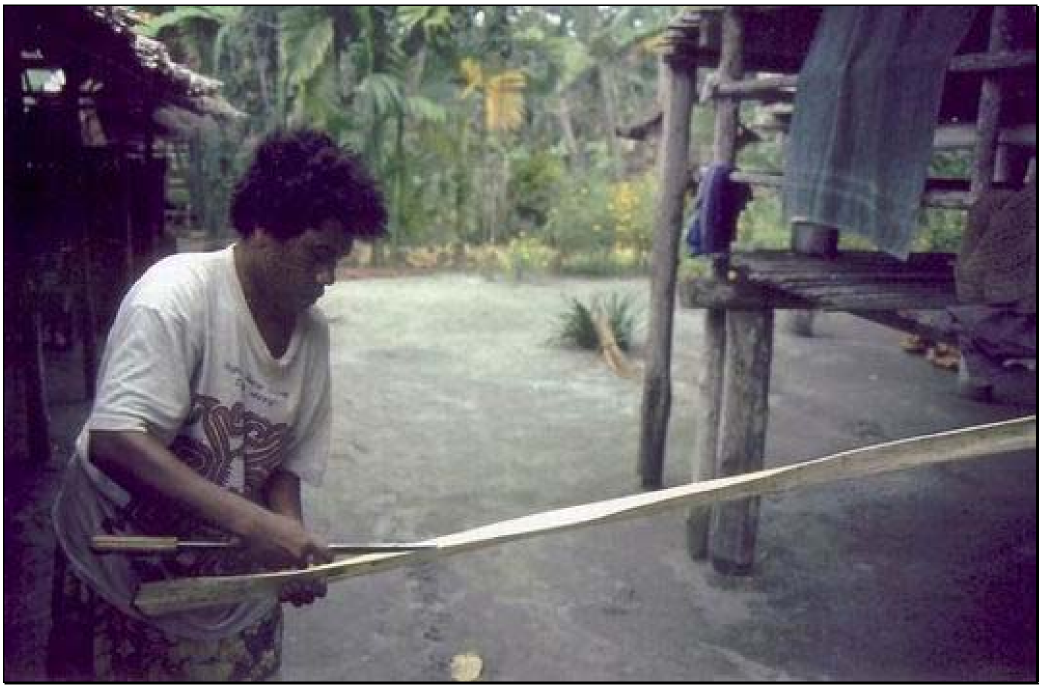
The size of the tree determines the type of cloth - a female or male cloth - one can make. Short and thick *wuwusi* are used for making the quadrangulary shaped *embobi*, while taller and thinner *wuwusi* are kept for manufacturing the long and narrow *koefi*. Depending on the type of barkcloth that is needed, the *wuwusi* is cut when its diameter measures some 5 or more centimetres, and then carried back to the village or to the garden house.

Cutting a *wuwusi*, a barkcloth tree in the food gardens.

Every Airara woman has her own preferred time and space to perform the various stages involved in the manufacturing of barkcloth. These are first, the scraping of the outer-bark loosening it from its wooden core and subsequently beating and pounding the barkcloth. In a following stage the barkcloth is designed, and in the final stage parts of the design are painted red.
Every stage demands its own time and sequence, and a woman will have to balance her time and activities to be able to work on barkcloth, since she has to make sure enough food is present in the house to be able to stay at home. As such, it will generally take several weeks and sometimes even months before a piece of barkcloth is completely finished.



Monica is scraping off the outer bark (left) and making a lengthwise incision to loosen the bark from its wooden core.

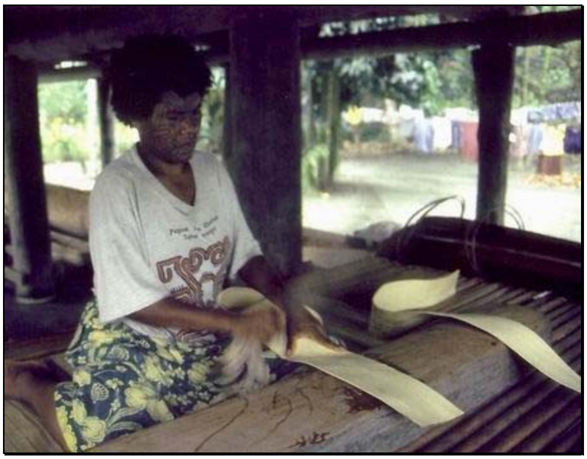


Removing the bark from the wooden core.

After the bark is carefully scraped and peeled off from its wooden core by making a lengthwise incision in the bark, the bark is ready to be processed into a thin and pliable piece of paper-like cloth.

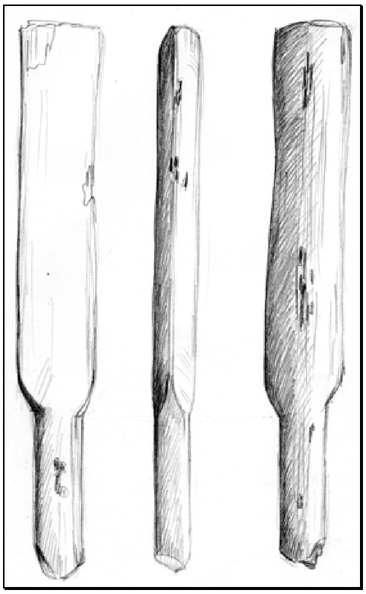
Beating the bark

In general, women will start with the arduous beating of the bark as soon as it has been removed from the tree-trunk. If the bark is left too long, it will dry out and consequently has to be soaked for several hours before beating it. Beating and pounding bark is a strenuous process that is performed by a single woman.
Sitting with her legs folded underneath her, she will single-handedly beat and subsequently pound the scraped bark on a heavy wooden log, called *fo*. This position, which is maintained for several hours, poses considerable strain on women's bodies and especially their backs. In addition women need considerable strength to beat the barkcloth.

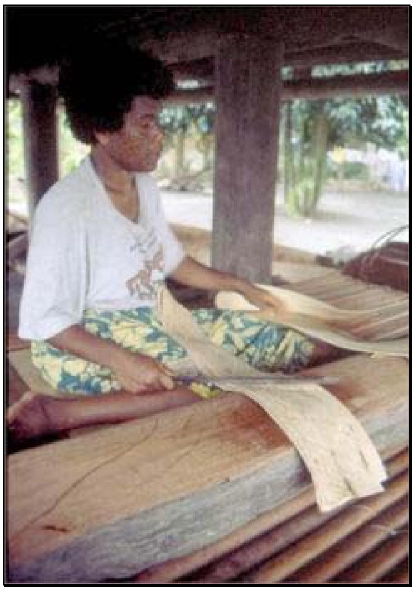


Monica is beating the bark with a metal beater on a heavy wooden log, called *fo*.

Beating barkcloth on the wooden log makes a very distinct sound and one can hear from far distances the rhythmic sound of women making barkcloth.
The beating of barkcloth involves two phases that each call for a specific kind of mallet. Maisin women preferable beat the stiff bark with a thin metal object, like the blunt side of a large knife or some other metal tool. Only a few women still possess the small and narrow wooden mallets called *fisiga*. Fisiga are seldom used today since women prefer the heavier and sharper edges of the metal beaters as this facilitates the spreading of the coarse bark fibres.

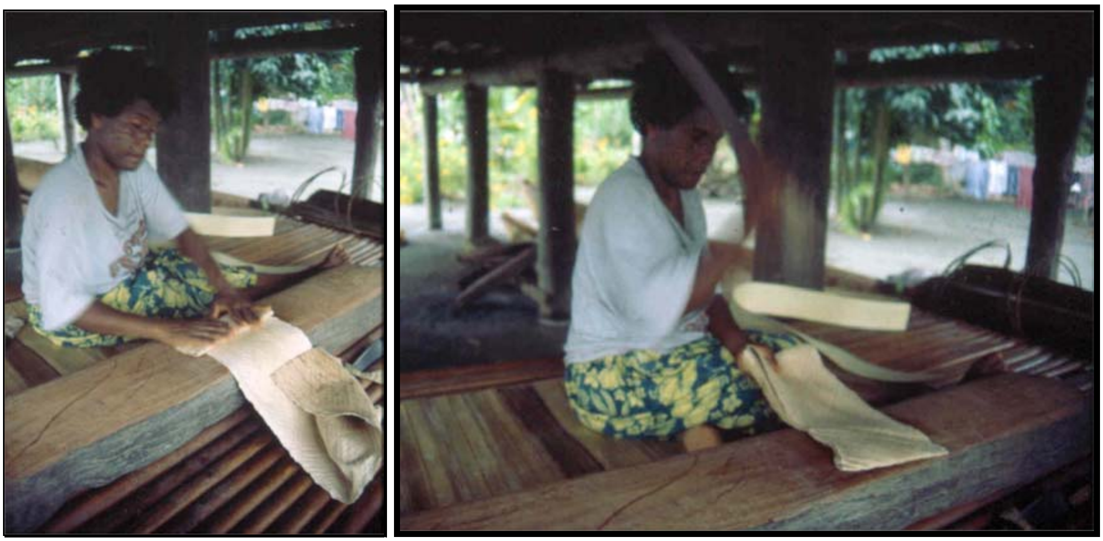


Drawing 1. *Fisiga* (43 cm).



A metal beater is used to beat the bark diagonally.

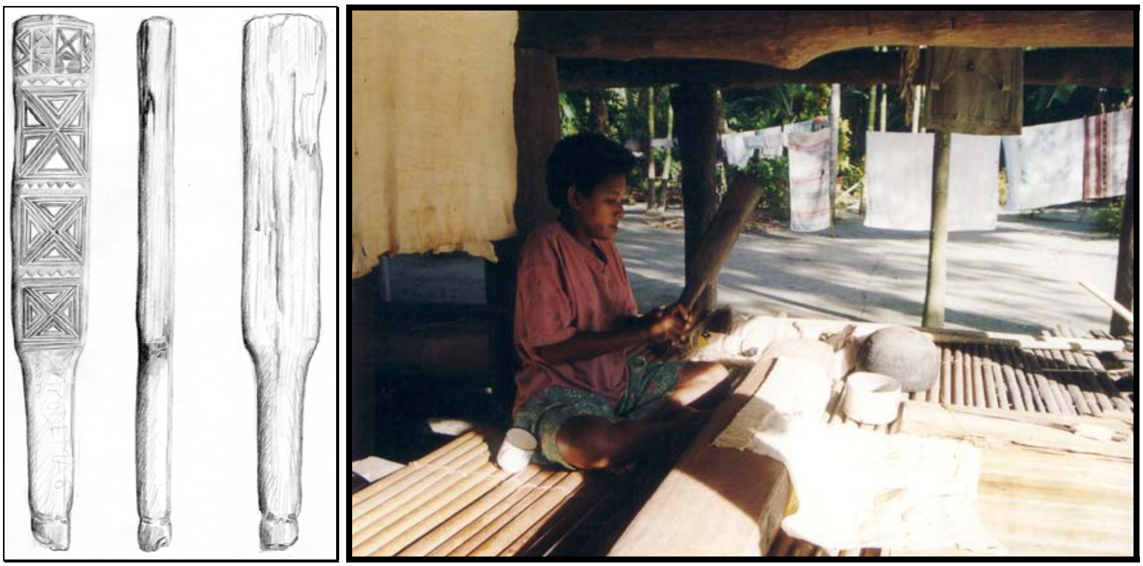
Both the inside and outside of the bark are beaten diagonally in order to make sure the fibres are crosscutting each other. This is done by repeatedly folding the bark and then continuing the beating process. If the bark is too dry, causing bark-fibres to break off instead of spreading out, women will sprinkle the bark with water.



Folding the beaten bark before continuing the beating process (left). Monica continues the beating of the folded bark.

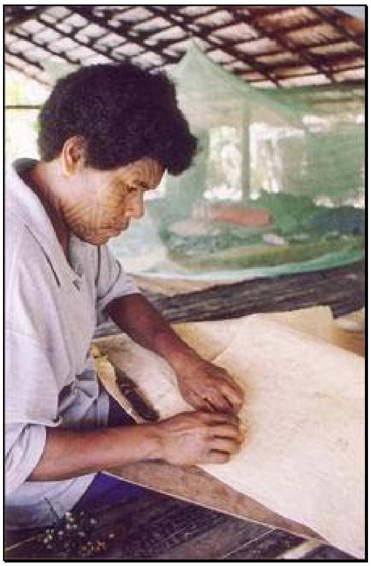
Pounding the bark into cloth

As soon as the bark has been sufficiently flattened and smoothened, the bark is pounded by using the side-edges of a larger and heavier wooden mallet called *fo*, just like the wooden log on which the barkcloth is beaten. In the recent past, Maisin engraved the wooden mallets with designs, but today women mainly use undecorated mallets.



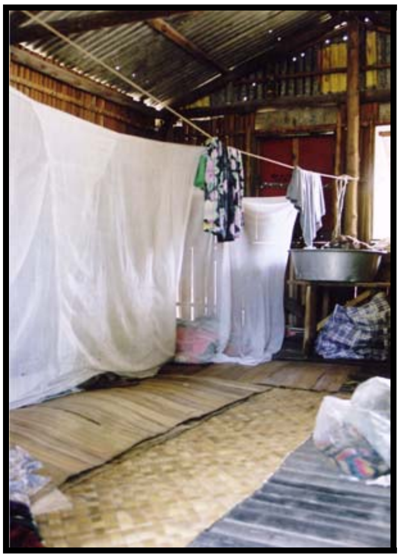
Drawing 2. *Fo* (left, 51cm). Monica's daughter Linda (right, 14 years old) is pounding barkcloth. Since she not yet possesses the strength to pound the cloth with one hand, she uses two hands to lift up the heavy wooden mallet. Behind her a completed piece of barkcloth is hung out to dry.

The pounding of the barkcloth occurs with a different folding technique of the cloth than the initial beating. During the first phase, Maisin women fold the beaten bark in the middle, turning it when beating, thereby beating both the inner and outer side of the bark.
During the second phase in which the larger wooden mallet (*fo*) is used, only the outside of the cloth is beaten upon and the barkcloth is rolled up instead of folded. While pounding the cloth, women start in the middle and work towards the edges.
After finishing one layer, they unroll this layer and continue pounding the next layer that has surfaced. The rolled-up barkcloth is slowly unfolded until the complete outer-surface of the barkcloth has been pounded. This process is repeated until an evenly thin and broad piece of barkcloth has been obtained. As soon as this is done, the barkcloth is hung to dry in the shade after which its edges are cut straight, holes are patched and then the cloth is ready to be enhanced with the typical Maisin designs.



Patching holes in a piece of barkcloth, using the juice of little berries as glue. This practice is related to the commercialisation of barkcloth, accommodating buyers who want to obtain a smooth piece of cloth without any holes. In general, these small holes, which result from the process of beating the bark, are not restored when the cloth is meant for personal use.

But it can take several days or even weeks before a woman finds the time or an occasion to start designing the cloth. In the mean time, the barkcloth is kept between a folded pandanus mat. This mat is slept upon, by which means the wrinkles in the barkcloth are removed and as such 'ironed' during sleep, but this practice also keeps the barkcloth smooth.



Interior of a Maisin house. On the floor to the left lies a folded pandanus mat with various pieces of tapa. Underneath their mosquito nets, Maisin people sleep on these mats.

So women are not only connected with barkcloth through the processes of making it, women's bodies actually straighten and soften the barkcloth by sleeping on it. As one Uiaku woman expressed: by sleeping on it we imbue the tapa with "a little part of ourselves".[6] In a similar manner, each drawing that is applied on the barkcloth contains a part of the woman who designed it, as designing entails a large dose of skill, but especially creativity.

III. Drawing designs on barkcloth

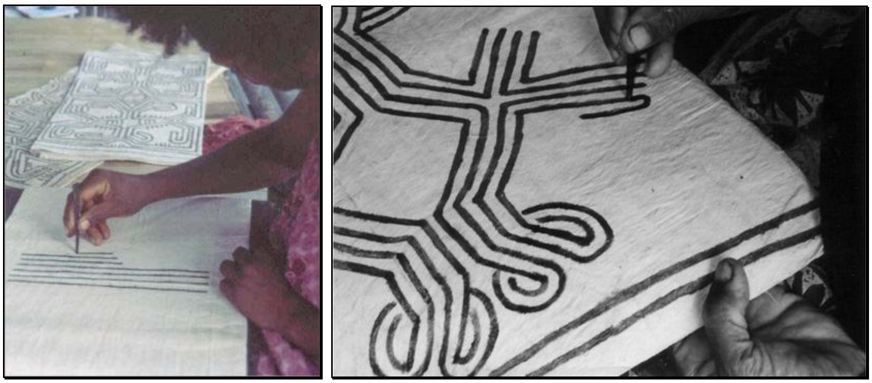
Before a woman starts to draw, a design has to be created. This is primarily done in the head, although women sometimes also draw designs in the sand, testing them out without spoiling valuable barkcloth. For instance, Monica, a 34 year old mother of five children, creates a design in her head and draws the mental design with four fingers on the barkcloth surface. The four fingers stand for the four black lines that will meander and curve parallel to each other, creating three 'veins' of which the central will be left white and the outer two will be filled up with red pigment. The designs are always very lively and dynamic.
All the women I interviewed and witnessed during their work would create a mental picture before starting the design. This implies that women to a certain extent already know in advance what they are going to draw. In addition, women will make up different designs for *embobi* and *koefi*. As *embobi* are rather broad and square shaped, providing a lot of space to draw, the designs depicted on these pieces of barkcloth demand more experience and skill than designs depicted on the narrow and elongated *koefi*.

Drawing black designs

The black designs are drawn with *mi*, a black pigment made from river clay (*yabu mi*) and leaves from a creeper (Latin: *Cucumoya sp.*) called *wayango*. Sometimes burned coconut husk or the ink of an octopus is added. These ingredients are mixed with water and can be kept for quite a long while, the odour of decaying organic material becoming stronger each day.

Louisa, being watched by her second youngest son, adds some clay into a mixture of water and leaves.

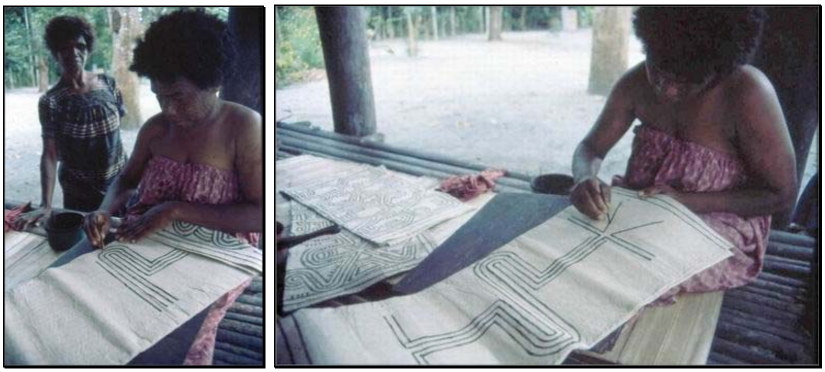
The *mi* is applied with a little stick called *nasa* that is broken off from the dry filament of the white palm, and sharpened to obtain a better drawing point.



Setting up a design with black pigment (*mi*) and a drawing stick (*nasa*). Right: Supporting the drawing hand with one finger.

In general each woman has her own bowl of *mi* and *nasa* sticks that vary in thickness in order to allow her to draw both thin and broader lines. Women will draw the black lines by either supporting their drawing hand with one finger or keeping the hand from resting on the cloth, only letting the *nasa* touching it. Especially the latter method requires a steady hand and not everyone is as skilled as her neighbour. This is something however, that is silently acknowledged but never publicly lived.

Women recognise each other's work and have preferences, but it is said that all women are equally capable of making and designing barkcloth and no hierarchies exist between experienced and 'young' barkcloth designers. Women uncertain of their skills often will turn their work upside down when more experienced barkcloth designers come to have a chat and a look. This behaviour was recognised by both men and women and regarded as a token of respect towards the visiting and more experienced woman. More experienced barkcloth designers will keep on working.



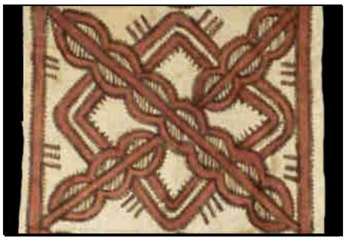
Monica is designing while her neighbour is watching (left) and one of the many stages in drawing a design.

The skill and insight in being able to draw the various stages of each design is, just as the beating of the bark, handed down from one female generation to another.

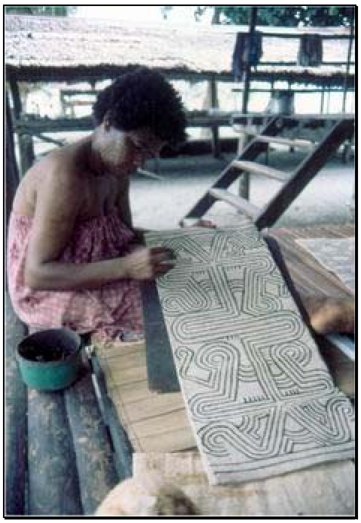
Monica is designing while her daughter Linda is watching her (left). Young girls learn the techniques of beating and designing barkcloth from their mothers or female relatives and by watching, and experimenting a bit on their own, while a female relative, sitting in front of them, is drawing a design on a piece of barkcloth.

Completing the design

After the design is drawn on the cloth, small dots and geometrical figures are applied, making the design complete. Black dots, called *supfifi*, are added with a somewhat smaller *nasa*. They accentuate the parts that are going to be left unpainted, and those lines and spaces that are to be painted red.

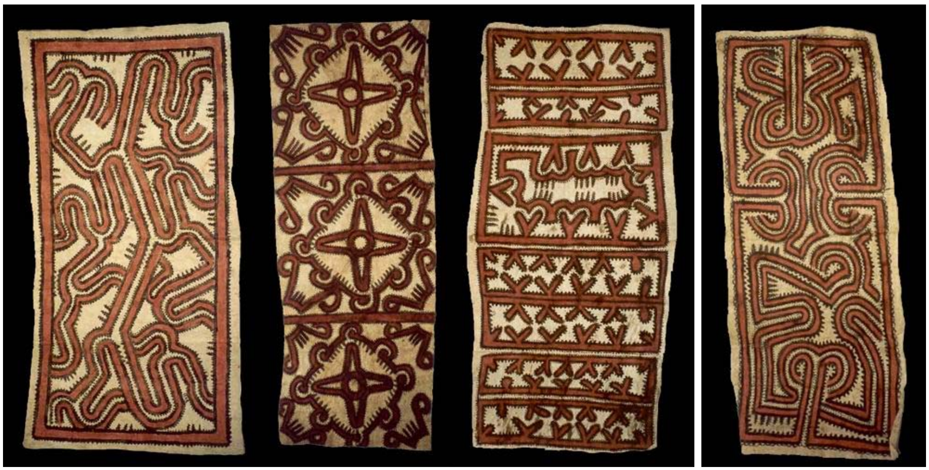


Supfifi (detail from RMV 6009-2)



Completing the design with small geometrical figures (left).

In addition to the *supfifi*, little black geometrical figures, called *sisimbi,* are applied. *Sisimbi* are, for example, little sticks with dots, called *kanè* and little black triangles called *boing*. As some women argued: “without *sisimbi*, a tapa doesn’t look good”.



Examples of *kanè* (left, RMV 6009-9, 38, 47) and of *boing* (RMV 6009-24, right).

If the design is complete, the tapa is hung to dry in the sun.

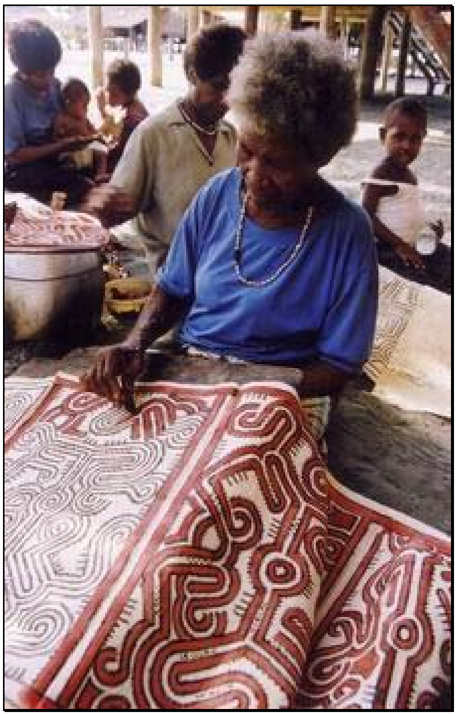
Subsequently it is put between a sleeping mat where it stays until sufficient barkcloth has been designed or an order or other occasion presents itself for which the barkcloth is needed. As soon as this is the case, the final stage of designing *embobi* and *koefi* comes to the fore, the applying of the red pigment *dun*.

IV. Making the barkcloth alive: applying dun

The red pigment that is applied on the barkcloth is called *dun*. *Dun* is made out of three components: the bark of a *Parasponia species* tree, locally called *saman* (= bark), the leaves of a *Fians Subcuneata*, named *dun fara* (*fara* = leaves), and fresh water (*jun*).

In contrast to the black paint, the ingredients for the red paint have to be boiled. The bark and leaves are put in layers in a cooking pot. First the bark, then the leaves, subsequently a layer of small pieces of bark etc. until the pot is filled up. Water is added and a fire is made underneath to boil the mixture for an hour or so. The red pigment is applied with the dried fruit of the pandanus, which is called *imongiti*. In contrast to *mi*, the red paint cannot be preserved. When painting the barkcloth with the red substance, the pot is kept on the fire in order to make sure the pigment is applied while it is hot.

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*. While painting, the women share not only *dun* but also their thoughts and gossips.



Airara women painting their general barkcloth designs, applying the *dun* with *imongiti*, the dried fruit of the pandanus.

Red paint or blood?

In the past, the manufacturing of *dun* as well as the painting with *dun* was ritualised. Both the production and the application of the red paint were bound by rules and taboos.

The red paint was mixed and boiled inside the house in a separate clay pot, which was not to be used for cooking as this would contaminate the food. Little children and men were not allowed to look at it, come near, or even to make any noise. Also the women working with the *dun* had to speak quietly. Furthermore, they were not allowed to eat and drink while handling the red substance and had to refrain from having sexual intercourse.[7] When the women had completed their secret work and the barkcloth was finished, they would hang it outside to dry and thereby exposed their completed work to the other clan and village members.

As long as the dun was inside the house, men were not allowed to enter, only women working on the *dun*, or *tambuta* as it was called during the work with or in reference to the red substance. As such, women were physically secluded from society while painting the barkcloth. Men were secluded from the process because it was feared they would 'spoil the paint'. The idea was that the presence of men would ‘spoil’ the paint by making it 'less red' or 'dry up', and as a consequence men had to be kept away from its production and use, which, as a result, took place in secret.

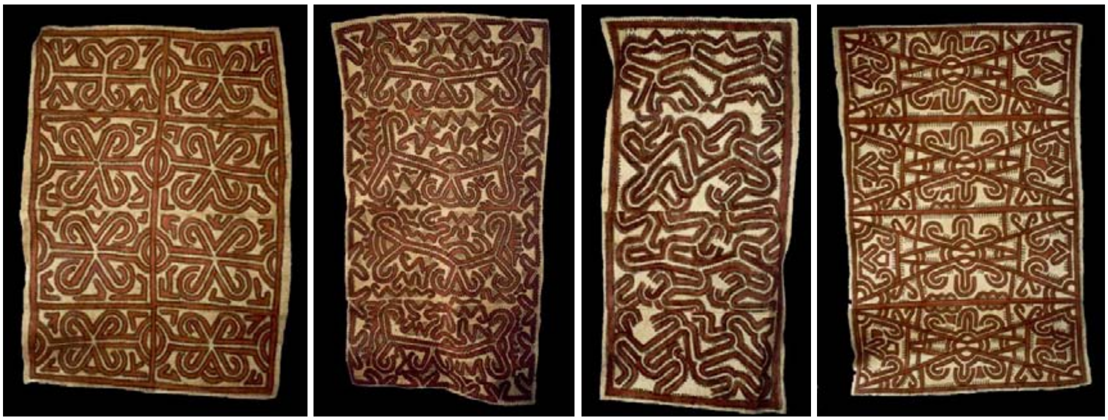
The prohibition of having sexual intercourse prior to the preparation and applying of *dun* probably had the same motive: a fear of weakening the red pigment. The same thing would occur if one would say the name ‘*dun*’ aloud while producing the paint or working with it. Out of respect and fear

of ‘spoiling’ the paint, people would therefore call it *tambuta*. Since *tambuta* means red blood[8], the exclusion of children and men, and the taboo of mentioning its proper name ‘*dun*’ aloud, become more interesting. Even more so when one takes into account that in the majority of New Guinean societies women are regarded as possessing ‘polluting’ and dangerous substances, not the men.
In the past, Maisin men were regarded as dangerous in their ability to ‘dry up’ and ‘spoil’ the dye, in other words, making the blood weak.[9] Seen in this light, the red lines could be regarded as veins depicted on the cloth or skin, ‘running’ in meandering patterns and creating life. Since the ingredients have to be boiled and the resulting *dun* has to be applied when it is hot or warm, the association with living blood becomes even stronger.

For unknown reasons the relationship between blood and *dun* lost its power. The strictly ritualised production and use of *dun* was still practised two or three generations ago, but soon afterwards lost its ritual character. It seems that men were gradually allowed to witness women making *dun* and nowadays men theoretically are allowed to paint as well, although they rarely do so, leaving this work, as well as the beating, to female relatives.

V. Styles and types of designs

Every woman has her own style of drawing designs. The museum collection harbours pieces of barkcloth that were drawn by women of various ages and belonging to various clans and villages. This makes it possible to see the individual styles of each designer, such as Brenda Dave, Mildred Tinawe, Jill Javisea or the family Taniova.

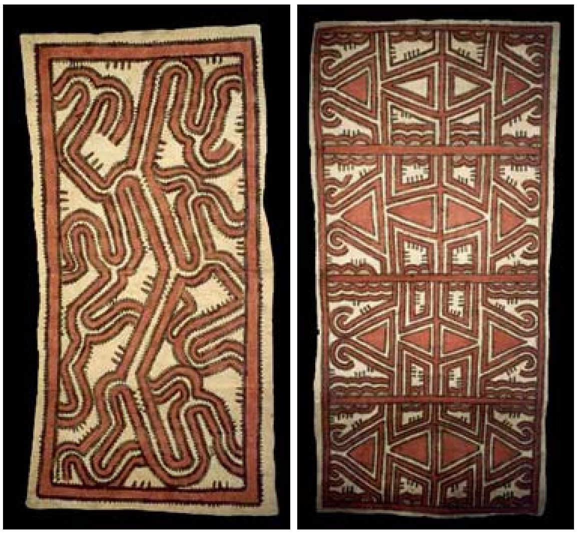


From left to right examples of barkcloth made by Brenda Dave (RMV 6009-30), Mildred Tinawe (RMV 6009-47), Jill Javisea (RMV 6009-31) and the family Taniova (RMV 6009-49).

Despite being different, the barkcloth designs are clearly recognisable as being Maisin designs. Moreover, in order to avoid that some people might benefit more from the sale of barkcloth than others, Maisin people prefer that decorated barkcloth is referred to as being made by Maisin, instead of naming the individual artist.
In addition to the style differences, different types of designs exist that are intertwined with Maisin past and present. These different types of designs all narrate or rather visualise their own story. The first type of design is called '*a moi kayan*', which means 'just a design'. These ‘general’ designs visualise the skill and imagination of individual women, embedded within Maisin tradition and style of designing. The second type of design encompasses visual displays of Christian worship, which can be regarded as tokens of Maisin people’s religious history. Finally, some designs narrate stories about Maisin clan ancestors and their travels from Musa River down to Collingwood Bay. These designs are clan designs, called *evovi*, and belong to particular clans.

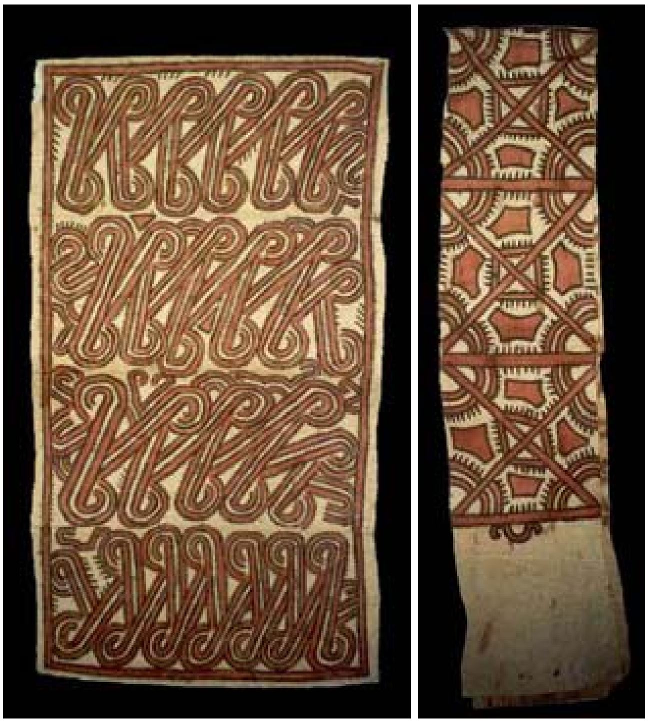
General designs

The ‘general’ designs are either 'continues', called *gangi-gangi* (meaning twisting) designs, or so-called 'panel' designs.



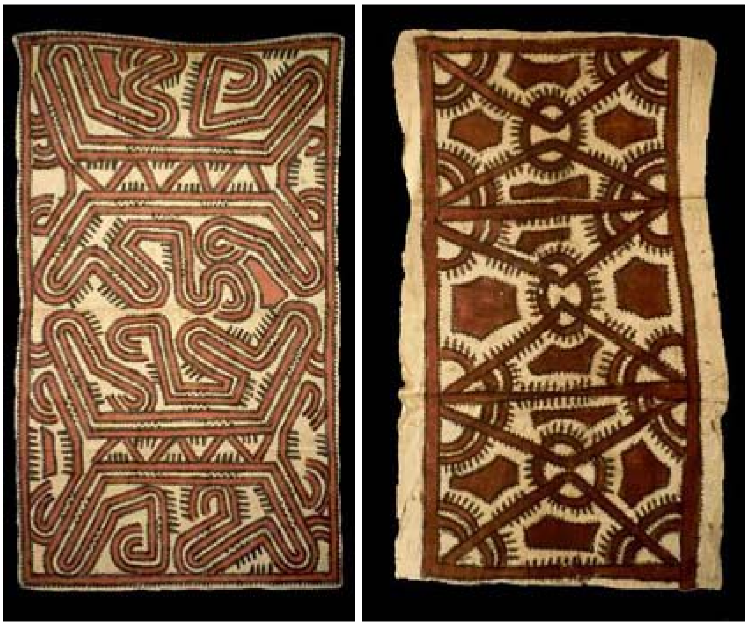
A *gangi-gangi* design (left, RMV 6009-9) and a ‘panel’ design (RMV 6009-43)

Panel designs entail one design that is repeated traditionally four times on *embobi* and in general six times on *koefi*.



Examples of panel designs, traditionally repeated four times on *embobi* (left, RMV 6009-11) and in general six times on *koefi* (RMV 6009-14).

The cloth is folded in parts and the design is drawn on each of the panels separately, often without looking at the previously drawn panel. In contrast, *gangi-gangi* designs flow freely over the cloth and are not bound by borders or panels. In Airara, only few women draw in this latter style. Though symmetrical panel designs are preferred, much depends on the size of the barkcloth. Small pieces are always decorated with freely floating *gangi-gangi* designs, larger cloths often with panel designs. The *gangi-gangi* designs appear to be a more recent development enabling artists to design and paint pieces of barkcloth that are too small to fit a panel design. Furthermore, in addition to the four panel designs that are drawn on the large women's cloths (*embobi*), smaller pieces of tapa are also decorated with two panel or three panel designs.



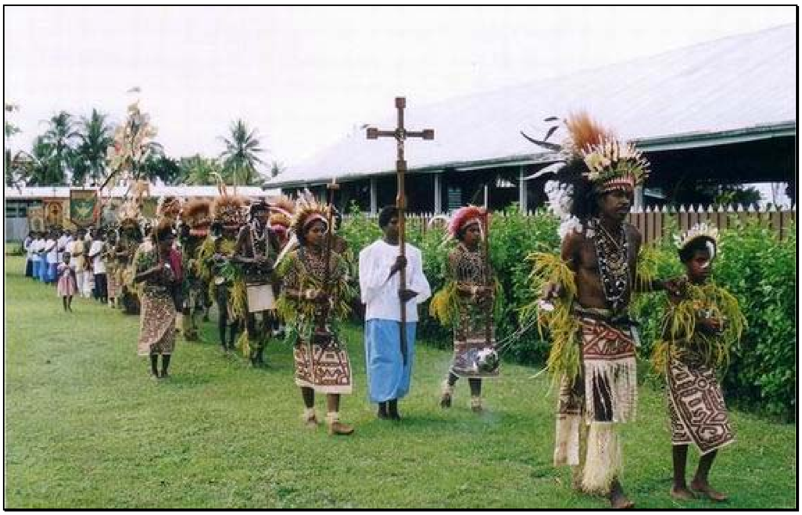
Two smaller pieces of tapa with two panel designs (RMV 6009-10: left) and three panel designs (RMV 6009-32: right).

Since the barkcloth collected at the turn of the twentieth century among the Maisin and in Collingwood Bay predominantly entails four and six panel designs, these developments are probably linked with the commercialisation of barkcloth, which makes it worthwhile to decorate even the smallest pieces of barkcloth[10].

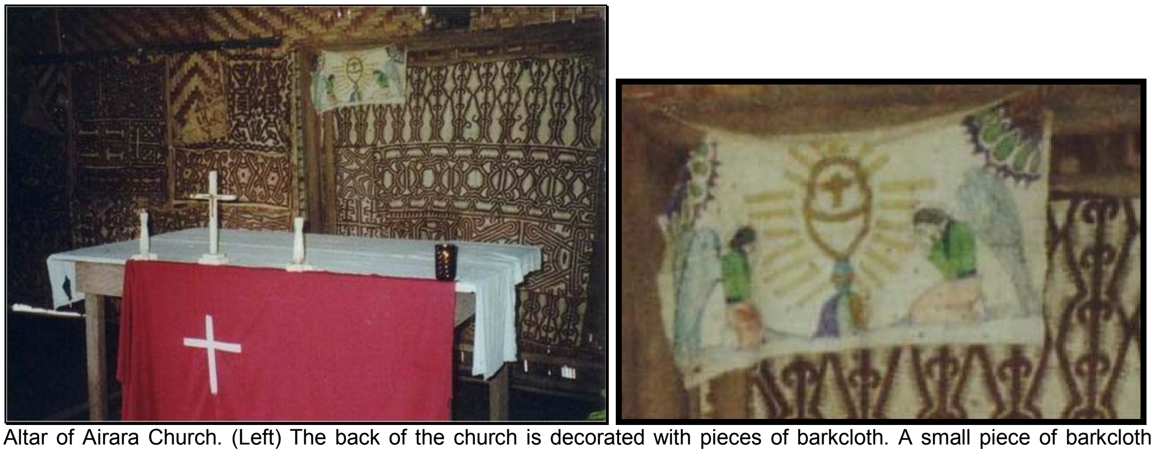
Christian designs

The second type of designs that is applied on barkcloth are Christian designs. Since the advent of Anglican missionaries in Collingwood Bay in 1890, Anglican worship and emblems have been appropriated and incorporated into Maisin ways of life.
Barkcloth played a crucial role in these appropriations as almost all missionaries stationed in Collingwood Bay collected artefacts like barkcloth, and some of them even decorated their houses with pieces of decorated barkcloth. Missionaries such as W. Abbot and P. Money, who were stationed in Collingwood Bay between 1898 and 1910, collected various pieces of decorated barkcloth, while their successors facilitated the collecting of barkcloth by fellow confederates and scientific collectors like C.G. Seligman and A.B. Lewis.

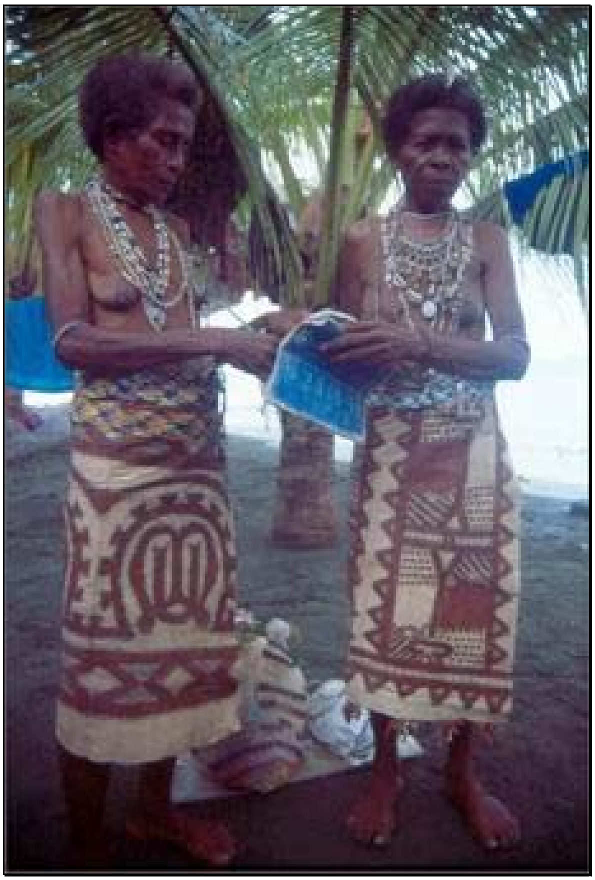
Sister Helen Roberts (1920-1992) who was stationed at Wanigela Mission for no less then 45 years, continued these Anglican attempts to commercialise and incorporate barkcloth in the Christian way of life and worship. She organised the sewing of a cape and mitre for the Archbishop of Canterbury, which he received upon the Church's centenary celebration and wore on the procession at Dogura in 1991 (a village in Milne Bay where the first Anglican missionaries landed).


Church festival in Wanigela.

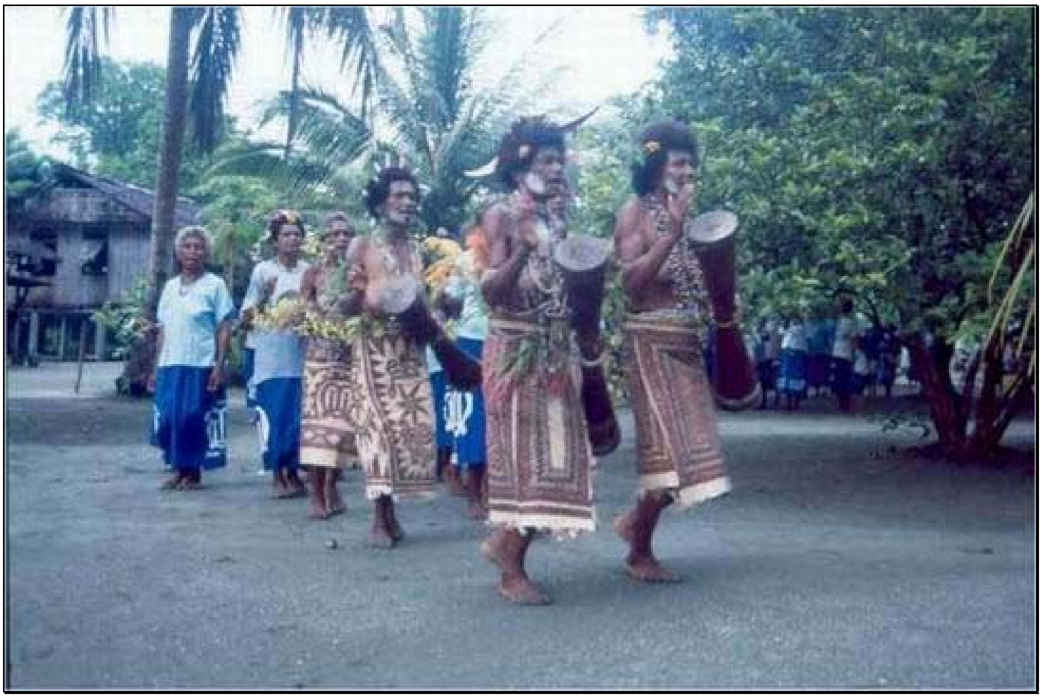
Many Anglican Churches in Collingwood Bay are decorated with barkcloth. Religious scenes are displayed on barkcloth and bibles are wrapped in pieces of barkcloth.


Altar of Airara Church. (Left) The back of the church is decorated with pieces of barkcloth. A small piece of barkcloth is decorated with the cup of Christ, flanked by two kneeling angels.

In addition, the Mothers' Union (MU) [11] logo is painted on *embobi* (female loincloth), which are worn by the MU-women during meetings and special occasions.



Two members of the Mothers' Union (MU) dressing up.
The woman on the left is wearing a barkcloth with the MU design painted on it.



Members of the Mothers' Union celebrating the arrival of guests. The women in the rear wear blue cotton skirts with the MU logo printed on them, while the women in the front wear barkcloth skirts.

Mothers' Union members are welcoming visitors.

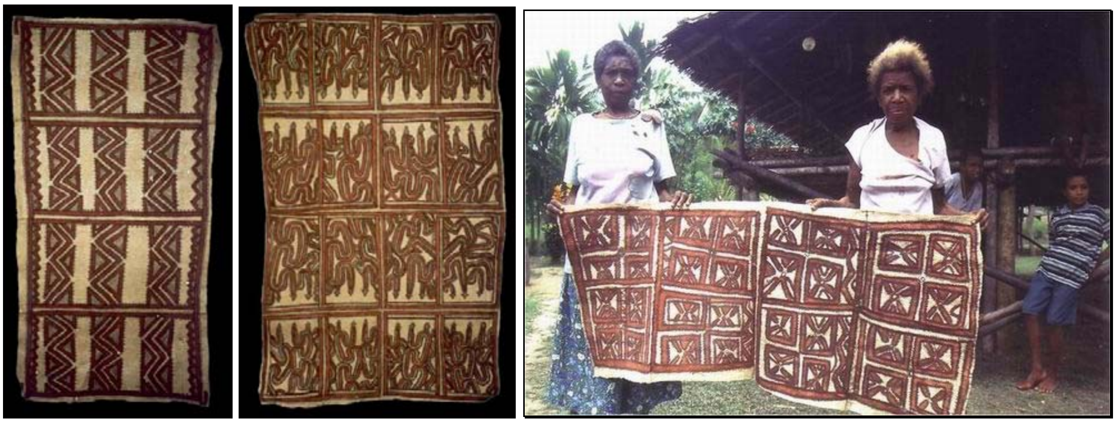
Clan designs

In addition to the ‘general’ designs and ‘Christian’ designs, women also apply clan designs, called *evovi*. These are often figurative depictions referring to a particular patrilineal clan and its clan emblems and history. Each *evovi* has its own name that often refers to the clan ancestor travelling down from Musa River to Collingwood Bay.

In contrast to general designs, which are women’s own personal creations, clan designs are handed down from generation to generation, as regards ownership from father to son, as regards ‘craft’ from mother to daughter and from mother to daughter in-law.

Although various generations of women have applied and continue to apply the *evovi*, the designs are fairly rigid and hardly change. Some *evovi* that were used more then hundred years ago and subsequently collected by missionaries and other collectors, are still in use today[12]. However, some clan designs were created more recently. Women who have a strong vision, or a re-occurring dream of a particular design, may submit their design to the clan elders. If the clan elders approve of the design and its meaning, it may be accepted as clan design. So women can be more than just the transmitters of clan knowledge and identity as embedded within the clan designs, they can create them as well.

Because these clan designs are strongly intertwined with the identity of individual clans, as these designs embody clan histories and claims on land, Maisin people are afraid that others may copy or use these clan designs, thereby appropriating the clan’s identity. As a consequence, Maisin people are, in contrast to their neighbours, reluctant to sell or give away their clan designs.



RMV 6009-39 and 51 with designs from the Yakap clan. Elsie Safem (left) and Grace Kafusa (right), also from the Yakap clan in Gegerau village (Miniafia), showing their clan design (RMV 6009-35).

VI. Barkcloth as clothing

In the past, barkcloth was used as daily clothing and as blankets. In some cases, loincloths were used in a secondary context as well, expressing a person's gender and identity not by means of wearing, but by means of display. Among the Maisin and Wanigela people, barkcloth is 'displayed' on graves. The latter cover a woman's grave with *embobi* and a man's grave with *koefi*. Among the Maisin, the garment of the deceased is hung underneath the house together with the small string bag of the deceased, containing his or her personal belongings. The deceased bodies are first wrapped in mats and subsequently covered with a piece of barkcloth, although today pieces of cotton cloth are also used for this purpose.

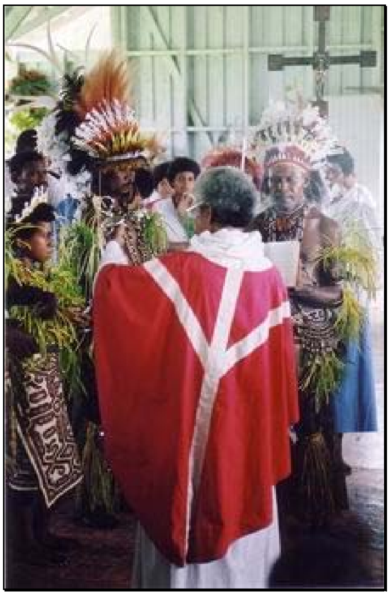
Because the Anglican Mission had no policy to convert Papuans by means of dressing them up in western clothes, Collingwood Bay and especially Maisin people kept wearing their *koefi* and *embobi* for rather a long time. Especially in comparison with other areas in New Guinea where traditional clothing was rapidly replaced by western dress as soon as European missionaries, colonist and traders made their appearance.[13] In Collingwood Bay, "the missionaries who clothed Papuans were the exception rather than the rule; and Anglican missionaries more frequently lamented the desire of Papuans for European clothes than complained about immodest dress".[14] This provided a social and cultural context wherein barkcloth was used as the principal garment up until some years after the Second World War.

Due to the fast changing socio-economic and political conditions in Papua New Guinea, the production and use of barkcloth is under threat, and in many regions has ceased all together. Replaced by cotton textiles and western clothes, it has no longer a major function as garment. Many of the ceremonies and initiations in which barkcloth was used, have stopped to exist. This decline in barkcloth manufacture exceeds also to other indigenous artefacts. Some of these objects are "reduced to the status of production for tourism".[15] However, although Maisin barkcloth has ceased to be a garment for daily use and part of its production is intended for sale, it is still used as a garment during especially church festivities and, to a decreasing extent, in the context of rituals.

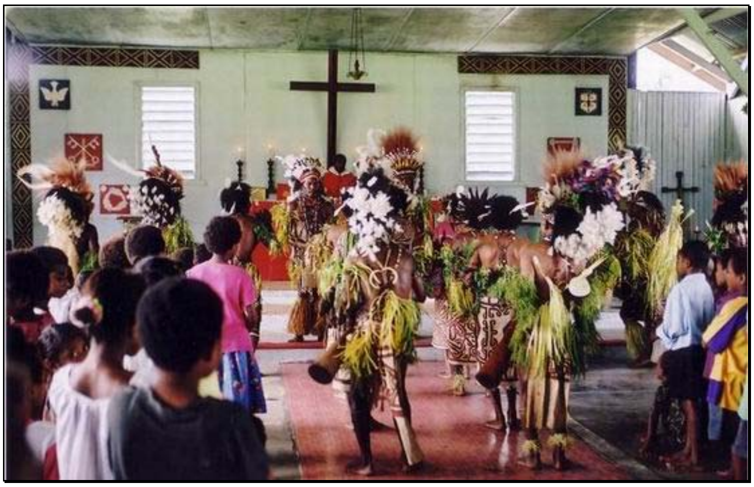
Church festivals

The recent history of Maisin barkcloth shows how especially the Anglican Church is intertwined with the initial commercialisation and use of *embobi* and *koefi* in religious practice and church festivals. The interrelatedness between Anglican Church and barkcloth exceeds the purely decorative and commercial functions it has gained. Since every Anglican Church in Collingwood Bay is named after a Saint that is honoured and celebrated on a specific date, each year several church-festivals are held.

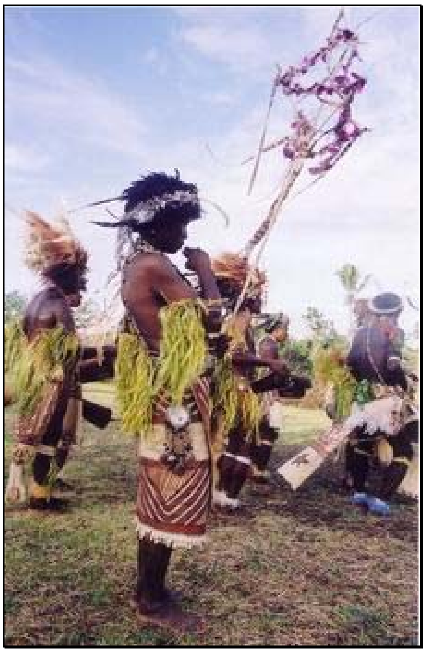
Anglican Churches are located in the villages Airara, Sinapa, Uiaku, Yuayu and Uwe. And in nearby Wanigela, and Miniafia and Korafe speaking villages, they are present as well. During my stay among the Maisin, I witnessed six church festivals in Collingwood Bay, and missed about three. These festivals are a combination of Christian worship and traditional dancing and singing. During the Service, people dressed up in their 'traditional' regalia will regularly sing and play their drums, alternated by the priest's preaching and Christian hymns sang by the Church attendants. Prior and after the Service dances will be performed whereby men and women all dressed up in barkcloth and ornaments perform various 'traditional' dances and accompanying songs. The effect of dressing up in 'traditional' regalia is to "replicate the image of the ancestor as he or she emerged from beneath the earth at the dawn of time"[16]. The tapa clan designs and specific ornaments worn by each clan-member, achieve this effect.



The Wanigela priest performs the service being aided by people dressed up in their traditional regalia.

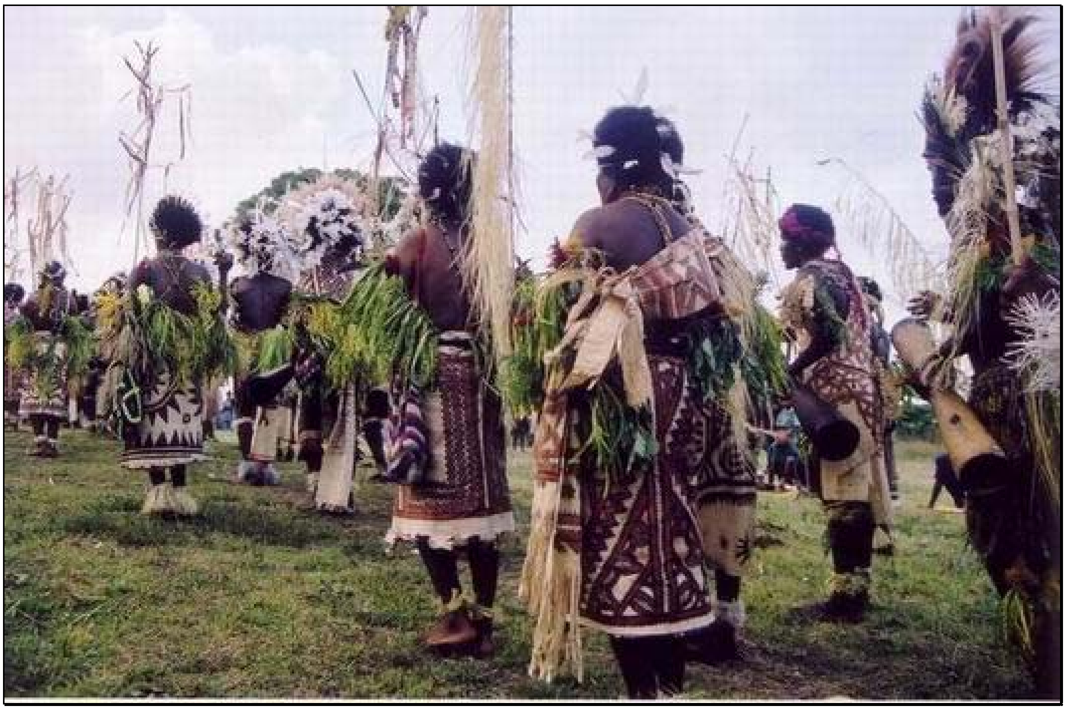


Dancers dressed up in their regalia beat the drums and sing and dance while entering the Wanigela Church.



Maisin women and men performing their dance during a church festival in Sefoa in 2001.

In the past these enactments of clan identity took place during ceremonies and festivities organised by particular clans. But, for clans to organise a festivity, months of preparation and large amounts of money are involved to feed and host all guests. Chief clans cannot organise a small festivity; it has to last for weeks. This implies the clearing of new gardens, and the hunting and buying of many pigs. Due to the costs and work involved, Maisin clans and people do not wish to organise these happenings anymore. As a consequence, initiations and other ceremonial festivities have become rare. In contrast, Church festivals pose no strain on specific clans, but involve the participation of the entire community. As such, the Anglican Church provides a legitimisation for dancing and singing. Seen in this context, the long lines of paired dancers not only enact upon their 'eternal clan identity', they also communicate their dedication to the Church.[17]



Maisin from Airara village dancing at a Church festival at Sefoa. Each clan member is wearing a barkcloth with his or her clan design, thereby forwarding various clan identities and affiliations.

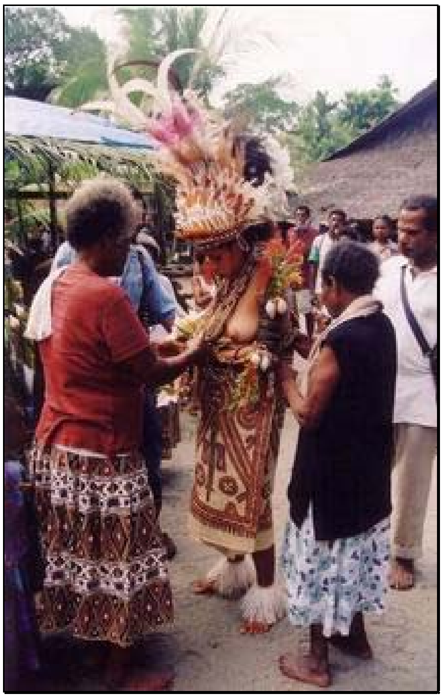
The wearing of particular *embobi* and *koefi* provides an arena in which various identities and messages may be visualised and forwarded. Not only the patri-clan is enacted, gender identity and personal affiliations may equally be expressed. Dressed in the black designed and red painted *embobi,* wrapped around the waist with a plaited girdle, a woman can send out various messages. Since women can design and wear both their father's and husband's clan designs, while their husband and children will only inherit their father's designs, a woman can choose which identity she wants to embody and visualise. And although a man will stress the importance of his wife wearing (one of) his clan designs, and sometimes may even compel his wife to do so, in some cases a woman will decide upon wearing her father's design instead of one belonging to her husband's group. In case of a local Church or Mother's Union festival a woman may also decide upon wearing a barkcloth decorated with the Mother's Union logo, thereby visualising and signifying her membership and identity as a Mother's Union member instead of belonging to a particular clan.

Depending on the scale of the feast or happening, both men and women can decide upon wearing a loincloth decorated with general designs, thereby visualising the craft, creativity and style of the female barkcloth maker. These general designs are predominantly worn during small-scale feasts where everybody knows each other so the necessity of forwarding either a particular clan or even Maisin identity is less important. When heading for a large Church festival in Sefoa near Tufi in 2001, which was attended by diverse linguistic groups of the region, Maisin coming from various villages and clans all wore their clan designs as to visualise both their particular clan, but moreover and more importantly their identity as one linguistic and cultural group, as Maisin people.

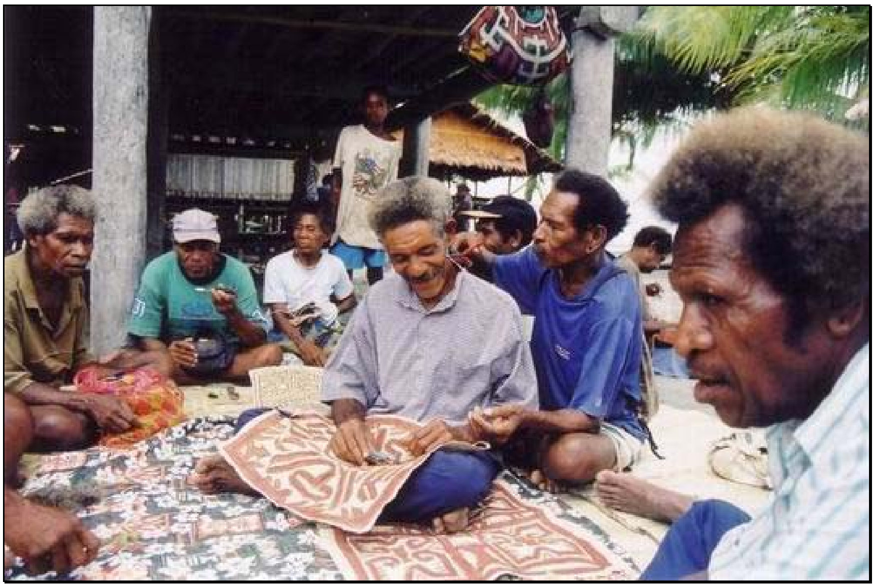
Barkcloth in life-cycle rituals

Especially in the past, Maisin used to perform several rituals that marked a change of status in a person's life. From birth till death, Maisin people were guided in their ageing and changing status and social roles by these rites of passage. These rituals were performed in relationship to birth, marriage and death. In addition, all firstborn children and girls were initiated into adulthood. While especially marriage and rituals surrounding death are still performed, although changed in comparison with the past, firstborn initiations are very rarely practised and the initiation of girls by tattooing their faces was last practised in the 1990s.[18]

The giving of tapa, ornaments and other gifts, still plays a crucial part in ceremonies such as marriage and mourning rituals. Some of these gifts are given to the person who is initiated, while other gifts are exchanged between the groups who are involved in this person's transition and constitution.

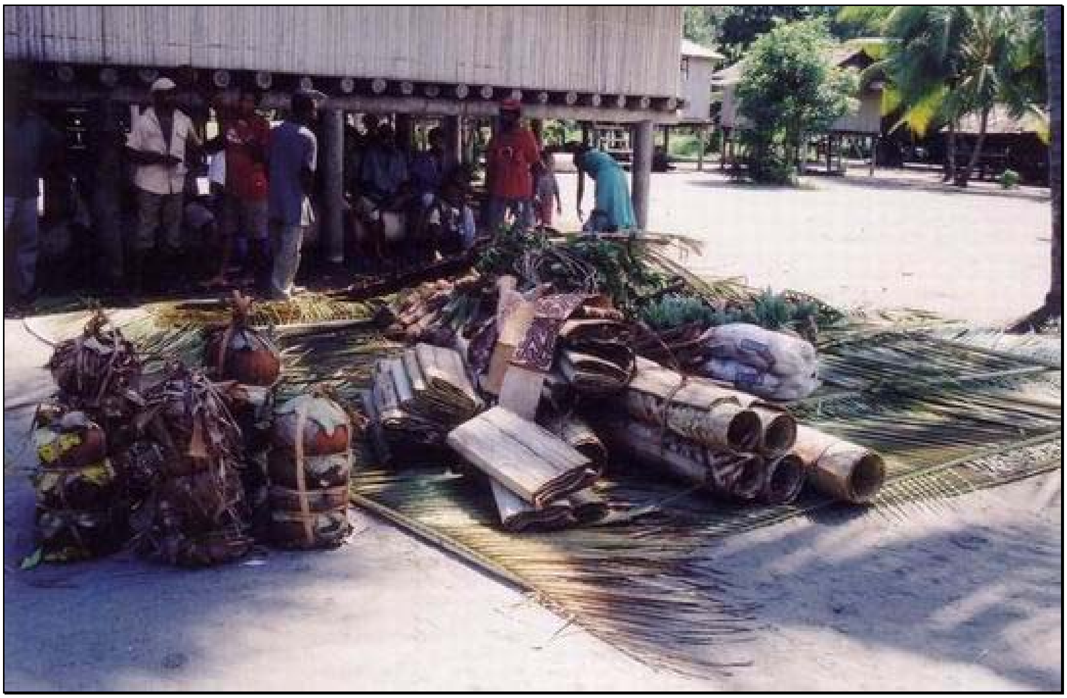


The bride is being dressed up in her father's clan tapa and other clan regalia.

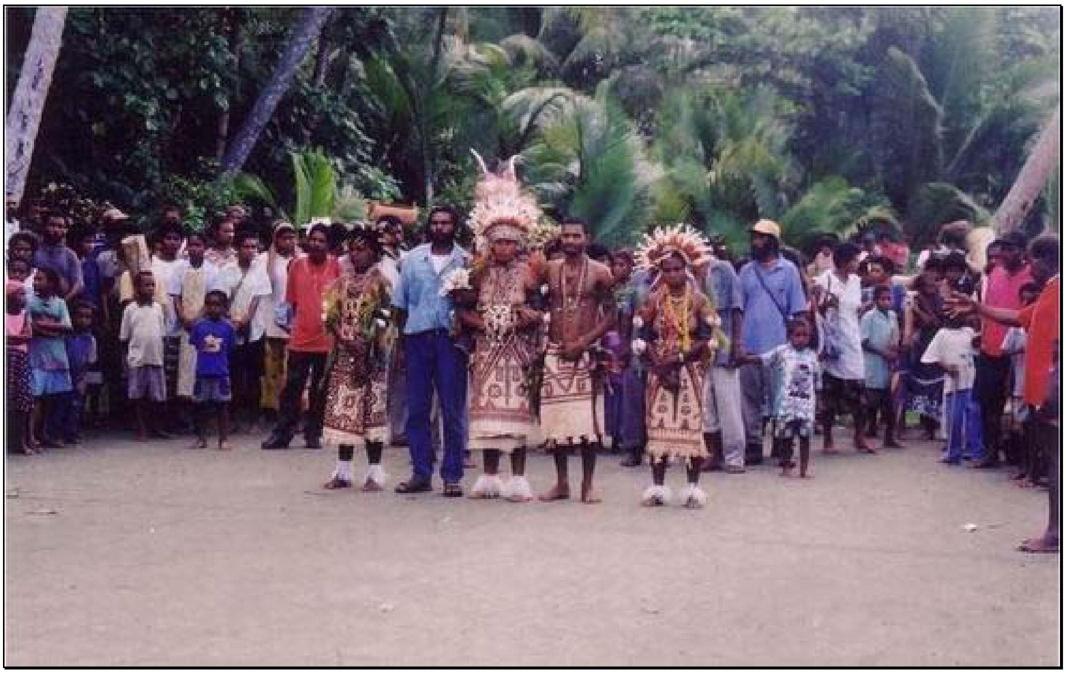


A widower undergoes a ritual that marks the end of his mourning period. As part of this ritual, his in-laws cut his hair and beard, which he had not been allowed to cut and comb during a whole year. In addition, he received new clothes and gifts such as mats and pieces of barkcloth.

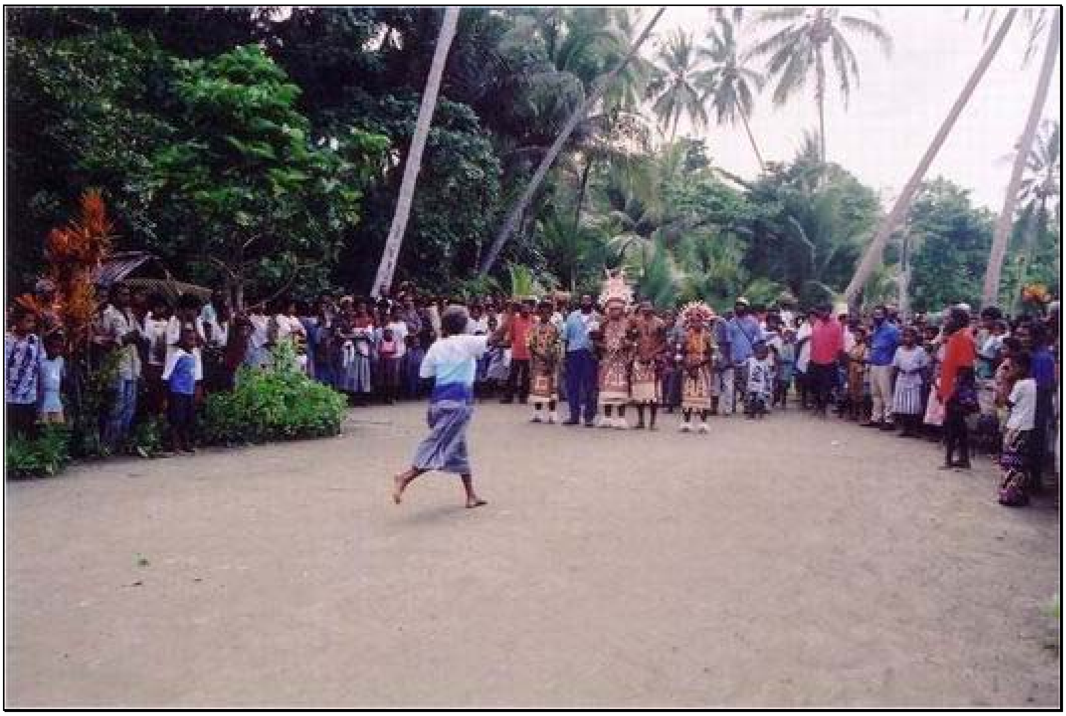
When Georgina married Jason, Georgina was dressed up in a barkcloth skirt displaying her father's clan design[19]. In addition, she was decorated with ornaments, such as feathers and shell necklaces that belong to her father's clan. So all the decorations displayed Georgina's identity as belonging to her father's clan. Together with her bride-wealth, that had been accumulated by her father's and her mother's relatives, she was then brought to Jason's clan. Upon their arrival, they were 'welcomed' by one of Jason's relatives who performed a ceremony called *tonton.* While running towards Georgina and her relatives, the person performing the *tonton* shouted they (the groom's relatives) would give money or goods to Georgina's relatives for bringing Georgina to their clan.



Bride-wealth (*babu*), including food, pandanus mats, pottery and barkcloth. This gift of food and objects is handed over by the bride's relatives to the groom and his relatives. In return for this gift and their daughter, the bride's family will receive a bride-price from the groom and his family (*sauki-jobi*).

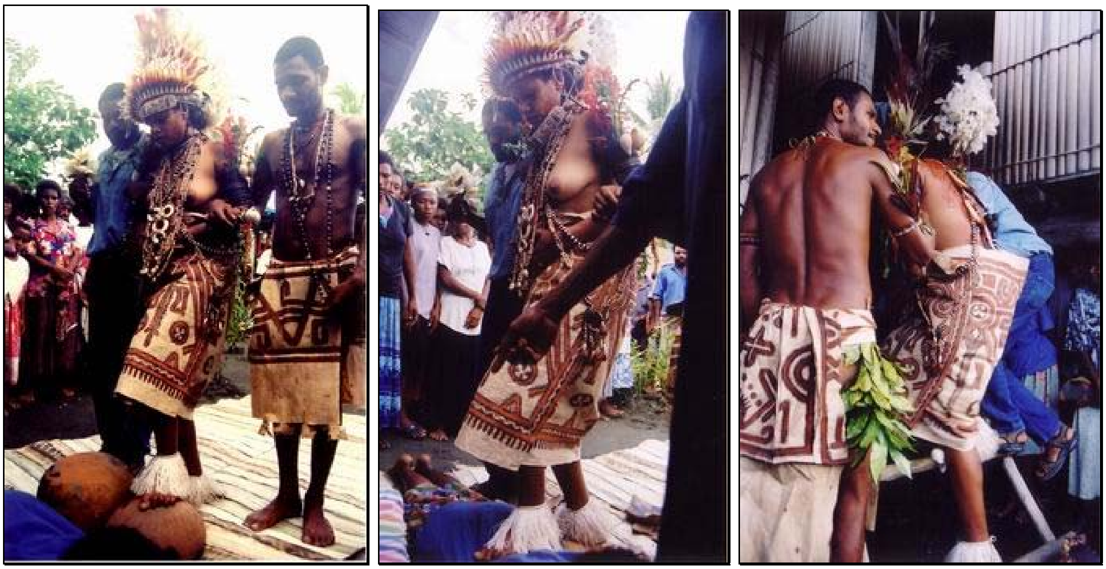


Georgina is brought to the groom's clan, accompanied by her cousins and followed by relatives and friends from her father's and mother's side.



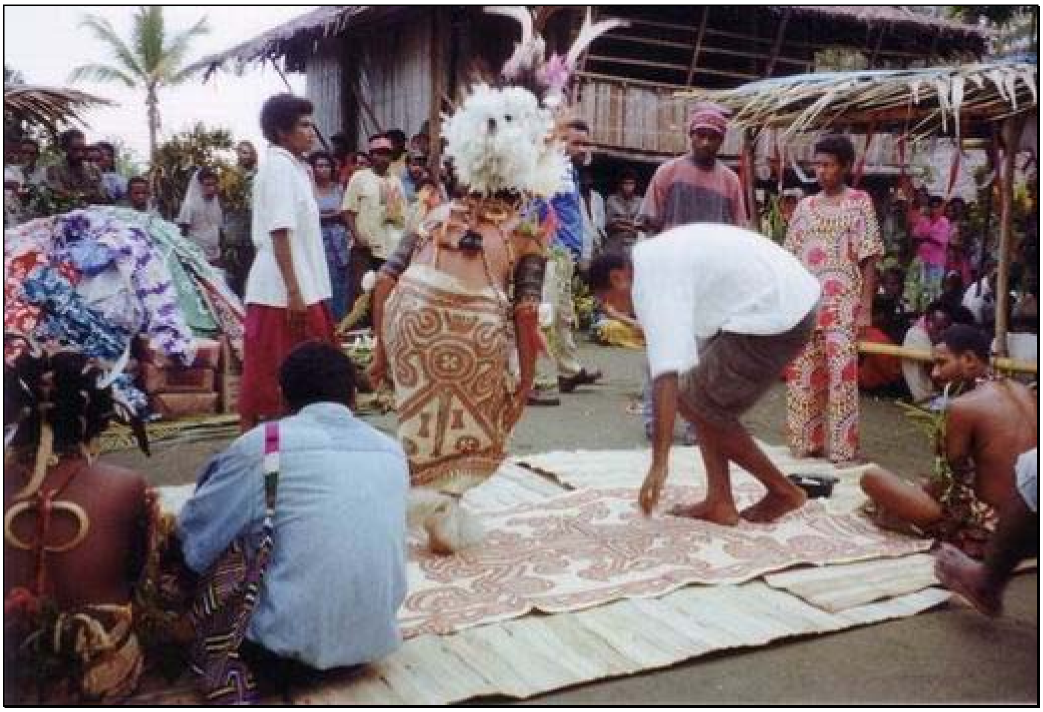
Tonton performed by one of the groom's relatives, thereby welcoming Georgina in their clan.

After a series of *tonton* had been performed, Georgina was led to the groom's house. But before she entered the house, she had break two clay-pots and walk over the backs of her female relatives. This signalled there was no way back for her. She now belonged to her husband's clan. Her identity as belonging to her husband's clan was also symbolized by the fact that after the wedding ceremony she would remove all her fathers' regalia. In the future, she will now be encouraged by her husband and his clan members to wear their clan design.

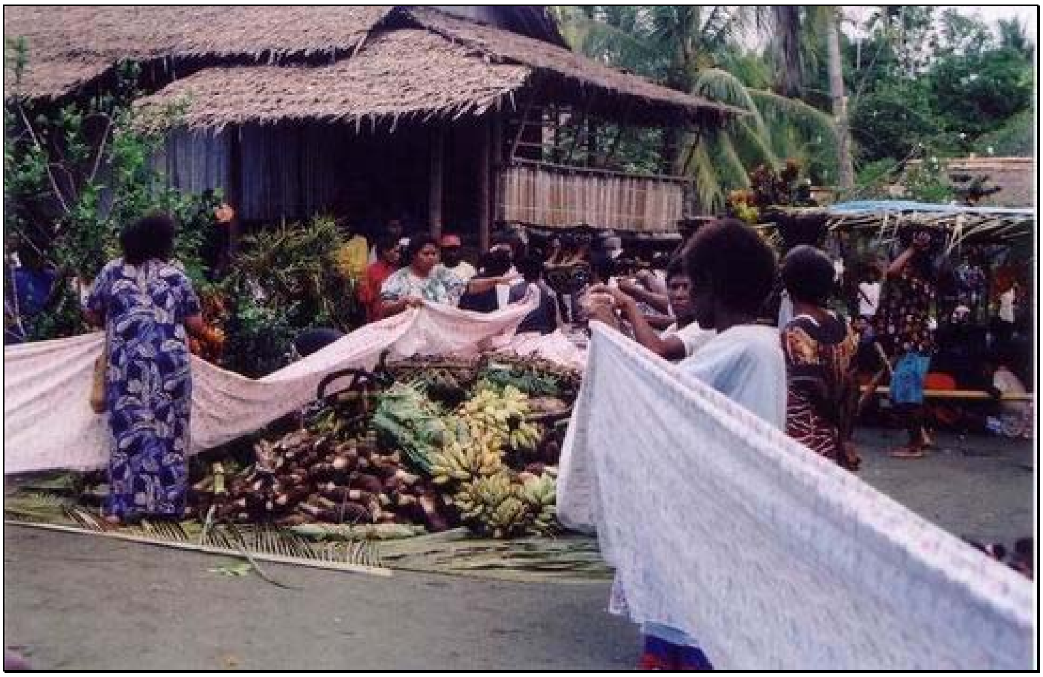


Georgina is guided into her husband Jason's house.

Georgina's and Jason's wedding was somewhat exceptional as Jason's family had decided upon paying the bride price to Georgina's relatives immediately. Normally, this is done after one or more children have been born. Georgina and Jason were seated on a large barkcloth, made by Jason's female relatives, while Jason's relative's brought together the bride price. This gift, consisting of food, living pigs and goods such as cotton cloth, were taken by Georgina's relatives to her father's clan, where it was distributed among all the relatives and friends who had helped Georgina's family in organising the wedding or had contributed to Georgina's upbringing.



Georgina and her husband Jason are taking a seat on layers of mats and a large barkcloth provided by Jason's female relatives.

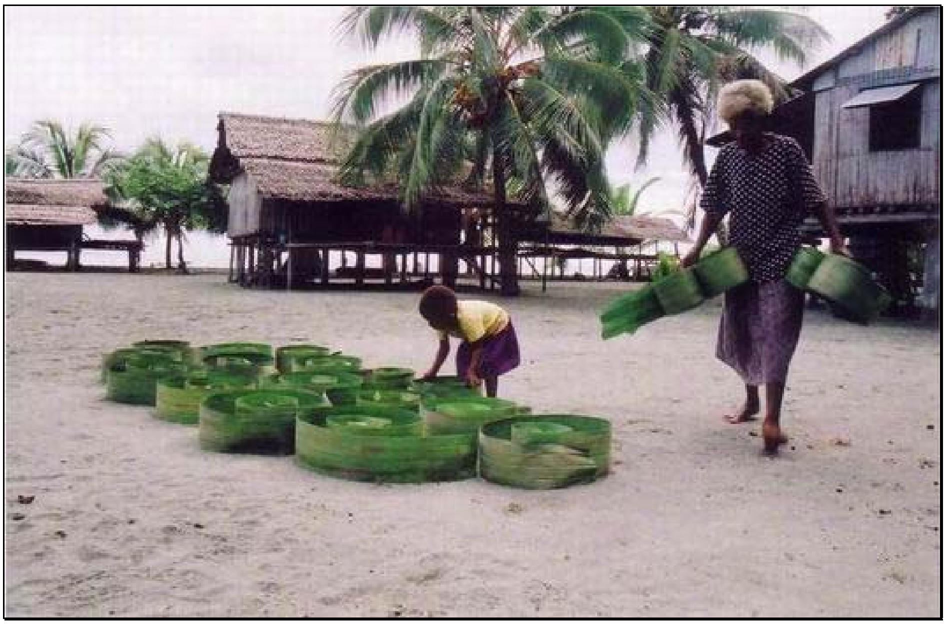


Displaying the bride price (*sauki jobi*). While in the past barkcloth was given in abundance, today this is largely replaced by cotton cloth.

VII. Barkcloth in exchange

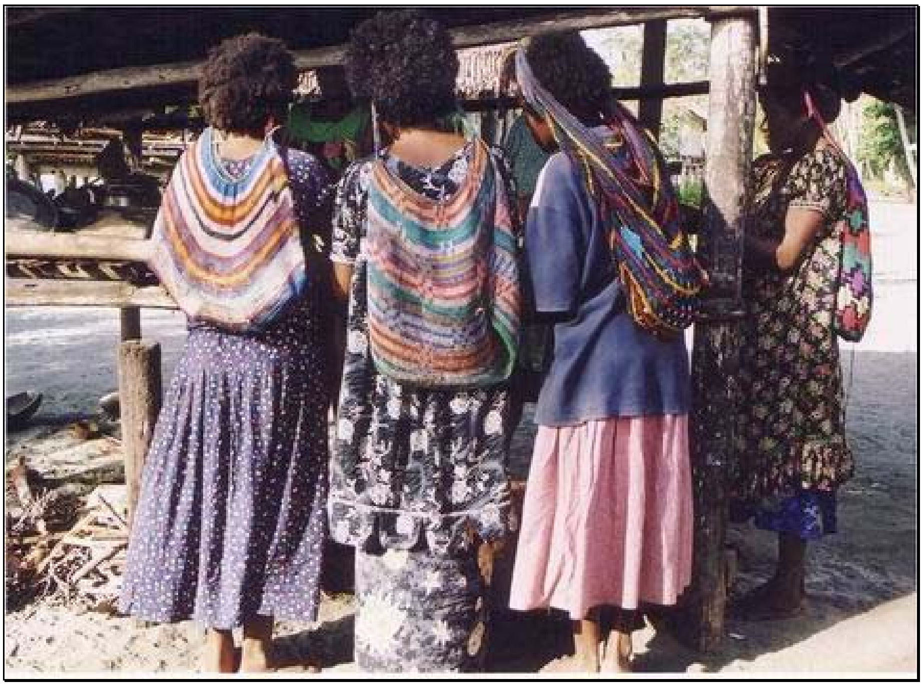
Maisin barkcloth is used in different forms of exchange. First of all it is used as a gift in life-cycle rituals, such as marriage. Secondly, it is used in barter and, finally, it is sold as a commodity. Exchange networks exist between Maisin people and their various linguistic neighbours. These networks were more extended in the past. But even today, Maisin people barter extensively with Wanigela, Miniafia and Korafe people living along the coast, as well with Biniguni people living inland on the slopes of the mountains.[20] The exchange of barkcloth plays a crucial role in these networks.

In addition to barkcloth, Maisin women always have to make sure that mats (*yan*) string bags (*nonti*), and clay-pots (*wusu*) are present in the house. It is their responsibility to either make them, or obtain them through barter. As Maisin state: all Maisin women should be able to make these items. When women do not have time to make these objects themselves, or are not used to make them as in the case of clay-pots, they have to barter for them.



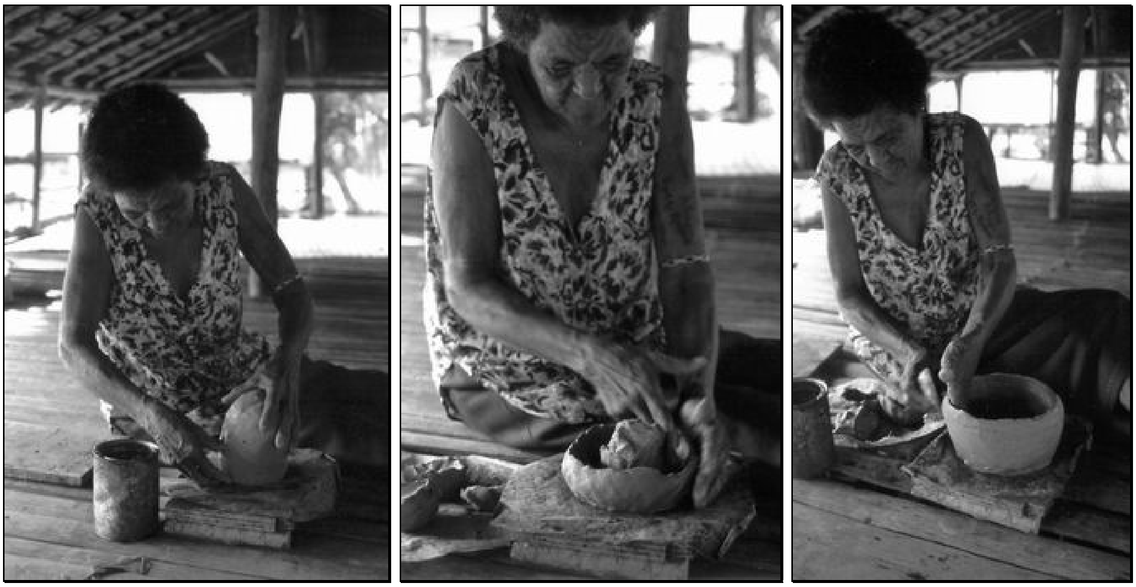
Strips of pandanus have been rolled up and are put to dry in the sun.
As soon as these strips have dried, they are stitched together and made into mats.

Dried strips of *pandanus*.



Four women with their string bags suspended on their heads.

Maisin have always depended on the barter system with Wanigela women to obtain, in exchange for undecorated or general designed tapa, the highly valued clay-pots that are manufactured by Wanigela women only. Maisin women use these clay-pots for cooking during specific occasions such as life cycle rituals or church festivities. In general, one piece of barkcloth is the equivalent of one clay-pot.



Wanigela woman making a clay-pot.

While in daily life food is cooked in tin pots, during special occasions women prepare food in clay-pots.

Barkcloth is also often used to barter for canoes. The amount of tapa that one needs to obtain a canoe depends upon the size of the canoe. In general, some 20 to 25 pieces of tapa are required to obtain a middle-sized canoe. If a man wants to obtain a canoe, he will first have to seek agreement with his wife to make the agreed amount of tapa. But, it may also happen that deals for obtaining a canoe are reached between two men without the direct consultation of the wife who has to produce the counter (barter) gift. In either case, the wife will make the negotiated amount of tapa, often with help of her female relatives and friends. In some cases, women negotiate individually to obtain their own canoe by giving tapa to the man who wants to barter it.

Due to the growing significance of barkcloth as a commodity, less barkcloth is being given as ceremonial gift. While in the past large amounts of barkcloth were given as part of bride price payments, bride-wealth and played an important role as clothing in life-cycle ceremonies, today only few pieces of barkcloth are part of these ceremonial exchanges and rituals. Instead, people prefer giving mats and clay-pots, thereby saving their barkcloth in order to sell it.

With regard to barter, some Wanigela women complained that Maisin women are giving inferior tapa in exchange for the clay-pots, while they themselves give their best pots in return. It appears that Maisin women tend to keep the best tapa in order to sell it. As such, the commodification of tapa seems to have an impact on the quality of tapa used in barter.

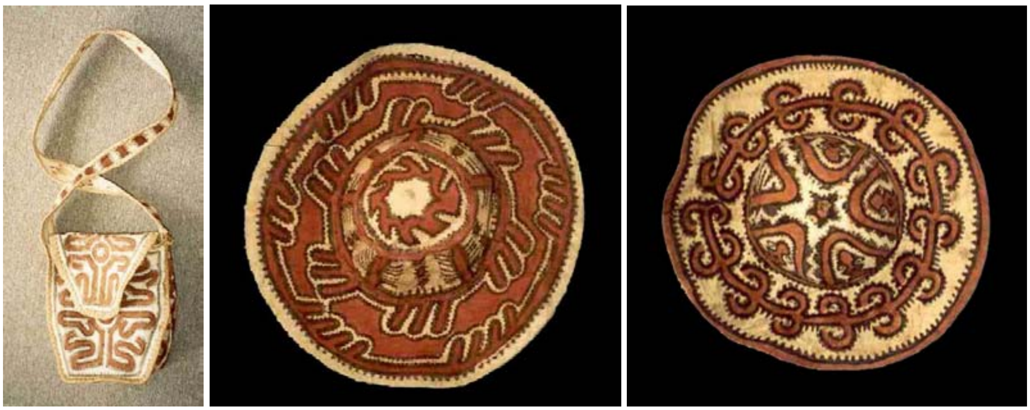
In short it seems that the economic and symbolic value and meaning of barkcloth is changing, as its role in ceremonial and barter exchanges is diminishing. However, barkcloth is not entirely loosing its meaning as a gift. Barkcloth with general designs is given in abundance when foreign visitors, such as anthropologists, are bid farewell. In doing so, Maisin create alliances outside their clans, even crossing Papua New Guinean borders.

Barkcloth as a commodity

The economical importance of barkcloth becomes clear when one considers the few alternatives for generating an income after the copra market broke down. In addition to markets on which women sell their garden produce, prepared dishes and pandanus mats, and the small trade-stores where men sell goods like kerosene, rice, sugar and salt, the selling of barkcloth provides one of the few means to get access to money.

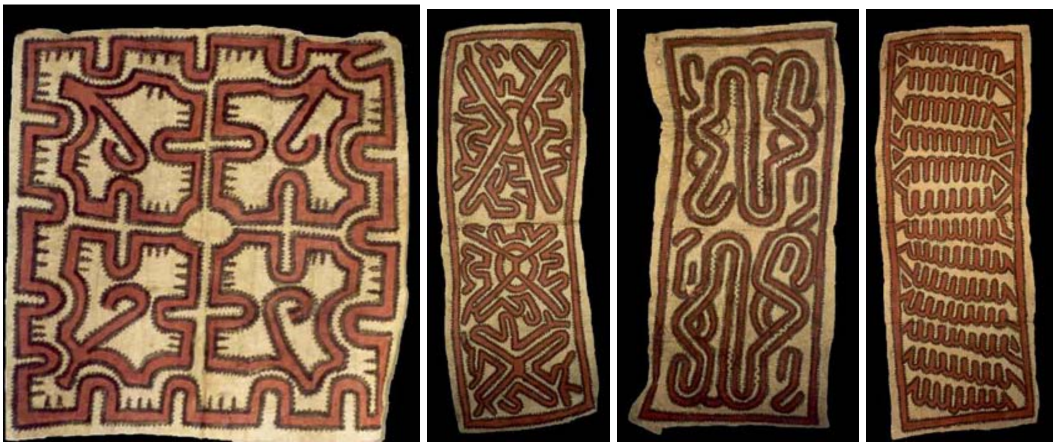
Since predominantly women make barkcloth, households depend on their wives and mothers to produce this special kind of cash crop. This has lead to an increase in production, and as a consequence to an increase of women's labour. Regularly, groups of Airara women can be seen painting large amounts of barkcloth because one of their husbands decided upon taking the boat to the nearest city in order to sell barkcloth. In these cases, female friend and relatives help the wife with designing or painting barkcloth.

The commercialisation of barkcloth also brought about changes in the designs that are being applied as well as in the sizes of barkcloth being used.
In addition to 2-dimensional pieces of cloth, Maisin have also started to make 3-dimensional objects from barkcloth, such as bags and hats.



A bag (RMV 6009-58) and two hats (RMV 6009-59, 60).

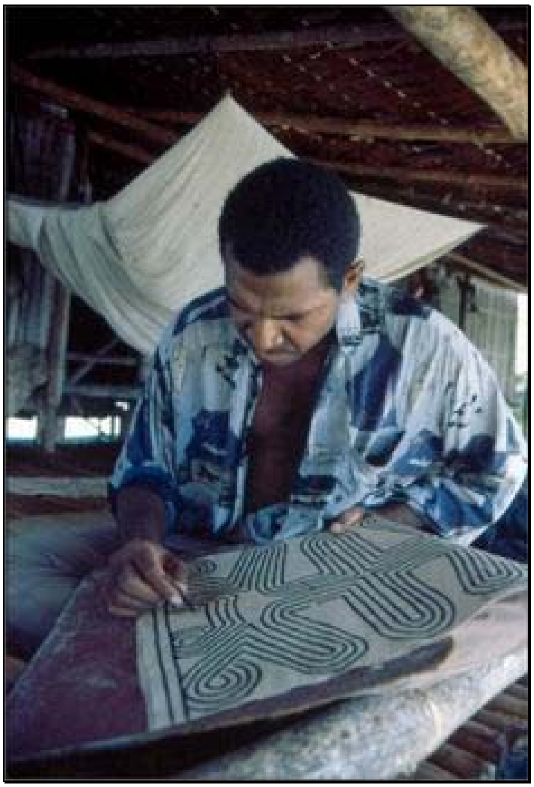
And whereas in the past only large pieces of barkcloth were being made to use as either clothing (loincloths and capes), or blankets, today, Maisin also produce relatively small decorated pieces of barkcloth, which fit easier in the tourist or traveller's suitcase.



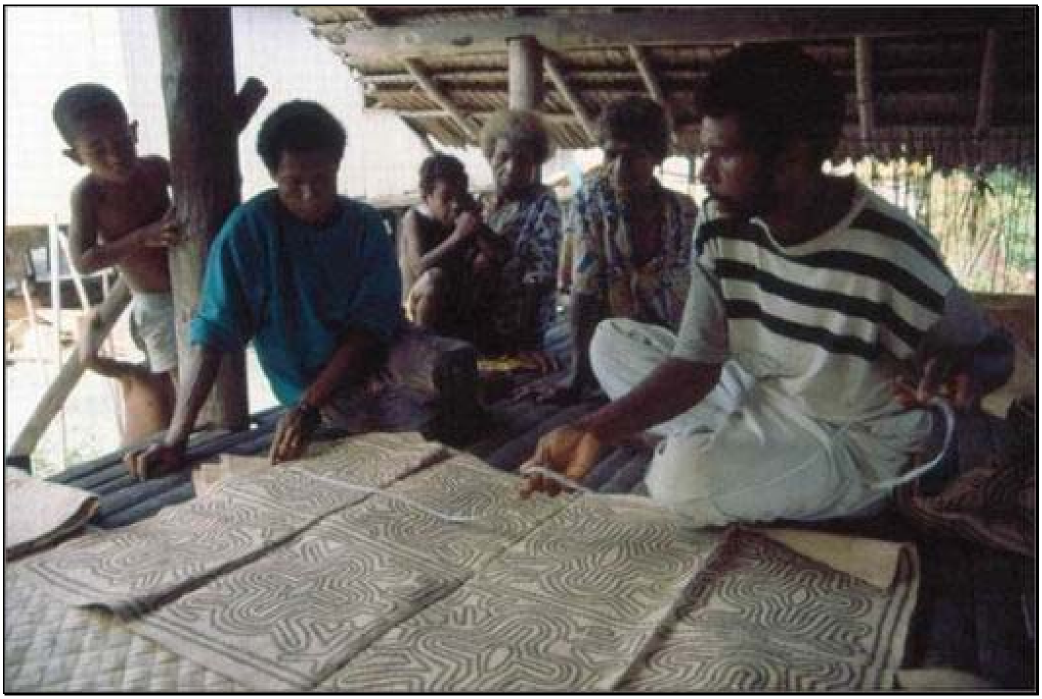
RMV 6009-1, 16, 23, 26.

VIII. Maisin men making and promoting barkcloth

Attracted to the revenues, a few men have started to design pieces of barkcloth. This was made possible due to fading symbolic meaning of the red pigment *dun*. The taboos that used to surround the painting of barkcloth have been abandoned some 60 years ago, thereby making it possible for men to witness and participate in its production. Nevertheless, it are still mainly women who produce barkcloth. In contrast, mainly men are involved in the selling and promoting of barkcloth.



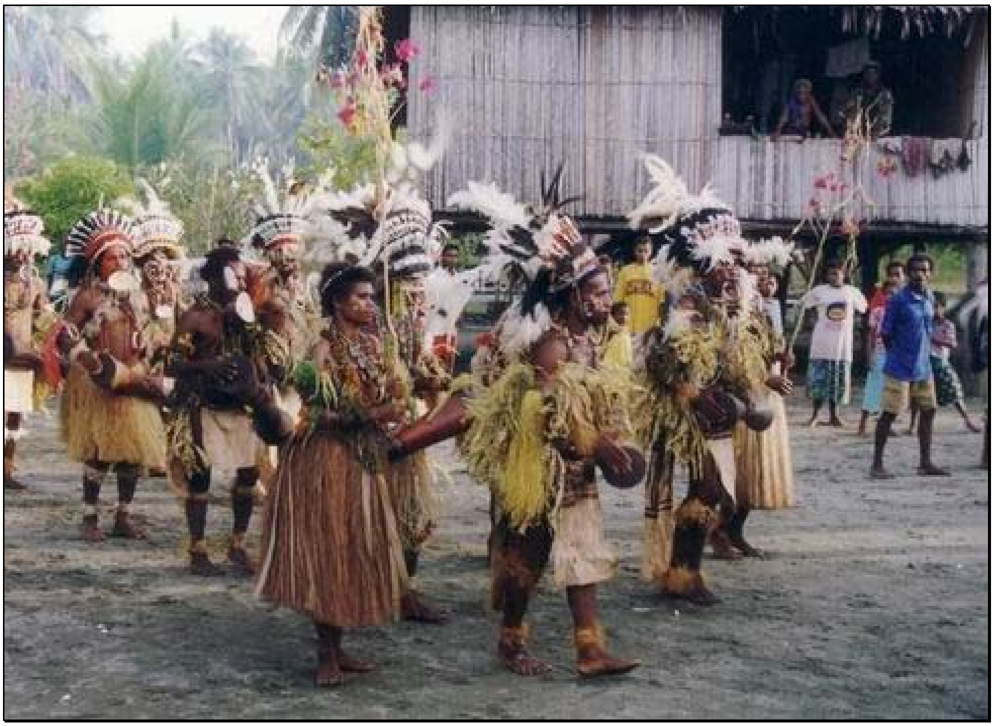
Cecille from Airara village is drawing a design on a piece of barkcloth. He has learned the technique of drawing designs from his mother.



Measuring the size of the design. The size of the design determines the monetary value of the barkcloth.

Promoting barkcloth, Maisin and Papua New Guinea

Since the 1980s, Maisin people have been able to promote themselves via the display and exhibition of barkcloth. In the 1980's several international Art Festivals were held, which included a Maisin e.g. barkcloth representative. At these festivals barkcloth was designed and sold to an international audience.
In 1986, at the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Edinburgh, a man from Ganjiga village, called Franklin, represented the Maisin people and the art of barkcloth making. He even had the opportunity to hand over two pieces of barkcloth to Prince Charles and Princess Diana, thereby incorporating Maisin barkcloth in the Royal collection of Westminster Abbey.
In 1988, Franklin was again selected to represent Papua New Guinea, this time at the 5th Festival of Pacific Arts in Townsville Australia. Three years later in 1995, Franklin and two other Maisin men represented the Maisin community in a barkcloth exhibition held at the University Museum in Berkeley California.
Just recently, in 2004, Franklin once again was given the opportunity to participate, as the only representative from the Oro Province, at the 9th Festival of Pacific Arts in Palau.
In these contexts, Maisin barkcloth did not only represent Maisin people, but also Papua New Guinean culture as a whole.
Moreover, since neighbouring and adjacent cultural groups have stopped manufacturing barkcloth, many people even by groups who have no tradition of wearing barkcloth use Maisin barkcloth as a 'traditional' garment.
For example the Biniguni people, living in the mountains behind the South-eastern Maisin villages, are using Maisin tapa. Besides coastal dances and songs, Biniguni men have incorporated the *koefi* in their traditional outfit, while their women still wear their grass-skirts.



Biniguni people performing their dances and songs at a church festival held in Kewansasap.

In the same way, through the mediation of the Anglican Church, cultural groups in New Britain have recently bought a large amount of *koefi* and *embobi* to wear during festivities. Maisin barkcloth is therefore crossing its boundaries and acquiring new value as a neo-traditional symbol of cultural identity.

IX. Barkcloth against logging

In the mid-1990s, the Maisin came to the attention of environmental activists when villagers launched a public campaign to prevent the national government from permitting commercial logging on their ancestral lands. In their struggle, the Maisin received support from Greenpeace, who actively used Maisin barkcloth in promoting of support and the fight against logging. “Painting a sustainable future. Maisin art and rainforest conservation”, was the heading of an international campaign. It presented the Maisin as a tribal people whose ancestral barkcloth-art could save the rainforest and bring development in their lives at the same time. One of Greenpeace’s flagships, the MV Rainbow Warrior, even sailed into Collingwood Bay being welcomed by dancing and singing Maisin people and a feast that lasted several days.

UKLIA FRIPAS
HALT PLUTONIUM SHIPMENTS

A tapa banner on the Rainbow Warrior II.

Maisin people were encouraged to run an “integrated conservation and development” (ICAD) organisation, in order to prevent extensive logging in their area. The idea was to set up national and international barkcloth markets to sustain the organisation. However, although individuals and families have been selling barkcloth since its commercialisation in the 1960s, people more and more depended on MICAD to provide alternatives ways of development, being possibilities to sell barkcloth.

Although Maisin stress the commercial value and importance of barkcloth, the success of the barkcloth-business is to many villagers disappointing and troublesome. There is no tourism, markets are scarce and often out of reach due to the bad logistics. There are no roads and transport is limited due to high plane-fares, irregular flights and high costs involved with transport over water. As a consequence Maisin mainly depend on MICAD to by their barkcloth. But, the national and international markets on which MICAD depends are equally limited.

However, despite the fact that barkcloth has not yet brought the development people hoped for, it did aid Maisin in winning their court-case against illegal logging, at the same time making Maisin people and their struggle globally known via the Internet.[21]

Moreover, Maisin people still look for ways to market their barkcloth, thereby hoping to improve their ways of living.

In this way, Maisin barkcloth is not just a traditional garment connected with the clan ancestors and past ways of living, but also with the hopes and dreams of Maisin living in the world of today.

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Notes

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[1] Anna-Karina Hermkens mainly conducted fieldwork in the village of Airara, from February 2001 until March 2002 and during a short period in 2004. Her field research focused on the ways the production and use of barkcloth is related to formations of identity (Hermkens 1999, 2001, 2005). This research was financed by The Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (NWO-WOTRO), and the Radboud University of Nijmegen, Netherlands.

[2] Research was mainly conducted in the southern Maisin villages: Sinapa, Sinipara, Koniasi, Airara, and Marua. The central and two largest Maisin villages are Uiaku and Ganjiga, with Yuayu and Uwe as the most northern Maisin villages. From the 1980s onwards, the Canadian anthropologist John Barker has been doing research in especially the villages Uiaku and Ganjiga (Barker 1985, 2004).

[3] Population Census 2000. In addition, many Maisin people live in urban settings such as Alotau, Port Moresby and Popondetta.

[4] This ideology of patrilineal descent and patrilocality is crosscut by affiliations with the mother's group, and other residence practices.

[5] Strong 1911: 381

[6] Choulai et al 1999: 213.

[7] John Barker: personal communication.

[8] *Ta* means blood and *buta* is another word for *mu*, which means red or ripe. In addition, one woman told me that her uncle used to call sago *tambuta* while squeezing it with water. The sago turns the water reddish, but the association with blood becomes more obvious when one considers that the 'beating of sago' is referred to as '*baya nawi*'', which literally means 'killing sago'. An elder of Airara explained that the act of chopping down a sago tree, splitting it open and removing its inside, was comparable to killing a pig or a human being.

[9] It is not only with reference to *dun* that male substances are regarded as 'polluting'. A man is prohibited from intercourse with his breastfeeding wife because it is thought that his substances (semen) will enter the child via the mother's milk, making it weak and sick with a risk of death. Furthermore, men are not allowed to step over their wives or children, since that could cause similar effects. In return, women are not supposed to step over men's legs because the female substances would make those men's legs tired and weak.

[10] Hermkens 2005.

[11] In 1845, the Mothers' Union was established in England by Mary Summer, the wife of a priest, because she wanted to discuss family matters with other wives and mothers.

[12] A.Hermkens 2005. *Engendering Objects: Barkcloth and the dynamics of identity in Papua New Guinea*. PhD thesis Radboud University Nijmegen.

[13] For example Eves 1996; Hermkens 2005.

[14] Wetherell 1977: 202.

[15] Maureen MacKenzie 1991: 2

[16] Barker 2001: 365.

[17] Barker 2001: 366.

[18] See Barker and Tietjen 19 and Hermkens 2004.

[19] Before being married in 'traditional' ways, Georgina and Jason had married in church.

[20] Barter is predominantly a female affair. It occurs both between people who know each other as well as between strangers. Sometimes women barter objects with distant relatives or old female friends who have later on married into other villages. At other occasions, when women travel around or when visitors come to their village, they equally take the opportunity to barter their goods. Extended exchanges may also take place, in particular between exchange partners. This kind transaction demands significant levels of mutual trust and respect since one depends upon the other to make the return 'gift' of the barter at a later point in time. I witnessed Maisin women giving tapa to Wanigela and Biniguni women in order to receive respectively a clay-pot or a string bag. In those cases, the latter were sometimes given in return months after the initial barter agreement had been made. In a similar way, Maisin women received clay-pots for which they were supposed to give tapa sometime in the near future.

[21] See also Barker 2004 and in press.