WOMEN'S FACIAL TATTOOING AMONG THE MAISIN OF ORO PROVINCE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA: THE CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF AN ANCIENT CUSTOM

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The Maisin women of northeastern Papua New Guinea are among the last coastal Papuans to tattoo their faces. This article first describes the techniques and social process of Maisin tattooing. We then examine the resilience of the custom in light of changes in puberty rites and notions of gender. We argue that these contexts have lost their cultural salience as a result of the Maisins’ incorporation into the larger Papua New Guinea society. Tattooing has acquired new significance as a marker of cultural identity in a multicultural setting and as a sign of the Maisin people’s commercial success as makers of indigenous art.

When we arrived in Port Moresby in 1981 on our way to the field, we were fascinated by facial tattoos adorning women from different regions of Papua New Guinea. Most of the tattoos were simple designs, usually on the cheeks or the edges of the eyes. But a few women wore elaborate, curvilinear tattoos that covered their entire faces like veils. These, we were told, were ‘Tufi women’ from Oro Province, formerly the Northern District. To our surprise and delight — for we found these tattoos both intriguing and beautiful — we learned that the Maisin people of southern Collingwood Bay with whom we were going to work lived in the Tufi District and practised facial tattooing.

Many Oceanic people traditionally tattooed their faces and bodies, the most famous being the Marquesans and Maori (Handy 1922; Simmons 1983). Tattooing was probably widely practised in coastal Papua at the time of European contact, but detailed information is available only for a few groups on the south coast, most notably the Motu (Haddon 1894; Ison 1974; Kidu 1982; Oldham 1939; Seligmann 1910). Only women regularly tattooed themselves in these groups — as was also true of Collingwood Bay peoples.¹ But unlike the Maisin and their neighbours, southern Papuan women tattooed their entire bodies. Barton’s (1910) early survey remains the best source. He included a few paragraphs and plates on Maisin women’s tattoos — his only examples from the north east coast — but he obviously had little information. He was not aware, for example, that Maisin women tattooed their thighs as well as their faces. In the years since Barton published his article, most of the southern Papuans have abandoned tattooing, leaving the Maisin and a few neighbouring peoples on Collingwood Bay as the last coastal people actively designing the faces of young women. Consequently, our first purpose in this article is to add to the ethnographic record on this neglected art form.

We are interested in tattooing for additional reasons, however. The study of the techniques, aesthetics, and cultural significance of Maisin tattooing, in our view, cannot be
understood without considering the surprising resilience of the practice. Like most coastal Melanesians, the Maisin have long participated in the colonial and post-colonial social order. In the course of becoming Christians, submitting to a Western education system, and entering the cash economy, they have abandoned some customary practices, adopted or fashioned new ones, and tinkered with many others. Our analysis of Maisin tattooing is shaped by an interest in the linkages between changes in the external economic and political conditions of Collingwood Bay communities and modifications of cultural institutions within the society. We will argue that Maisin tattooing needs to be understood historically. As the conditions of their lives have changed, the Maisin have discovered new reasons to tattoo adolescent girls and, in the process of recontextualization, have found new significance in the custom.

James and Achsah Carrier (1985) recently addressed a similar question in a study of the effects of economic transformation on indigenous kinship and exchange in the Admiralty Islands. They point out that colonization drastically changed the ways Manus people organized their productive activities, with important consequences for traditional leaders, but left intact many elements of the precontact social structure. Viewed in isolation, these elements 'seem quite stable and resilient'; yet from the larger perspective of the changing regional economy under colonialism 'this resilience is illusory' (1985:506). The old kinship and exchange forms continued within a transformed social and economic system that in turn altered their significance to Manus people and their practical impact on villagers' lives. Resilience, in other words, was only at the level of formal culture.

Like the Carriers, we argue that a narrow focus on elements of formal culture in Melanesian village societies tends to exaggerate cultural continuity while masking external linkages (cf. Carrier and Carrier 1987). This insight, of course, is not original (e.g., Wolf 1982), but it rarely is applied to such subjects as art, mythology, or ritual in small-scale societies. Although Maisin tattooing looks very traditional, we are impressed by the flexibility of the custom. Before the Second World War, Maisin tattooing was strongly associated with puberty transition rites and with a pronounced opposition between the sexes. In Collingwood Bay communities, as in southern Papua, colonization hastened the demise of most puberty ceremonies and muted (and greatly complicated) formal gender distinctions. Most women elsewhere in the contacted regions stopped tattooing, but the Maisin enthusiastically carried on. Why? We see little evidence that the Maisin are more conservative than other Melanesians or that tattooing represents either the key to their cultural system or an irrelevant 'survival'. Maisin tattooing is not an example of resistance to change but, in many ways, of an embrace of changing conditions. The demise of puberty rituals and changes in gender rules and symbols have led to corresponding reassessments of tattooing along more individualistic lines of personal adornment and achievement. In addition, Maisin have found that their women's tattoos give them a very visible status (as 'Tu'f people') within the multicultural mix of Papua New Guinea. Ethnic pride only partially accounts for this emerging sense of cultural identity. As producers of the finest and most commercialized tapa (bark-cloth) in Papua New Guinea, the Maisin have solid economic reasons to accent their artistic achievements.

Because we wish to present both an ethnographic description and historical analysis of tattooing, we will divide the essay into two parts. The first outlines tattooing techniques and associated practices and points out specific changes and continuities. The second part puts tattooing into the larger contexts of puberty transition rituals, gender symbolism, and the commercialization of art forms. We will trace how changes in these contexts have
altered, often in subtle ways, the implications of the ancient custom of inscribing women's faces.

I

The Setting

In the early 1980s the Maisin numbered around 1500. Most lived in eight neighbourhoods on the southwestern corner of Collingwood Bay in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. At the turn of the century, the Maisin were forcibly brought under government control and the Anglican mission set up a school and church at Uiaku, supervised by Melanesian teachers (Barker 1987). Eighty years later, Maisin society was well integrated into the larger economic and social structures of Papua New Guinea. A third of the population had permanently migrated from the region, most of them to enter high school and begin professional careers as doctors, nurses, teachers, civil servants, and priests. Migrants’ remittances provided a mainstay of the local economy. In the villages, church, school and various business committees occupied the centre of social and political life, largely supplanting the kin-based feasts and ceremonial exchanges that formerly provided the venue for competition between leaders. Yet Maisin villages retained a distinctly ‘traditional’ ambience. In part, this was the result of their economic isolation from roads and seaways linking them to urban centres. The rural Maisin were still subsistence horticulturalists, dependent on the local environment for most of their material needs. In addition, the people retained many indigenous practices and ideas, including a strong moral emphasis on kin and exchange relationships, a lively concern with sorcery, and numerous rituals and customary practices, the most exotic of which was the tattooing of adolescent girls faces (see Barker 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Tietjen 1984, 1986; Tietjen and Walker 1985).

Most of our information comes from the neighbouring villages of Uiaku and Ganjiga, which had a combined population of around 500 in 1982. The villages were divided into fifteen contiguous hamlets, occupied by sections of twelve named patri-clans (iyon). The clans, or lineages within the larger clans, controlled estates composed of village and garden lands, tapa designs, ritual prerogatives, ceremonial rank, plant and animal emblems, and body decorations. All but the largest clans were exogamous, but the level of neighbourhood endogamy, for those who did not migrate out of the region, ranged between 75 and 80 per cent (Barker 1985a:225). Every villager could trace numerous kinship and descent ties with everyone else. Neighbourhood solidarity was reinforced by common participation in the community school and Anglican church which had occupied the centre of Uiaku since 1901.

The Process of Tattooing

According to one of the best tattooists in Uiaku, the custom of adorning women’s faces with buwaa (tattoos) originated ‘when the heaven and earth appeared’ and the Maisin people emerged from the ground far to the west. Curiously, Maisin narratives, most of which are told by women, make virtually no mention of tattooing. The custom, however, is undoubtedly old. It was well-established when the missionaries made their first records of the Maisin. John Percy Money, the lay missionary who established the first church in Uiaku, between 1901 and 1910 took several invaluable photographs of recently tattooed girls and of one girl wearing a bark-cloth hood (jeoki) while undergoing the operation (see Fig.1). It is also widespread. The Maisin’s coastal neighbours to the north — the Ubir, Miniasia,
and Korafe — also practised facial tattooing in the recent past. While there have been many changes in details, the basic process and technique of tattooing appear to have been remarkably stable over the last 80 years.

Figure 1: Tattooed girl at Uiaku village, photographed by Percy John Money, c. 1902-1909. A black substance appears to have been applied to the subject's face to highlight the tattoo for the photograph. (Mitchell Library).
The following description of the process of tattooing is based primarily on interviews with tattooists and their clients as well as our own observations. We will deal with the following matters: the timing of tattooing, the interactions between tattooists and their clients, the methods and aesthetics of tattooing, the seclusion of girls undergoing the operation, and the status of newly tattooed girls. The 'ethnographic present' is 1981-86.

Tattooing marks the transition from childhood to adolescence for women. Parents and close relatives decide specifically when a girl should be tattooed, although girls have some say in the matter. The onset of menstruation and the enlargement of the breasts signal that girls should be tattooed, but other factors also enter into setting a time. First, the parents must secure a tattooist (not always easy because only a few women possess the requisite skills). Second, tattooists and their clients prefer to undertake the tattooing of girls in groups of two or three at one time, rather than singly. Moreover, villagers favour certain times for tattooing, particularly the months leading up to large public celebrations at which the newly tattooed girls may display themselves. In late 1982, for example, seven girls underwent tattooing in Ganjiga in preparation for the annual patronal church festival held in Uiaaku in December. Sometimes the parents and close kin need time to build up a supply of food and gifts for the tattooist and her people, especially when she lives some distance away or when the girl is a first-born child (who should undergo a first-born ceremony soon after her tattooing). Finally, if the girl has entered high school and still wishes to be tattooed, the operation must be scheduled during school holidays or after she graduates and returns to the village.

A survey taken in 1986 revealed that almost all women who had spent their puberty in Uiaaku and Ganjiga were tattooed, while several women who had returned to the village from high school and most women who remained in urban centres after completing school were not. Women who had left to attend high school tended to be tattooed at a later age than those who remained in the village, if they were tattooed at all. Once a woman marries she cannot have her face tattooed.

Villagers prefer to have their daughters tattooed by close kin (practitioners tattoo their own daughters); but as there are never more than a few women who can do the operation, people must settle for whom they can find. In 1985, for example, only three women, all in Ganjiga, designed tattoos. After making arrangements with the tattooist, the parents bring their daughter to her house, often with a small gift of food. The parents may or may not remain for the first part of the operation, as they choose. Inside the house, the tattooist shaves off the girl's eyebrows and cuts back her hair to expose the forehead to the hairline. She then dips a twig into a black dye and traces out a design on the girl's face. When she is satisfied with the design, she may invite the mother in to approve it. One tattooist claimed that she also invites the father. On most occasions, however, the parents trust the skills of the tattooists and do not check her work.

There have been some changes in the materials used for tattooing. Up until the 1940s or so, tattooists commonly pricked the skin with a thorn from the wild tata vine, which grows near the village. The thorn was bound to a short handle. Holding this, the tattooist tapped the tata thorn with another stick, called the kimama. Soon after the Second World War, tattooists began to use bundles of two or three steel needles to prick the skin. A few still use the kimama hammer, but most prefer to prick the skin with a direct up and down stroke of the hand. There have also been changes in the black dye (mii). This was formerly made by combining charcoal with the juice of an herb collected near the village called buwa kain ('tattoo medicine') which together produced a thick black liquid. Today, tattooists
often use stove black or commercial black dye instead of charcoal, which produce, in their opinion, a darker and longer-lasting tattoo. In the old days, tattooists provided the materials, but since today these may cost money they are usually brought by the parents of the client.

Tattooing takes place in the cool hours of the early morning and late afternoon. If there are two or more girls, the tattooist works on the face of each in succession. The girl being tattooed lies down, folding her arms and resting her head on the tattooist’s lap. The tattooist dips her twig brush (nasa) into a cup of black dye (mi) and first redraws the design on the forehead. Then she follows the line of dye, jabbing with the needles to prick the skin. When blood is flowing freely, the tattooist applies more dye and presses it in with a piece of cloth (which also absorbs excess blood and dye and helps to stop the bleeding). Needless to say, the operation is extremely painful and some girls must be held very tightly to prevent squirming. However, the tattooist provides no medicines to ease the pain. If all goes well, the tattooist may proceed as far as the bridge of the nose in the first session. In subsequent sessions, she does one side of the face and perhaps the neck, and later the other side, completing the first application to the whole face in three to four sessions over two or three days. The face swells up badly, especially after the first tattooing. After the swelling and pain subside, the tattooist reapplies the pattern. The procedure may be repeated as many as six times until the tattooist is satisfied that the tattoo is sufficiently dark and permanent. The process takes from a month to six weeks to complete.

Figure 2: Betty Claire Doke and Christobelle Warama of Marua Village, November 1986. (John Barker).
Unlike women along the southern coast of Papua, Maisin women insist that they apply no standard patterns. Each tattoo, they say, is the unique product of the ‘thoughts’ (mon) of their maker. Like snowflakes, every tattooed face is different, yet there is a recognizable Maisin style of facial tattooing. The Maisin do not favour the sort of geometric designs worn by Motu women, which form vertical columns up and down the face, leaving large open patches. Maisin tattoos have relatively thick lines which follow the contours of the face. Typically, the lines form parallel swirls, curves and circles along the sides of the cheeks and neck, the chin and the lips. In almost all cases, tattooists draw a descending series of ‘V’ s on the forehead, leading into two parallel lines down the bridge of the nose (see Fig.2). They try less to apply a pattern than to mold the tattoo to the contours of the individual’s face. The entire face is covered by the black webbing in such a way that the girl’s personal attractiveness is emphasized as much as the tattoo itself.

Tattooists receive no special training. Villagers, however, recognise that only a few women are gifted and patient enough to design faces. One tattooist commented, ‘It is very hard work, so the woman must be strong and have good concentration (seramon). She must at the same time cook for her husband and children’.

From the moment they begin the tattooing process, the girls remain in a semi-secluded, somewhat ‘liminal’ state (Turner 1969). When outside of the house, they keep their heads covered with a cloth (feoki) so that no one may see their faces. Today girls use a towel, but in the past a special tapa cloth hood was prepared by the mother or the tattooist (see Fig.3). A generation ago, according to some informants, girls undergoing tattooing kept to a secluded part of the house, eating and sleeping behind a tapa cloth screen. Today, they eat and sleep with the tattooist’s family, often with their faces exposed to all members, including the husband. Most tattooists allow mothers to visit. Some also allow fathers to come (although men seem rarely to take up this opportunity) and one tattooist opens her house to female and male siblings and close friends. On no occasion are the girls themselves allowed to go out visiting. Undoubtedly, this long seclusion encourages parents to turn to nearby kin to tattoo their daughters.

The secluded girls spend much of their free time helping the tattooist. They accompany her to the garden, fetch firewood, carry water, and help

Figure 3: Ida Elsie Sanagi of Uiaku village, November 1986, modelling a feoki hood traditionally worn while undergoing tattooing. (John Barker).
Facial Tattooing Among the Maisin

with young children in the house. Their mothers also pitch in, regularly bringing raw and cooked food to the tattooist.

From the time they enter seclusion to a month or so after their emergence, the girls abstain from certain foods. The prohibitions are intended to safeguard and enhance the beauty of the tattoos. Tattooists say they have relaxed these prohibitions considerably, to the point that they no longer agree on the essential taboos. All agree that eating mangrove crabs (geri) and large hermit crabs (gun) induces an unpleasant sense of these bony creatures crawling across one’s face and causes girls to squirm during their tattooing. The experts also say that hot food and drink are bad because they cause sores to form from tattoo punctures. Most tattooists forbid coconuts, lest the ‘grease’ dilute the charcoal dye under the skin and make the tattoo fade. A few tattooists also prohibit the white flesh of fish, apparently to prevent the tattoo from bleaching. The tattooists themselves observe no food prohibitions.

In the old days the girls were not allowed to bathe, mainly because it was thought the water would wash out the dye, but one tattooist also pointed out that the girls might be frightened to see the reflection of their disfigured faces in water. The girls cleaned their bodies during seclusion by sitting near a fire until the sweat came out and then rubbing this off with a towel. On occasion, the tattooists living in one ward arranged for girls in their care to meet in a hidden part of the bush behind the village. There the girls built a fire and spent a few pleasant hours sharing stories while they sweated. This custom has long lapsed. Girls today are permitted to wash their bodies with water, but they continue to sweat to clean their faces.

When the tattooist is satisfied with the results of her work, she sends word to the parents to come on a certain morning. Usually a girl’s close kin and the tattooist together help to decorate her, but sometimes one or the other will undertake the entire task. If a girl is a first-born child, she normally is only lightly decorated, if at all, in anticipation of her upcoming puberty ceremony (see below). Most girls, however, are extensively decorated. On the morning of emergence from seclusion, the tattooist, mother and close female kin take each girl to river and wash her body (although not her face). They pierce her ears and line them with red shell or filed plastic disks. They then smear her with coconut oil to enhance the tattoo. They complete the decoration by crushing aromatic plants into coconut husk armlets and leg bands and adding an abundance of shell necklaces. The newly tattooed girl wears a striking tapa skirt, called a wamatuvi, dyed red with a plain fringe at the base. The absence of black charcoal designs on this tapa cloth accents the wamatuvi’s redness which, in turn, suggests to the outside observer the blood let during the tattooing and, perhaps, the advent of menstruation which precedes tattooing. The Maisin themselves, however, say only that this is the ‘custom’.

At this time or soon after the tattooist and the girl’s kin make a series of informal exchanges. These vary a great deal depending on distance of relationship between the tattooist and her clients and the ability of the clients to give. In most of the cases reported by the tattooists we interviewed, the tattooist gave the girls one or two tapa cloth skirts (and often their wamatuvi) and gave the parents a pot or two of food. The girl’s kin usually responded with pots of raw and cooked food, and, occasionally, tapa cloths, mats, and cooking pots — the last all items made and exchanged by women. In recent years, a few villagers with access to remittances from working relatives have given tattooists cash. The largest gift we recorded was 30 kina. Gifts of between 2 and 5 kina were more common.
For the next two to five weeks, the girl now makes ‘beautiful’ (boresi) to the village. She usually discards the wamatuvi within a day or two for a decorated tapa skirt, often bearing the emblematic design of her clan. She remains in the village for most of this time, does no heavy labour, and travels about visiting with friends and kin. She should maintain the food taboos to keep her tattoo dark and bold. When she and her parents feel that her ‘display’ has gone on long enough (from two weeks to a month), she quietly discards the costume for regular European clothes and resumes village life.

Maisin tattooing obviously entails ritualized patterns. The ritual process includes some elements common in initiations elsewhere, notably the seclusion of the girls during the rites, the enforcing of certain privations upon them, and their celebrated emergence in a transformed (decorated) state into a new status. But, to draw upon Allen’s (1967:5-6) useful distinction, female tattooing among the Maisin might be better understood as a puberty ritual. Allen defines initiations as periodic inductions of candidates into discrete social groups, often involving the transfer of secret knowledge. Maisin tattooing meets neither of these conditions. The cohorts of girls tattooed at the same time do not form age groups and the girls receive no secret or specialized knowledge from the tattooist. They do, however, receive significant experiential knowledge as they suffer the stabs of the tattooing needle. Those who have endured the operation consider themselves to be well prepared for the trials and burdens of womanhood. Tattooing thus marks the transition of girls from a pre-sexual to an actively sexual state, makes them ‘beautiful’, and tests their ‘strength’ (wenna) as they approach the rigours of child-bearing and women’s labour.

There are some other general features of interest. Tattooing is a secular process. Despite the weakened condition of girls as they undergo tattooing and the abundance of blood, Maisin women insist that there is little danger of sorcery. Tattooists ridiculed our suggestions they might use protective magic or appeal to spirits during tattooing — normal healing practices followed after illnesses or injury. We also found no evidence to suggest that Maisin women think that tattooing physically transforms girls into women. Given that many girls today are not tattooed because they are away from the village in high school, there is, of course, abundant evidence to the contrary. Female tattooing is a secular ritual carried out for aesthetic ends, to make girls beautiful, and to demonstrate their endurance and strength. When Maisin adults complain of untattooed girls, they do not say the girls are not full adults but that their faces are inappropriate, especially for traditional dancing. They say that such girls have ‘blank faces’ and ‘faces that look wrong’.

It remains to comment on the overall changes that have taken place in the process of tattooing since contact. As we have seen, there have been modifications in most aspects of tattooing as the result of the increasing mobility of the people and availability of Western technology and money. Girls undergoing tattooing have not convened to sweat together in the bush since at least the late 1930s. And the associated practice of body tattooing, which we describe below, ended by the early 1940s. In the final analysis, however, the continuities remain more impressive than the changes. The tattooing process has become progressively less severe — the girls are less isolated and undergo fewer privations — but it is essentially the same in form and sequence as fifty or more years ago. Both oral and documentary evidence indicate that female tattooing has for many years been what it is today, a secular ritual marking puberty and enhancing the beauty of girls as they become sexually active and move toward responsible adulthood.
II

The Changing Significance of Maisin Tattooing

We have seen that the process of female tattooing has remained remarkably resilient over the years in Maisin society. The continuity of process, however, may be misleading if we take it to mean that the significance of tattooing in Maisin society has not changed in eighty years of colonialism. Tattooing is a secular ritual that marks the transition of girls into strong, sexually active, and beautiful women; but if cultural conventions concerning transitions to adulthood, beauty, and gender can be shown to have changed, the apparent resilience of tattooing becomes problematic. We argue in this section that these conventions have indeed changed. Tattooing persists not simply because it has cultural significance but because the Maisin have found support for the practice in the larger context of Papua New Guinea society.

Rites of Transition Into Adulthood

Before the Japanese invasion of Papua in 1942, all Maisin adolescents underwent rites of transition.\(^7\) There were three kinds: tattooing for girls, a small induction rite introducing all boys but first-borns to the insignia of their clans, and a large public ceremony for first-born boys and girls. These were puberty rites in Allen's (1967) terms; that is, they marked and celebrated a change in physical and social status from childhood to adulthood. They bore other similarities. At the climax of all three ceremonies their subjects appeared heavily decorated in new tapa and usually wearing clan insignia; they remained on display in the village for several weeks. Maisin today often refer to the three ceremonies as kisevi, recognizing their similarities.\(^8\)

The rituals differed in scale and intent. Tattooing, as we have seen, involved only the parents of the girl and her near kin. The size of the exchanges accompanying tattooing depended upon the geographic and genealogical distance between the tattooist and her clients — the greater the distance, the bigger the exchanges. Perhaps because in this (normatively) patrilineal-virilocal society most women married out of their clans and did not pass their clan estates to their children, people did not associate tattooing with the patriclans.

The male induction rites, on the other hand, were strongly identified with the patriclans. The rites usually involved only clan members and their wives and perhaps a few close kin. On an appointed day, clan elders took the adolescent boys of the clan to the river, bathed and dressed them in new tapa loincloths, and then decorated the boys with clan insignia (certain designs on the tapa, certain arrangements of shells, some feather decorations, and other details). The women in the group then prepared a meal for clan members. There were no exchanges.

The first-born ceremonies were and remain by far the largest of the three rites of transition. They capped a series of exchanges between the kin of the mother and the kin of the father which began with the birth of the parents' first child. First-born boys and girls held an ambiguous social identity until the time of this ceremony. They were not allowed to decorate themselves and, in particular, to wear their father's clan's insignia. The mother's classificatory and real brothers organized the kisevi ceremonies, thus signalling their continued interest in their sister's first child. The mother's people came to wash and dress their sister's child; and at the climax of the ceremony, they placed necklace upon
necklace upon him or her. Frequently these ornaments included some insignia of the mother’s clan, although the first-born so honoured could rarely pass these to his or her own children. First-born ceremonies drew people from several villages and required the exchange of a very large quantity of wealth and food. They often took years to organize.

Of these three ceremonies only women’s tattooing has continued in a relatively traditional form. The clan-centered induction ceremony for boys disappeared before the Second World War. First-born ceremonies still take place, but very infrequently. Most first-born children no longer undergo this ritual.

It is much easier to suggest why the boys’ and first-borns’ ceremonies declined than why tattooing is so resilient, but the explanations are probably related. The end of the ceremonial induction of boys into the clans corresponded with a radical refocusing of political activities in Maisin society from the patriclans and local alliances to village and inter-village organizations. Since the early 1950s village men have concentrated their political energies and aspirations on introduced organizations, especially the local government council, the church council, and cooperative societies. The clans remain important as markers of social and cultural identity — the villages are still divided up into clan hamlets — but the indigenous forms of social structure are no longer the primary venues for organizing or competing. Even when engaged in apparently customary activities, such as death ceremonies and exchanges, modern political entrepreneurs downplay clan divisions and speak of village cooperation. Hence, many customs that once expressed clan boundaries have become moribund or have shifted their focus to the community as a whole.

The reasons for the decline of the first-child ceremonies are even clearer. The immediate problem has been that, with easy access to high school after the mid-1950s, most first-born children have not been available for the honour. The mass exodus of young people from the villages to distant schools and jobs also led to a radical decline in the labour force available to grow the food and collect the wealth necessary for the ceremonies. Only a few people still observe the early exchanges for first-born children, let alone the ultimate event. The puberty ceremony is still held on occasion, but usually by people with access to remittance money. The entrance of cash into the exchange equation has introduced novel forms of inequality and has given apparently resilient customs new twists of significance. Recently, for example, a Maisin politician sent word to Uiaku that he wanted to ‘kisevi’ his daughter in the near future, even though she had lived her entire life in town. By showing that he was still at heart a ‘village man’ and by putting villagers into his debt with a large and expensive celebration, this aspiring politician apparently hoped to boost his electoral chances in future campaigns.

Tattooing adolescent girls does not share the practical disadvantages of the other rites of transition. Tattooing is not connected, symbolically or practically, with the patriclans. Because there have never been more than a few women capable of tattooing in the villages, many Maisin women have had to ask distant relatives or non-kin to undertake the operation. The decline of the clans and the emerging importance of the village level of organization has therefore been of limited significance for tattooing. And because the exchanges surrounding tattooing have been flexible and relatively small, the decline in village labour power has had minimal impact on this custom.

Still, it would be misleading to see female facial tattooing as a ‘survival’ unaffected by the changes occurring in Maisin adolescence. Indeed, Maisin have had to make several important adjustments. A generation ago, according to older women, a ‘bare faced’ girl bore a heavy stigma. The placing of a tattoo moved girls from ififi (early adolescence) to
susi (sexually active adolescence). Girls who were not tattooed in the old days would not participate in mangu via, 'beach play' on moonlit nights where boys and girls danced and made love. As one tattooist remarked, 'It was not right to be decorated without tattoos'. The tattoo marked the girls as ready for sexual activity and, eventually, marriage. Yet as the old folks know, and regret, tattoos no longer necessarily carry this message because they must be applied, if they are applied at all, at the convenience of the girl and her kin and may be delayed or prevented by schooling or early marriage. Moreover, the traditional forms of courting behaviour including the mangu via, have mostly disappeared, replaced by all-night string band parties and other functions arranged by youth groups which untauttooed girls may attend (Barker 1986). The old people speak of these changes with regret, and mutter about how 'education' has made the girls too 'big-headed', too independent.

Clearly tattooing still marks a transition into adulthood for those girls who undergo the operation. But it is not as necessary as it once was. One can find acceptable reasons for avoiding tattooing and there are few penalties for doing so. Tattooing is no longer something everyone must do. It involves careful planning, for parents must rely upon a smaller circle of kin for help in making the necessary exchanges than in the past. Perhaps it expresses a growing individualism: unlike their elders, adolescent girls speak of a desire for adornment and peer pressure as their primary motives for undergoing tattooing. Tattoos enhance their maturity and femininity; they have less importance as markers of a new status.

Changes in Gender Identification

While male and female rites of transition contained structural similarities, they introduced the sexes to distinct worlds. Most obviously men and women took on different responsibilities. Men cleared garden land, hunted and fished, built houses and canoes, launched attacks against enemies, and engaged in ceremonial exchanges and feasts. Women shared the more routine tasks: cultivating and harvesting the gardens, transporting food, wood and water to the villages, cooking, gathering shellfish and wild foods, and bearing and nursing children. The rites of transition indicated that the different sexes had attained the 'strength' (anno wenna) needed for their particular tasks. In addition, the ceremonies introduced men and women into different social worlds. The boys' rites were associated with specific clan estates composed of emblematic decorations, migration histories, land, and shared ancestry. Born into particular clans, mature men faced the political challenge to build alliances beyond their immediate kinsfolk without blurring the identity of the clan and its estate. Girls coming down from the house of the tattooist might also wear clan emblems: but their tattoos indicated individuality, the girls' ambiguous association with particular factions in the society.

This distinction between male social identity and female individuality extended to forms of material culture. Men manufactured or otherwise controlled shell ornaments, tapa motifs, feast houses, and lime sticks. Many of these objects displayed inherited designs, insignia, and natural materials known collectively as evovi, owned by and denoting particular social factions. The wealth controlled by men was exchanged between themselves only in ceremonial situations. They rarely exchanged evovi - normally only at first-born ceremonies — for these items marked clan and lineage boundaries. Women in contrast made mats, wove stringbags, drew tattoos, and beat and designed tapa cloths.
These items were not as scarce, durable, or valuable as those controlled and exchanged by men. Further, women were free to make such designs as they wished, constrained only by aesthetic conventions. They drew no equivalent of the evovi on faces or on clothes (other than evovi designs on tapa controlled by their brothers or husbands). Women circulated the items they made, like the food they harvested and cooked, in both informal and formal exchange networks, usually in co-operation with brothers and husbands.

The contrast in male and female labour and material culture resonated with a political contrast between men and women. Men grew up in, stayed with, and exploited the potential of their clans while building wider alliances. A man lost his clan or lineage identity only through adoption or by conscious choice. Women upon marriage moved between clans. Maisin elders disagree on whether women could retain and use their father’s clan insignia after they married, but women certainly could not pass emblems on to their children. Unlike men, women were rarely overtly politically active; but their influence reflected their movements for they could draw upon the political capital of their husbands and brothers and, behind the scenes, influence both.

Oral traditions concerning the lapsed custom of body tattooing give the intriguing impression that village women periodically formed their own community, separate from the men and free of clan politics. During adolescence and well into adult marriage, women tattooed the areas of their bodies hidden under their tapa cloth skirts: their legs, thighs, and buttocks. The designs of these tattoos reportedly resembled those applied to the faces (we have not seen any). The same experts who designed facial tattoos drew patterns on the women’s bodies, but the process was not ritualized and involved very informal exchanges. Women added to these body tattoos year after year during the annual grass-burning hunt, when the men left the villages for two to three weeks. This was one of the few occasions, and certainly the longest, where the women came together in the absence of husbands, fathers and brothers. There was thus a very close association between tattooing and female identity. This custom, along with the practice of newly tattooed girls sweating together in the bush, appears to have been abandoned around the Second World War.

Through their engagement with Christianity, Western institutions, and capitalism, the Maisin have also allowed the formerly sharp distinction between male and female to blur. For example, although men and women usually maintain the traditional division of labour, it is not remarkable to see people breach the rules: men carrying produce back from the gardens or women net fishing. Villagers have also relaxed or abandoned many behavioural taboos that used to obtain between men and women. Further, men no longer make shell valuables and have come to rely upon money and commercial goods for formal exchanges — exchanges that today take place infrequently. Such changes have no doubt been encouraged by the realities of a reduced labour force in the villages with the extensive out-migration of the 1960s and 1970s, by education, and by the example of other Melanesian people the Maisin have encountered in recent years. But more importantly in our view, they correspond with the shift in local social organization from local alliances built around clans to village-level organizations such as government councils, church councils, and school associations. Although men take most of the leadership positions, the organizations formally include all villagers, male and female. In other words, the opposition of women and men, while still a practical reality, is becoming less ideologically salient.

Tattooing has not been entirely immune from the blurring of the symbolic and practical boundaries between the sexes. Women, for example, ceased adding body tattoos
when the men, probably because of extensive outmigration during and after the Second World War, gradually shortened the annual grass hunt from a few weeks to a single day. In recent decades, as we already noted, a significant minority of women have not received tattoos. Meanwhile, during the War, men began to have women apply tattoos to their arms. A few years ago, one young man further challenged the exclusivity of women's tattooing by having a small tattoo applied to his face. So far, however, male tattoos have been crudely applied and in no way resemble women's facial patterns. They are typical of the simple designs (often no more than roughly sketched names) one finds in urban Papua New Guinea.

Facial tattoos remain the most striking marker of feminine identity in Maisin culture. But the feminine identity they boldly mark is not what it was several generations ago. Given the many changes in other forms of gender symbolism, tattooing seems especially anachronistic — a 'survival' appreciated primarily, perhaps, as a form of adornment. While we have already noted an increasing individualism in the practice and rationale of tattooing, however, we think this suggestion is misleading. First, Maisin women have modified their understandings and practices of tattooing in ways consistent with the decline of puberty ceremonies and changes in gender relations. Second, and more importantly, they along with Maisin men have discovered new reasons within the changing socio-economic circumstances of their society to continue with great enthusiasm what is becoming their signature tradition.

Tattooing as a Cultural Symbol and Artistic Industry

Adult villagers expressed great unhappiness about women who left the village and never received tattoos. But they were resigned. It is the 'new learning', they said, 'the new Maisin' who today 'do as they like' (cf. Barker 1986). Women in high school and the towns miss their chance for tattooing because the operation is inconvenient. One elderly woman told us 'The missionaries did not stop it. No one said they should not do it — no one in the government, mission, or village. Now some do not want tattoos, but no one prevented them'. Those parents and girls who choose to undergo tattooing thus make a powerful statement of their commitment to tradition — a statement that they could not have made when tattooing was a routine part of growing up. Thus one young woman spoke of her tattoos: 'It came this way from underground, from the ancestors [i.e., at the time of creation]. That is the only reason we do this'.

Tattoos have been a customary practice from before the time of European contact, but only recently have they become a statement of custom. Unlike other prominent modern renditions of tradition, such as ceremonial dancing or bridewealth exchanges, tattoos are permanent and ever-present to the eye. As in most parts of Papua New Guinea, daily dress in Uiaku consists of used clothing originating in Australia. Lacking cult houses and other physical public representations of ancestral inheritance, the curvilinear enhancements of women's faces provide the most constant reminder of the Maisins' roots.

If tattooed faces present an image of cultural tradition within the community, they also provide a dramatic expression of cultural identity without. Villagers are keenly aware that the enhanced faces of the 'Tufi women' of Collingwood Bay are unique in Papua New Guinea. One tattooist expressed the common sentiment in this way: 'It is bad to leave the village and marry without a tattoo. When one is in town, one can always recognise a Tufi girl by her tattoo'. Several people took special pride in that Uiaku strongly supports the
custom while some of its non-Maisin neighbours, notably the people of Wanigela near the regional airstrip, have long abandoned it. Tattooing has thus become a marker of cultural identity in multicultural Papua New Guinea.\(^{13}\)

The emergence of facial tattoos as a marker of cultural identity is not an accident of history. We would argue that tattooing, as a form of aesthetic production has been affected by overall rearrangements in the local production of material culture and Maisin's increasing engagement in the cash economy. In the past forty years, men have ceased making many of their traditional objects, including most clan emblems, partly because these things have been displaced by money in exchanges and partly because they have no place in village-level politics carried out through introduced organizations. But women's production of traditional items remains steady and strong. This is in no small part due to the opening of a market for indigenous crafts in Papua New Guinea since the mid-1960s. For the past twenty years, Maisin women have marketed bark-cloth through the local church and government agencies to be sold in artifact shops in urban centres.

Women's products have an ambiguous status in present-day ceremonies. They are 'gifts' — which women exchange between themselves — but they are also potential commodities, as any of them can be traded for tapa and tapa can be sold (cf. Gregory 1982). Thus tapa cloth, mats, string bags, and clay pots have not been displaced by money in exchanges to the degree that men's wealth has been. To further complicate the picture, marketable items such as tapa cloth can no longer be considered simply as being in the women's domain. Men play a very active role in promoting, marketing, and exchanging these things. And they pocket much of the cash. The commoditization of bark-cloth encourages Maisin to think of women's craft work as a form of specialized labour the rewards of which may be appropriated by men. A few men have even started making tapa cloth themselves. And several have attempted to standardize techniques for making tapa and designs in an effort to set 'quality controls' for the product. As these men appropriate women's labour and products (along with the profits), the old symbolic opposition of male and female blurs and is replaced by a new economically based form of sexual domination. This ideological blurring of traditional gender distinctions, of course, also makes it easier for Maisin to accept tapa and tattoos as markers of cultural identity that represent both men and women.

Far fewer women design tattoos than make bark-cloth, but the tattooists number among the most prolific and accomplished tapa designers. We found indications that tattooists and their clients are beginning to rethink the nature of tattooing along the lines encouraged by the commercialization of tapa. We have already noted the growing emphasis on aesthetics over custom. Rather than viewing tattooing as a shared custom, something that marks the universal movement into womanhood, some tattooists speak of their work as a specialized form of artistic labour, which can be purchased with cash and performed on any client regardless of kin relationship. A number of women from non-Maisin villages on Collingwood Bay have been tattooed in recent years, for example, a service for which they paid considerable cash and presents. This sort of disarticulation of labour from its product is, of course, a prime feature of industrial economies and the world economic system in which Papua New Guinea is embedded.

As a rite of transition, tattooing continues to mark the movement of Maisin girls into womanhood. But with the demise of other puberty ceremonies and traditional courting practices, this has ceased to be its only, or perhaps, main accomplishment. Today tattooing also marks girls as 'Tufi women', as members of a particular region in the nation who have
artistic talents which have been broadly marketed. In sum, as Maisin have become less convinced of the saliency of tattooing as a marker of transition and gender in the local context, they have become aware of the value of tattooing as a marker of their place in the national society and marketplace.

CONCLUSION

We began this article by examining the tattooing process among the Maisin as an institution in its own right. We noted that it is generally ritualized and contains elements common to rites of passage, notably a liminal stage when the girls are secluded and undergo privations and a celebrated re-entry into the community. The tattooing process has changed in many details in the past forty to fifty years. But, overall, given the dramatically changed circumstances of Maisin lives, one cannot help but be impressed by the continuity of its processual form.

We next turned to examine the initiatory or transitional elements of the rites more closely, placing them in the larger contexts of other puberty rituals and notions of gender. We argued that both puberty rites and traditional notions of womanhood have changed for the Maisin and become far less important than they used to be. Tattooing retains some of its old associations and significance, but as the Maisin have entered into the multicultural world of Papua New Guinea, they have come to rationalize tattooing as a cultural institution that all Maisin, men and women, may identify with, and as a form of artistic specialization congruent with other forms of specialized labour found in the complex economy.

In short, Maisin women continue to tattoo each other not only because this is a culturally appropriate way for them to mark their female natures, but also because they wish to display their identity and artistic ability in the pluralistic society in which they now live. The ‘traditional’ appearance of tattooing is deceptive. Its continuing popularity reveals it as a most modern ancient custom.

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NOTES

1. The Managalasi people living in the interior of Oro Province reversed the coastal practice: males receive
tattoos during puberty ceremonies (Noble 1978).

2. There were two ranks. The superior kawo clans, according to oral traditions, were alliance builders who
had the prerogative to organize and hold inter-tribal feasts in their hamlets. The subservient sabu clans
are said to have 'helped' the kawo with these feasts, but themselves enjoyed the right to organize raids
and warfare.Maisin still observe a number of rather trivial ritual distinctions between the ranks (kawo
members, for example, may wear chicken feathers in traditional costume) but with the decline of warfare
and feast-making since the turn of the century these ranks have lost most of whatever political importance
they may have had (see Barker 1985a; Tietjen and Walker 1985).

3. Outside of Collingwood Bay, these people are collectively known as 'Tufi people' after the administrative
centre at the north end of the bay. Ubir and most Miniafa people have given up the custom, but the
Korafe who live near Tufi still tattoo. The tattoos of the different groups appear very similar, but we
have little information on tattooing outside of Maisin villages.

4. We interviewed five tattooists (three of whom were still practising), seven women, and two men in Uiaku
and Ganjiga specifically about tattooing. Their ages ranged from early 20s to 80s. We also had ample
opportunity for observation and informal questioning in the course of 22 months of fieldwork. Our
assessment of historical change is based upon oral testimonies, Barton (1910), and mission documents
and photographs.

5. The survey included 160 women between the approximate ages of 18 and 45, from 71 (of 94) households
in Ganjiga and Uiaku. Of the total, 79 had been tattooed and 81 had not. 76 of the non-tattooed women
had married into the villages from non-tattooing societies or had left the area to attend high school, to
take up professions, and to marry. At the time of fieldwork, very few high school and other out-migrating
women had returned. The vast majority of younger women living in the rural villages, and virtually all
older women, wore tattoos.

6. Tattooists and clients alike told us that these cash transactions should not be seen as 'payment' (jobi) but
instead as gifts marking 'friendship' (marawa-wawe).

7. Although Collingwood Bay was outside the combat zone, most able-bodied men served as labourers with
the Australian forces. As in the rest of coastal Melanesia, the Second World War was a watershed in
the Maisin's relations with the outside world.

8. Both the clan induction and first-born ceremony are called kisevi, but the latter is the 'real kisevi'.
Tattooing may be called kisevi, but frequently people say 'buwa se-ta', 'she applied tattoos'. Maisin call
an end of mourning ceremony, which bears a formal resemblance to the first-born rites, 'kisevi'; they also
call it (more properly according to some) roi babast, 'face cleaning' (see Barker 1985b).

9. The prime example is the inter-tribal feast which used to be organized competitively by higher ranking
kawo clans. For many years church patronal festivals and holy days, especially Christmas and Easter,
have marked the main occasions for feasting and traditional dancing. Committees representing all of
Ganjiga and Uiaku arrange these festivals, which are held on neutral church grounds.

10. Several men in Uiaku and Ganjiga claimed descent from a man who had married into the clan in the
distant past - usually from a foreign group. They validated their distinct identity with a number of
unique evo, while also claiming their clans' evo.

11. Most women at the time of fieldwork wore their husbands' insignia (if any at all) on ceremonial occasions,
but a small minority wore insignia of their fathers' clans. In December 1983, a woman dressed her
daughter in her maternal clan's tapa cloth for a church festival. Her husband's people and her brothers
roundly condemned this innovation and she desisted.

12. Terence Hays (personal communication) has reminded us that early explorers and missionaries reported
'Amazon' communities along the southern Papuan coast. It is possible that similar customs were
practised there.

13. This attitude may be shared by portions of the population who have permanently moved to the towns,
although they rarely find it convenient to have their own daughters tattooed. In 1983 a young woman
who had lived most of her life outside the village, and who had attended college in Canada and was
preparing for university, returned for four months to stay with relatives. She told one of us that she was
very eager to have her face tattooed because it was the most distinctive custom of her people. Her stay,
however, was too short to engage a tattooist.
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