

M067010

Thesis
DU
740
.42
.C35

A cord of three strands is not easily broken:
Birth, death and marriage in a Massim society

Sandra Callister, B.A. (Sydney), Dip.Ed.

Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts with Honours to the

Division of Society, Culture, Media and Philosophy

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Sydney, Australia

June 2000

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
CONVENTIONS	x
CHAPTER 1 DEATH AND MORTUARY RITUAL	1
FACTS AND FIGURES	3
A DEATH IN PROCESS	15
MANY VOICES, MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES	21
CONFLICTING EMOTIONS, CONFUSING PASSIONS	23
WILL THE REAL ME PLEASE STAND UP?	26
FAMILIAR ROUTINES, DISCORDANT VALUES	30
REFLECTIONS ON A GRIEF OBSERVED	32
CHAPTER 2 THE CENTRALITY OF DEATH	37
PART I	37
COMMON THEMES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND ELSEWHERE	37
THEMES AND PATTERNS IN MASSIM CULTURES	45
LANGUAGE ANOMALIES REVEAL KEY THEMES	52
PART II	55
SOME CONTRASTING AND CONTROLLING THEMES AND VALUES	55
FOOD AND FEEDING	55
RELATIONSHIPS	66
INDEBTEDNESS	68
POWER AND STATUS	79
UNWRITTEN RULES OF MISIMA SOCIETY	83
CHAPTER 3 MORTUARY FEASTS FOR THE DEAD	85
PART I	85
THE FEASTING MOVEMENT	85
RITES OF PASSAGE AND RITUAL	85
INTERTWINING STRANDS	91
PART II	109
THE FEASTING SERIES	109
<i>TOTOULIL</i> —ACCOMPANYING THE DEATH	111
<i>HIGHIG</i> —WASHING AWAY THE CORRUPTION	113
<i>IWAS</i> —UNTANGLING TWISTED OBLIGATIONS	117
<i>LOBEK</i> —FINISHING THE DEBTS	121
<i>ABABVIHI</i> —REVISITING THE DEATH	130
<i>LIMI LEKALEKA</i> —DEMOLISHING THE HOUSE	132
<i>BAKU HI PALO</i> —SINGING ALL NIGHT	135
CHAPTER 4 AFFINAL RESPONSIBILITIES	143
THE BODA—WORKING TOGETHER	143
BIRTH AND DEATH	146
DEATH AND MARRIAGE	154
HAGALI—REMEMBERING THE FATHER'S LINE	156

POWON—COMPENSATING FOR LOSS	174
THE BURDEN OF WIDOWHOOD	181
<i>LEYAU</i> —HANGING THE NECKLACE	185
<i>KALEHE HI GOVE</i> —DANCING THE MANGO	192
FEASTING OPPORTUNITIES	198
RELATIONSHIP GROUPS	198
BOBUTON SERIES	198
DISCUSSION	199
<u>CHAPTER 5 BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES SURROUNDING DEATH</u>	<u>203</u>
SPIRITS OF THE DEAD	203
SICKNESS AND DEATH	204
SPIRITS ON THE MOVE	208
SPIRITS COMMUNICATING	212
TABOOS—LIVING UNDER RESTRICTIONS	215
FORGETTING THE NAMES	220
<u>CHAPTER 6 DOMINANT THEMES AND VALUES</u>	<u>225</u>
KEY SYMBOLS	225
A MIXED BLESSING	235
A CORD OF THREE	241
CHANGING CUSTOMS, UNRAVELLING THREADS	245
KIN DUTIES	246
LAND DISPUTES	247
CHILDREN'S WOES	248
IN-LAW EXPECTATIONS	249
CORPSE TUG-OF-WAR	250
PIG BURNINGS	253
DEATH RITES AND RICHES	254
WIDOWS' 'WEEDS'	
ILLUSTRATIONS , MAPS AND GRAPHICS	
PLATES 1-4	145
PLATES 5-7	153
PLATES 8-11	173
MAP 1	3
MAP 2	5
MAP 3	6
FIGURE 1. ABILABA AND HER CHILDREN	96
FIGURE 2. SPONSORS OF THE <i>SIMENTI</i> IN 1984	126
FIGURE 3. THE <i>HAGALI</i> PRESTATION AND ITS EXPECTED RETURN	168
FIGURE 4. THE <i>POWON</i> PRESTATION	179
FIGURE 5. MUTUAL OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES BETWEEN SOCIAL GROUPINGS, AS PLAYED OUT IN MORTUARY FEASTING	197
FIGURE 6. ENUDI AND HIS IN-LAWS	249
TABLE 1. THE MAIN STAGES OF THE 1984 <i>LOBEK</i> AND <i>SIMENTI</i> HELD AT SIAGARA	128
TABLE 2. CONTRIBUTIONS FOR ITEMI'S <i>LIMI LEKALEKA</i>	135
TABLE 3. MISIMAN MORTUARY FEASTS AND RELATED CUSTOMS	139
TABLE 4 PARALLELS BETWEEN BIRTH AND DEATH RITUALS ON MISIMA	152
TABLE 5 <i>POWON</i> PRESENTATION FOR GILA	179
TABLE 6. THE <i>LEYAU</i> BETWEEN MIDENOSI AND THE LAILOGA CLAN	187

TABLE 7. THE <i>LEYAU</i> HELD BY JELO AND HIS IN-LAWS	190
TABLE 8. THE STRANDS OF MISIMAN SOCIETY AND THEIR ASSOCIATED FEASTS	198
TABLE 9. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MISIMAN EXCHANGES	200
GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOR THE MISIMA LANGUAGE	260
REFERENCES	269

TABLE 7. THE <i>LEYAU</i> HELD BY JELO AND HIS IN-LAWS	190
TABLE 8. THE STRANDS OF MISIMAN SOCIETY AND THEIR ASSOCIATED FEASTS	198
TABLE 9. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MISIMAN EXCHANGES	200
GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOR THE MISIMA LANGUAGE	260
REFERENCES	269

ABSTRACT

Death is an inevitable part of life, and as such, is central to understanding the cultural themes of a people. Death facilitates the expression of Misiman themes of being-in-the-world through the medium of mortuary rituals, wherein community values and beliefs are emphasised and reconstructed. Generosity, conviviality, a sense of cooperation and submissiveness towards authority all find an outlet in and are augmented by the activities and occasions comprising mortuary events. The motivating forces of self-esteem and prestige are channelled into the exchange of pigs and valuables; balance is achieved in relationships at all levels. Respect owed to ancestors is memorialised and displayed through the sequence of feasts as well as by the erection of gravestones; *communitas* is evident in the women's exchange of pots of food and in the workers eating together.

Death constructs society, causing disparate groups to coalesce and be reconstituted within the context of mortuary feasting. It is the marriage alliance on Misima, however, that constructs the form and shape of mortuary feasting, balancing matrilineal and patrilineal emphases and providing the third strand to the strong cord that binds Misiman society. As each of the three main groups of relatives carry out their mutual obligations at mortuary feasting times, each group reconstructs their roles, and at the same time asserts and affirms the importance of the relationships which bind them together.

Mortuary ritual is foundational to an understanding of Misiman people, their values and interactions; it is an ongoing performance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to many people for their help and encouragement during the writing of this thesis, the research for which I began when my husband and I and our two older children first arrived on Misima in February of 1978, and continues into the present.

I did a lot of the actual reading and in-depth research from June 1994 to June 1996 while I was living in the village and enrolled as an external student at Macquarie University. After a break from active writing in order to concentrate on preparing the Misima New Testament for printing, I took up my studies again at the start of 1999 when I was able to live in Sydney, and attend the university and, especially, pursue more reading in the library. Throughout my time as a student, I have had able assistance and encouragement from Dr Nicholas Modjeska, my supervisor. I also thank Dr Jennifer Biddle and the members of the postgraduate seminar group which met during 1999 for their encouragement. Special thanks go to Dr Estelle Dryland who stepped in towards the end and really helped me get finished at a time when there were other complications in my life; she made extensive suggestions concerned with the more technical aspects of writing the thesis.

How can I possibly mention by name all the people on Misima, and especially in the village of Siagara where we have lived and worked for over twenty years? I thank them for their forbearance and patience, especially in the early days. Even though we did not know the language when we arrived on the island, my husband and I made the decision not to use English as a

medium of communication. So by choice we threw ourselves into the deep end of the pool and somehow managed to stay afloat long enough to start paddling. We took our exercise books around with us, writing down words and expressions as we came across them and then falteringly trying them out. We quickly learned to keep our encounters with people short in those early days, before they grew embarrassed in our presence and started avoiding us the next time they saw us! Many the occasion I inflicted myself upon the women and made them feel uncomfortable as I sat struggling to work out what was being said, pretending to laugh when everyone else did but really feeling disoriented in a fog of confusion. I want to thank Malida Wailosa in particular, who persisted in coming regularly to visit me and chattering away in Misiman, gently correcting my inept comments and helping me understand relationships in the village. It was also very helpful to have a number of younger girls who came and helped with looking after my children, taking the washing and the washing-up to the river while I struggled to write up some of my observations and do some language drills.

My next-door neighbours, Nevenak and Tonowak, were always there to guide and to help. And, in the early days before his death, their son, Sinodi—who suffered from polio—used to sit and watch the activities of the village, and was always available when we had questions. Their daughter, Naomi, together with her husband, Bill Collins, graciously allowed us to use their village house for the first two years while we were building our own; not only that, but when we would arrive on the island late in the day with our four children they often extended hospitality to us for the night, until we could find a truck to take us and our belongings out to the village. They have continued to regard us as family, and as first Tonowak and then, recently, Nevenak,

have died, we have tried to fulfil our obligations to Naomi and the family as an adopted son and daughter-in-law should.

I want to specially thank Kenasi Napoleon and Pelen Absalom who have been the main ones to not only help with the translation of the New Testament, but also have made themselves available when I have had questions to ask about customs and traditional ways of doing things. Together with members of the Misima Language Committee who were involved in the compiling, editing and publishing of *Tauwau Nimana Ggina*,¹ Kenasi and Pelen have been happy to share their knowledge and expertise.

My co-workers with the Papua New Guinea branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics—especially those based in Alotau, the capital of Milne Bay Province and at our main centre of Ukarumpa in the Eastern Highlands—have been very helpful to us as a family throughout our stay on Misima. They have shared their computer skills, their anthropological knowledge and insight, and given practical help, among other things.

I would also like to thank my four children: as they grew up at Misima they have been able to share many adventures and be part of our lives as adults in a way that few children and their parents are privileged to experience. We have those bonds in common; they have been able to put my perspective right on more than one occasion and bring me out of periods of despair (as I have wondered, when will I ever learn to say the right words in the right way?); they have provided me with moments of joy and sorrow, as together we have learned the Misima way of being-in-the-world.

¹ 'Tauwau's five fingers'

To my husband, Bill, go grateful thanks for the quiet, gentle way he has urged me on to complete the writing of this thesis; he has given up his time and energy in order to take on additional household duties, thus allowing me the opportunity to be free to devote myself to the technicalities of computers and the complexities of writing down my experiences. He is a careful proof-reader, and is also very good at curbing my flights of fancy, keeping me on track as I have recorded my understanding of how Misiman society works.

Finally, I must give thanks to the One who has looked after me all my life, and given me strength and perseverance to not only live in another culture, but also the insight and appreciation of another way of life which has allowed me to compile my observations and present them here in this thesis. In the words of Paul, Thanks be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed me ... (Ephesians 1:3).

CONVENTIONS

Misiman language words are in italics. (See glossary for more explanation.) When the word has been used more than once in close proximity, I omit the gloss within the text.

I have placed the English gloss in parentheses immediately following the Misiman word. Where the translation is literal rather than normally accepted usage, I have used quotation marks.

I have signalled the use of words from other PNG languages, e.g. Tok Pisin (Melanesian Pidgin) or Dobu, by the convention of underlining. These words are found primarily in chapters one and two.

At times, I have tended to use a literal translation of the Misiman way of expressing things, rather than the more usual English words. For example, I refer to the processing of sago as "make sago." I have tried to indicate such usage in a footnote.