

Chapter 1 Death and Mortuary Ritual

Death is central to understanding the cultural values of a people. Misima mortuary feasting reflects and embodies the highest values of Misiman society, constituting the glue which holds the society together. It provides a window through which we see not a still-life picture, but a dynamic video clip, where emotions and passions involved in commemorating the dead are acted out in ritual and performed in behaviour. Ties of matrilineal and patrilineal kinship are orchestrated in the movements of the feasting symphony, while marriage alliances and the corresponding obligations are an underlying tune discernible throughout the entire performance.

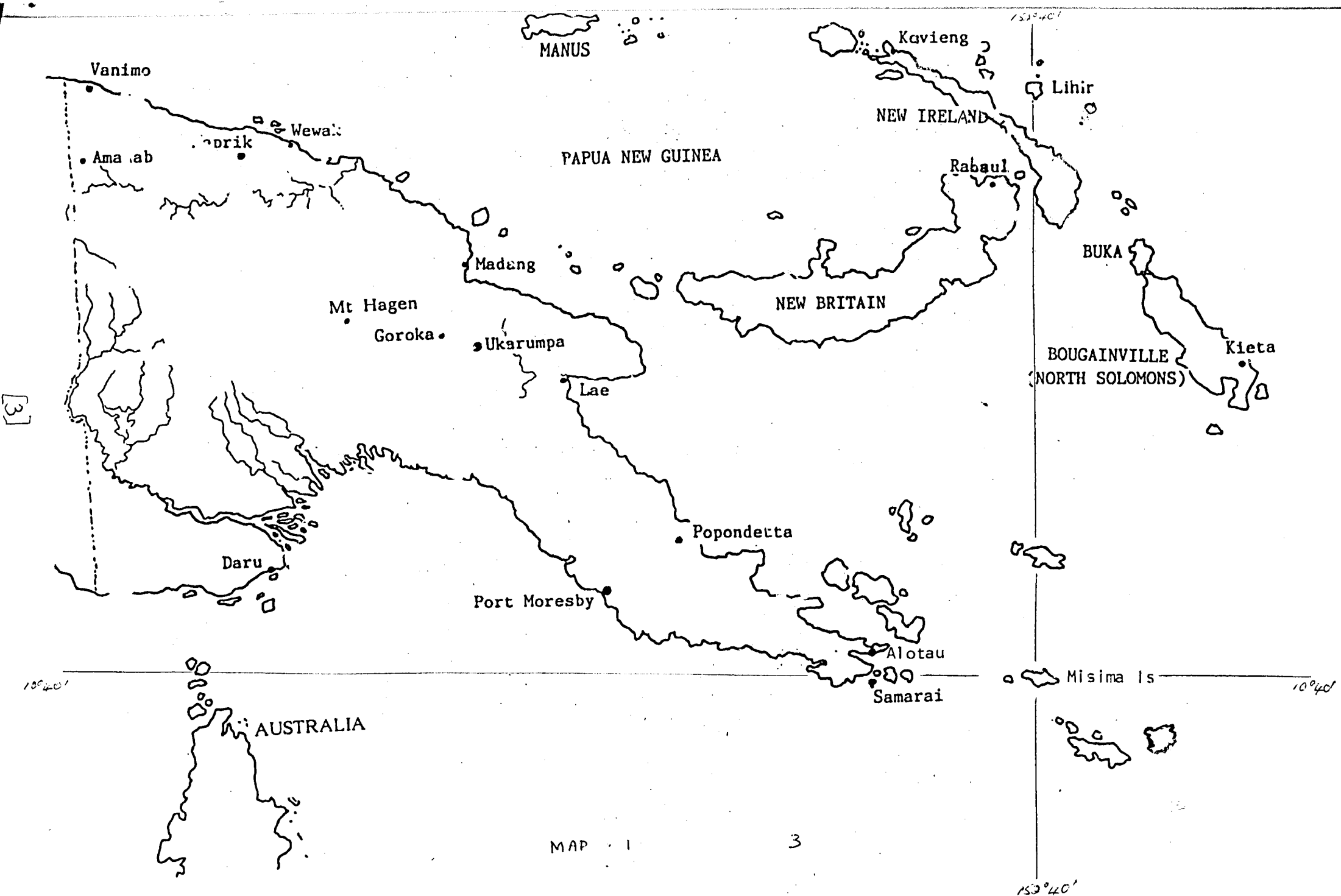
I have observed and documented the death process at Misima over a period of twenty years, during which time I have interviewed many people and entered into numerous discussions pertinent to mortuary feasting. As I have done so, I have been intrigued by the complexity of mortuary feasting rituals, and the ripples and undercurrents that are caused and manipulated by death. In this thesis, I will demonstrate how kin, in-law and residence affiliations associated with death and funerals are played out on the behavioral level, and how these highlight and underscore the major themes and values which permeate the Misiman worldview at a deeper level.

I begin this chapter by providing background information about Misima society, and then proceed to my central topic of death with a brief account—by way of illustration—of a funeral at Misima. I follow this with a consideration of some of my own values as a researcher and position myself

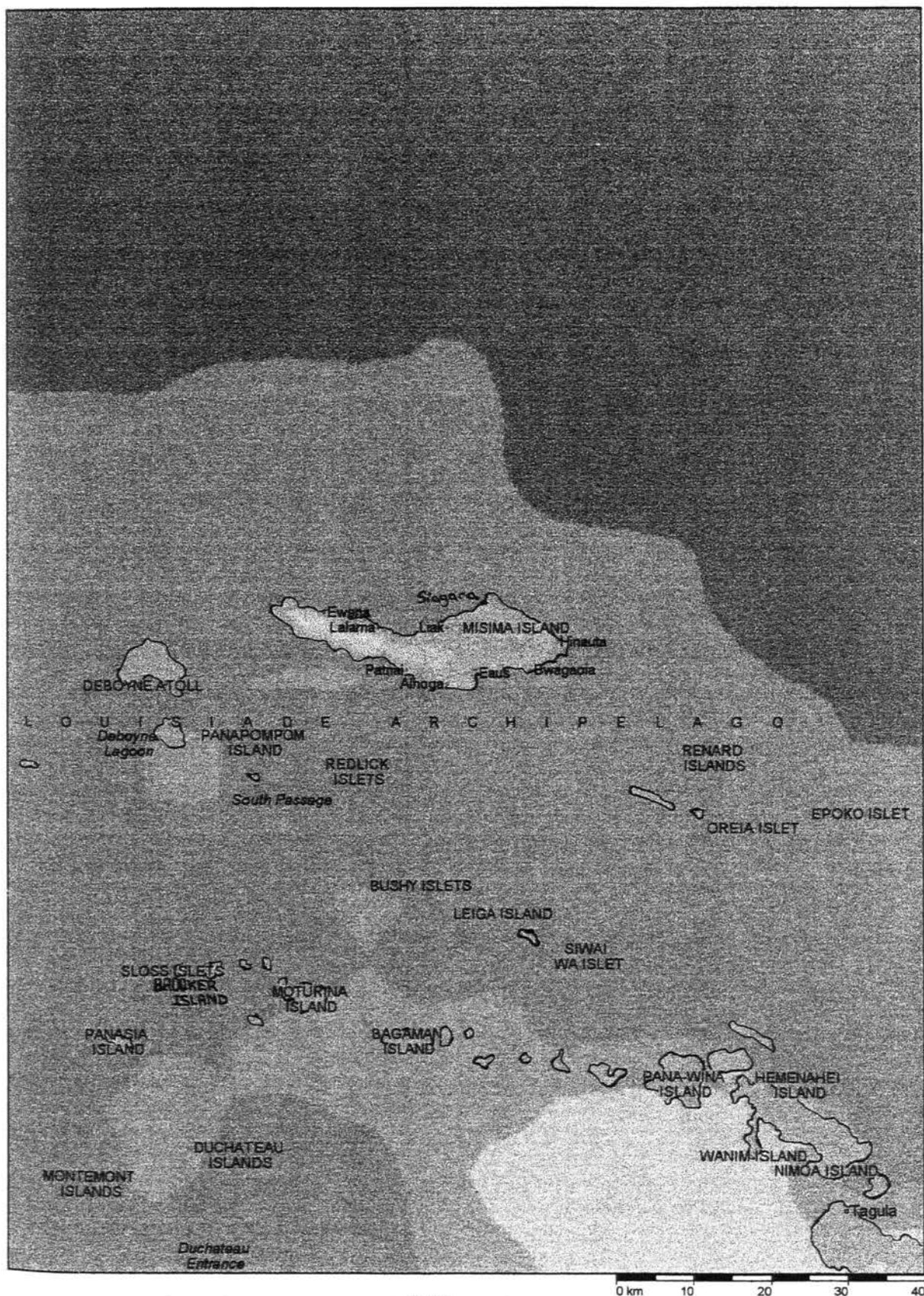
in the Misiman scene. The chapter closes with my reflections on some of the underlying emotions and concerns evoked by a particular death.

In Chapter two I set Misima death processes within the context of other Massim societies, and explore notions of death in other cultures. I then elaborate upon some of the controlling and contrasting values and themes that, in my view, underpin Misima society, and I relate these to the custom of mortuary feasting. Chapters three and four pursue the theme of relationships and how they are developed, manipulated and played out through the mechanism of rituals performed in honour of the dead. I provide detailed ethnographic descriptions, first of the obligatory feasting cycle as it is carried out by the matrilineal, and then of the feasting events which can be sponsored by affines.

In Chapter five I examine some of the beliefs, attitudes and motivations to do with the supernatural which inform Misima society in general and mortuary ritual in particular. These are embodied in certain taboos associated with feasting customs. Chapter six concludes the thesis, investigating some of the key symbols highlighted by mortuary rites, and connecting those to themes and values already identified.



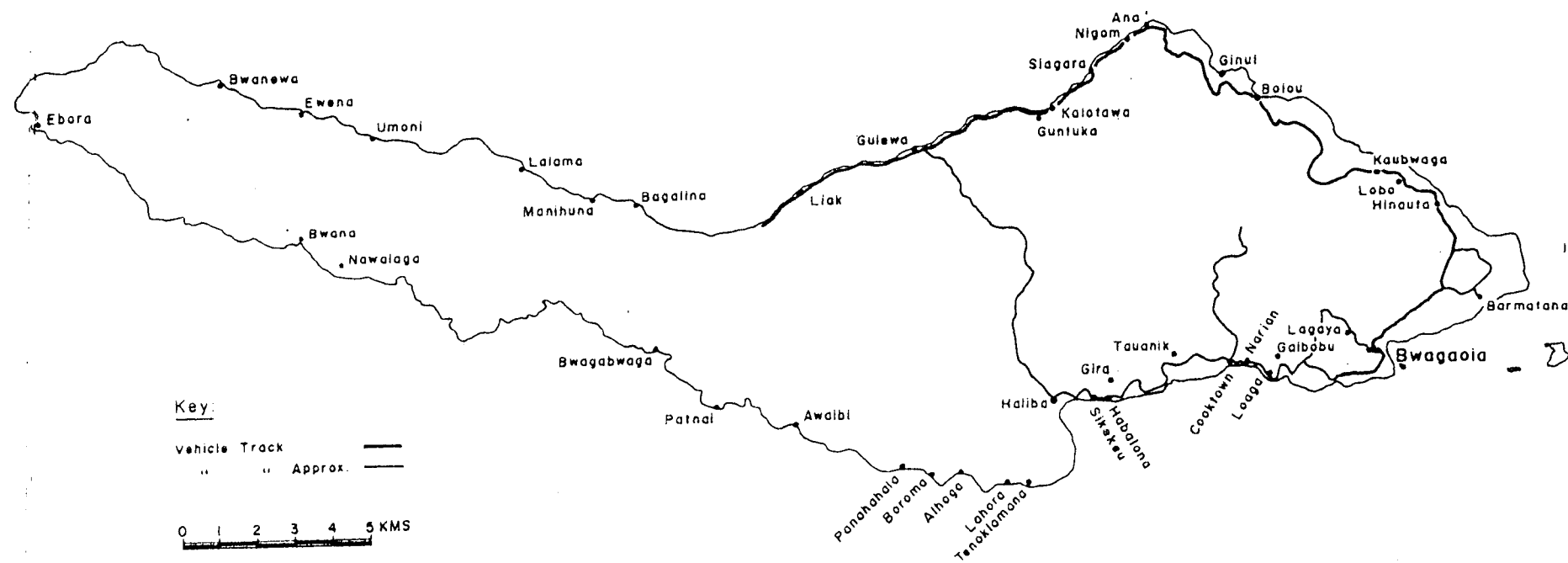
MAP 2



Microsoft
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Papua New Guinea
Pacific Ocean

PAPUA NEW GUINEA MISIMA ISLAND



LOUISIADE ARCHIPELAGO

Facts and Figures

Misima Island, Panaeyati, Panapompom, Kimuta and the islands of the Calvados Chain¹ are home to approximately fourteen thousand people who speak the Misiman language. Located just at the 10 degree 40 minutes latitude line and stretching for forty kilometers within the 152 degree line of longitude, Misima is geographically part of the chain of islands and atolls that comprise the Louisiade Archipelago in the Milne Bay province of Papua New Guinea. (See Map 1.) Linguistically, the Misiman language is part of the Austronesian family, as are all the languages in this southeastern region of Papua New Guinea, excepting that of the people of Rossel Island. Culturally it is included in the area known as the Massim, named, according to Young (1983:4), by a French scholar in 1888. Socially and culturally, common traits such as matrilineal descent, residence in hamlet clusters, trade conducted through sea-faring expeditions, and a comparatively high status for women are found at Misima, and similarly throughout the Massim group (Young 1983).

Historically, and even up to the present day, Misima's people enjoy a certain prominence in the Louisiade Government Council area, due to the selection of Bwagaoia—a township built on the lagoon at the eastern end of Misima—as the district headquarters. Other people groups in the area also are familiar with the Misima language and use it as a trade language, such as Tubetube in the west, Woodlark in the north and Rossell Island to the south-east.

¹ Brooker, Motorina, Panaumala, and Kuwanak are the main inhabited islands in the Calvados Chain, where about 1500 of the Misima-speaking population live. See Map 2.

Misima is a long, narrow island, very mountainous in the interior, with cliffs, sheer rock faces and waterfalls falling straight into the deep ocean, particularly at the western end. In the interior, mountains rise to one thousand meters. While some encyclopaedias attribute the reason for Misima's emergence from the sea to volcanic action, there is no evidence of volcanic activity on the island; other scholars state that the geological formation is consistent with an uplift of part of Papua New Guinea's mainland mountain range.

Rainfall is consistent throughout the year, with no one period labelled as the 'dry season'. Misima people distinguish various winds as the prevailing force in the climate and as indicators for both the seasonal routine of the garden work of planting and harvesting, and for the trading voyages amongst the islands. During December, the *aluwab* (a gentle northerly breeze) blows, bringing relief from the otherwise hot and humid conditions. The *yalas* predominates during the early part of the year, blowing consistently from the west. Cyclones can occur unpredictably at this time. From May through to about August, the main wind—the south-east trade known as the *babaliman*—can sometimes blow unceasingly for weeks; it signals the time for the harvesting period to begin. At the end of this period, Misimans clear the gardens and prepare for the planting of their seed yams saved from the previous harvest. The *yavana* that blows from the south is changeable. Although a pleasant breeze during February – March, it may blow cold during the winter months from July onwards.

People live predominantly on the relatively flat coastal strip, but tend to establish their gardens on the hill slopes of the mountains, an area conducive to the growth of the yam since the yam vine prefers to grow upward, twining itself around a pole or climbing a slope. Village populations usually number between three hundred and one thousand people, though in more recent times people are

tending to move to more isolated hamlets where related households can enjoy family life. Houses are constructed on posts made of hardwood, dug deep into the ground; because it is a cyclone-prone area, the main corner posts go from ground to roof, thus enabling the houses to sway with the wind to a certain extent. The roofs are made of sago leaves folded over vines, while sago bark is most commonly used for the walls. Coconut fronds are tied together to form a ridge capping, while split coconut palms are used for the bearers. Misima people usually construct the main house—for entertaining and sleeping—first, followed by a smaller addition for the kitchen which is joined to the main house. (See Plate 1.)

Misimans state that people are divided into twelve land-owning *un* (clans), although when questioned, they can only name ten. According to Olive Peter's research (1976:18), these ten clans originated from one source, the Manilobu clan. Because of a breach of public etiquette and a lack of responsibility exhibited by the women, the ruling headman at the time separated the people into ten different groups, allocating each clan their *mumuga* (place of origin). Each clan also has its own bird and fish totems. Inheritance of land and clan membership is through matrilineal descent, although there is a preference for viri-local residence.

Subsistence gardeners on Misima practise the 'slash-and-burn' technique. During July and August, the gardens are cleared of forest growth, followed by the burning of dead leaves and wood. A fence is built around the cleared area to keep out pigs and cows. The *siga* (boundaries), essential to the ordered planting of different crops and to the internal division of the land by individual gardeners, are marked by large logs or tree trunks laid out in a grid pattern. After the garden ground is dug, the seed yams are planted in small mounds. While men do the heavy work of clearing, it is the women's responsibility to do the planting and the weeding of the yams during the nine month's growing period, followed by the

harvesting. From March onwards the yams are harvested, beginning with the smaller yams yielded from the previous year's planting, and continuing with the new crop in May and June.² Groups of women dig the yams and store them in garden sheds—or under hurriedly gathered piles of large leaves—for protection from the weather until such time as they can be loaded into *egowa* (round baskets of woven coconut leaves) and carried on the head to the village.

Other root and vegetable crops are planted along with the yams. These include taro, sweet potato, tapioca, several varieties of cooking bananas, pumpkin, pawpaw, *aibika* (*Hibiscus manihot*), amaranth, pineapple, sugarcane, sweet corn, snake beans, tomatoes and cabbages. Different varieties of trees are cultivated, both in the gardens and close to the villages; these include mango, guava, orange, lemon (*muŋ*), Polynesian Chestnut (*siyaya*), *galip* nut, *tulip* (*Gnetum gnemon*), *kapoi* (*Burckella obovata*) and the Malay apple.

When we³ began living on the island, the weekly schedule took the following form:

Sunday: church begins around 12 a.m., followed by discussions concerning the following week's activities. People would sit around chewing betelnut and socialising, or visit relatives or friends in their houses and enjoy a meal together.

Monday: usually a day when individual family groups worked in their gardens.

Tuesday: the conch shell was blown and people would assemble around noon in order to hear the work duties for the day. Sometimes villagers would be required to clear the areas around the aid-post,

² These times are approximate, subject to local variation from village to village.

³ "We" here refers to myself, my husband and our three children; a fourth child was added in 1980. We began living in the village from May 1978.

the church or the school; at other times, the whole village would be enlisted to renew a house roof, or build a garden, or make sago for feasting purposes⁴

Wednesday: Women's Fellowship day. The meeting could be preceded by a quick visit to the garden, and perhaps followed by groups of women collecting firewood for the old or pregnant members—the 'shut-ins' of the community.

Thursday: usually a major garden day, involving the retrieval of yams from the garden for cooking in individual households over the next few days.

Friday: another community work day.

Saturday: gardening and market for the older folk; young people undertook a four hour walk to the main town of Bwagaoia, played soccer or basketball, and walked home again.

This weekly schedule was severely disrupted by the opening of a gold mine in 1989. Easy access to ready cash by the younger people employed in the mine meant increased power was now in their hands, thus diverting people's respect for the authority of the older men. Money is used freely, not only for the purchase of junk food to pacify a grumpy child or to distribute recklessly among one's cronies at a drinking session, but also for hiring people—even relatives—to do the major work of house-building and garden clearing that was formerly the province of cooperative labour. This shift in attitude has had an impact on the twice-weekly community work force: it is common nowadays to see only a few women, young children and a smattering of older men turn out, more to enjoy the social occasion than for the pleasure of seeing work accomplished.

⁴ "Make" sago is a literal translation of the common Misiman expression for the activities involved in processing sago.

Mortuary feasting, however, still has the charisma and power to draw people together to work, lured as they are by the promise of a good time in congenial company, 'greased' by liberal amounts of pig meat and sago porridge.⁵ This is the key ritual enjoyed by Misimans, both traditionally and today, the other main ritual being the celebration of the first-born child in a family. By contrast, marriage between exogamous clans has a relatively low profile and is unmarked by particular ceremonies.

Traditional beliefs include a reliance on ancestral spirits who are pacified, thanked and appeased mainly through mortuary feasting, a strong faith in the efficacy of magic to both combat and manipulate the power involved in sorcery and witchcraft, and a day-to-day preoccupation with the activities of sprites and spirits that inhabit rocks, trees and waters.

Misimans talk about the fact that their ancestors used to be cannibals. In those days, warfare in the form of localised raiding parties was carried on between villages. Despite intermittent raids, however, the tradition of inter-island trade flourished, facilitated by sea-faring canoes constructed primarily on Panaeyati Island. The pots produced on both Panaeyati and Brooker islands were, and still are, the basis of exchange for essential house-building materials, together with betelnut and yams supplied by people from Misima Island. Trading partnerships were established by the Misima people with folk on the Calvados Chain islands, as well as with other language groups from further afield, such as on

⁵ I use the word 'greased' advisedly, as it refers literally to the grease of both pig fat and the coconut oil in which the sago is cooked — both of which Misimans enjoy and associate with feasting. For Misimans, it also has the connotation of 'smoothing the way' as folk from different clans and villages meet together for a social occasion, with the possibility of old feuds resurfacing.

the islands of Sudest, Tubetube, Nimowa, and Rossel. Pigs and shell valuables were the desirable items of exchange from the Misiman point of view.

In early times, Misiman contact with white people was limited, the islanders having infrequent contact with sailors from ships that found their way into the area over a couple of centuries. During the 1880s, there was increased contact in the form of confrontations with Australian government boats, subsequent on less-than-profitable and less-than-pleasant encounters with labour recruiters—also known as 'blackbirders'—from the Queensland coast. Then in 1888, after an initial disappointment experienced by early miners because of a low yield from the gold fields on nearby Sudest, a rush was started by two men who commenced washing gold on the north coast of Misima (Nelson 1976; Hess 1980). In 1910, the first company began operating; mine shafts were excavated and a small railway constructed. Miners continued to work on Misima until 1942 when, under threat from the invading Japanese, they were evacuated and the shafts collapsed. From the 1950s through to the 1970s, new leases were taken up and exploration continued sporadically. In 1979, a Canadian company called Placer came to the island together with CRA⁶; after investing considerable preparatory work into surveying and prospecting, as well as compiling a feasibility study, Placer finally opened their gold mine in 1989.

Misimans acted as carriers for the early miners, sold them food, and pilfered from their camps; a few islanders took up panning for gold in their own right. The first major impact was at Siagara village on the north coast, a village of only eight or nine houses at the time. In the early 1890s, the Australian government built a

⁶ Conzinc Riotinto Australia Ltd. A subsidiary of this company, Bougainville Copper Ltd, were the ones who developed the major copper mine at Panguna on Bougainville (Ashton 1988).

house on the harbourside at Bwagaoia, and imposed Australian rule and notions of justice.

The third group of foreigners with whom Misimans had dealings was the missionaries. In 1891 a representative of the Australasian Methodist Missionary Society arrived on Panaeyati, an island located off the western end of Misima (Nelson 1976:35). He was accompanied by Tongan and Samoan missionaries when he landed on the south coast of Misima. This was the beginning of the proclamation of the Christian message, and the forerunner for Misimans of what has now become the United Church of Papua New Guinea. For almost a hundred years the Methodist/United Church presence was relatively unchallenged, other than by a small contingent of Roman Catholic adherents in Boyou village and in the town of Bwagaoia, who were visited from time to time by an expatriate priest from Nimowa. The 1990s, however, have seen the arrival of the Seventh Day Adventist Church as well as some pentecostal churches, including the Christian Revival Crusade and the Christian Life Centre. In addition, there have been brief forays by members of the Baha'i faith and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Misimans have continued to adapt to these agents of change, but not without confusion, conflict and chaos at times. This was epitomised by an outbreak of violence in 1942 when Buliga from Siagara village, who preached a new world order, murdered several government officials on Motorina Island, and was subsequently condemned to death by hanging for his crimes. Buliga laid the foundations for an ongoing millenarian movement or cargo cult (as it is known locally), based on communication with ancestral spirits and the promise of a time

when all black men would become white and would possess all the food and goods they required.⁷

In 1978 my husband and I and our two (at that time) small children arrived at Misima, in response to an invitation sent by the members of the island's United Church to the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Papua New Guinea. They had asked for a team of translators to work on a revision of the pre-war *Buki Tabu* (New Testament in Misima) and to establish a vernacular pre-school programme so that Misiman children could learn to read and write in their own language.

During the twenty years we lived in the village of Siagara, we first learned the language, and set up a year-long literacy program which eventually included all the villages and islands in the Misima language group. We completed descriptions of the phonology and grammar of the Misima language, and then in May 98, had the joy of being present at a festive day celebrating the dedication of a new translation of the Misiman New Testament and the distribution of four thousand copies. After home leave in Australia during 1999-2000, we return to Misima to work on the translation of parts of the Old Testament, help a committee of Misimans revise their church hymnbook, and publish a dictionary in the Misiman language.

A Death in Process

What does death look like at Misima? How does it feel? In this section I want to describe not only some of the traditional procedures and rituals undertaken at

⁷ See Whiting (1976) for a detailed account of this facet of Misiman life.

the time of death, but also the emotions and attitudes displayed at a particular death.⁸

Datala's husband Metana, aged somewhere in his forties, died one Thursday in November 1988 after a long struggle with asthma. The evening prior to his death, he fell and damaged his backbone, causing it to become swollen. Subsequently he was transported to the hospital in the main town of Bwagaoia, an arrangement made by the aid-post orderly who attended him in the morning. As people rehashed the death in their discussions that morning, they expressed the thought that this bone-shaking journey in a truck was the main contributing factor to his death. Some villagers however attributed his death to sorcery, since it was reported that during the night he had gnashed his teeth, a sign of spirit visitation.

While Metana was originally from one of the other Misima-speaking islands, his wife Datala is related to almost everyone in Siagara village, either as an in-law or as a fellow clan member. She belongs to Lailoga, a major land-owning clan in the eastern half of the village, high in numbers and prestige. She has several sisters but only one brother named Pibona, who was a real asseet, since he had outside employment—he could provide much of the store goods required for feeding the visitors at the funeral.

About six a.m. the morning after the death, a DPI⁹ boat hired for the occasion landed at the beach near the village. It was overflowing with store-bought goods, a supply of mats, and people from Bwagaoia. At ten o'clock, the truck bringing Metana's body back from the hospital arrived. It too was crowded with people, including Datala who was supported by two older ladies propping

⁸ Since the one who died was a friend's husband and this friend belongs to the clan with whom we are normally associated in the village, this death had a particular impact on me.

her under her armpits. The body was taken up into the house belonging to Datala's mother's brother, Enatu senior. An outcry of grief in the form of wailing chants burst forth from the women in attendance.

Nevenak, the wife of the Lailoga leader, went immediately to the house. I followed her. Satana (a Lailoga matriarch) who was the first on the scene, was soon joined by Labula and Danitu (both wives of prominent Lailoga men) who wailed loudly for a long time, saying:

Oh *taliu* (my sister), Datala *lagona* (husband) ee, you gave me things, we can't say you were mean in any way.

Women continued to gather, mainly the wives of Lailoga-related men and their children. A tractor bringing more people arrived from the next village. The younger women generally did not wail, but sat quietly, occasionally sniffing. Mebina, who both belonged to the same clan as the deceased and was Enatu's wife, came into the room where the corpse lay, wailed, then went out into the kitchen to see to the cooking that other women had already started. Distraught and not able to settle, she walked restlessly through the main room into a side room where she changed into 'good' clothes; she then came out again and began to wail, uttering loud shouts and gasping for breath. She rose and went back into the other room, wailed, came out again, and sank to the floor exhausted. Then she wailed again and banged the coffin, crying out, 'Why did you leave me?'

Datala's eldest son came up into the house, threw himself on the floor and mourned, saying:

⁹ Department of Primary Industry

Nam ee (O Dad), when you left I didn't think it would be anything; you said you would come back again.

Satana, the oldest woman present, wailed for a while, then sat back dry-eyed and proceeded to instruct Datala about how to phrase her mourning chant.

Say *lagou ee!* (O my husband), then talk about the children and their grief. Give details about all the things he bought at the store and gave you.

She also gave advice to others including Mebina, who seemed to become exhausted with crying:

Just stop for a while, stand still, get your breath back, then you can cry again. Breathe deeply, don't hyperventilate, so that you are gasping for breath.

Meanwhile, the younger men were in the cemetery digging the grave; this group was comprised mainly of local members of Manilobu (the deceased's clan), who worked together with the sons of Lailoga men. When the grave was almost completed, Pibona (a young cross cousin of Datala's and her brother's namesake) left the group and went to the house where the body had now been laid out in its newly-purchased coffin. He measured its length with a vine, allowing about three inches on either side. The grave needed to be dug sufficiently long and with room to spare at each side in order to accommodate the coffin.¹⁰

At about a quarter to three in the afternoon, the *teliteli* (funeral, lit. 'putting') began. An upsurge of rhythmic ululation from the house signalled that the coffin was being nailed down. The procession to the cemetery began. Women carrying wreaths of flowers and greenery walked in front singing hymns, followed

¹⁰ On more than one occasion, we have been present at a burial where the hole was not large enough. The proceedings were delayed while the workers picked up their spades and shovels and dug out some more dirt.

by the coffin, which was carried on the shoulders of young men. The crowds fell in behind.

On reaching the grave site, people seated themselves on the ground, some in the shade, others on top of the firm surface of the cement slabs which formed the gravestones. The five men participating in the service were dressed appropriately in sombre garb, wearing ties, long-sleeved white shirts and long, dark-coloured trousers. They clustered together at the western end of the grave site. The mourners watched solemnly as the men used ropes to manoeuvre the coffin into the roughly prepared grave.

Once the coffin was in place, Beten (Dataala's brother-in-law) produced a large heavy bag from which six bedsheets were taken one at a time and spread over the coffin; quantities of powder and perfumed spray were handed around for people to use on the coffin also. Two wreaths were laid out, one at the head and one at the foot of the coffin, and a large plain *laewa* (pandanus mat) was passed down into the grave, and folded in half over the coffin. *Gilesa* (gravel) was then brought from the beach by young girls who toted the gravel-filled baskets on their heads; these were tipped out along the sides, filling in the gaps between coffin and the walls of the grave.

The funeral service commenced. It was read from the service in the hymnbook, with different people taking part—saying prayers, delivering an obituary, or reading appropriate passages from the Bible. The service was interspersed with the desultory singing of hymns. At the conclusion, Pomas, in government employ at Bwagaoia, rose to his feet and addressed the crowd. During his speech, he provided some background information about Metana, speaking of his relationship to the dead man and telling the mourners how he had

cared for the deceased as a child. Metana had been married from his house, and subsequently worked in stores belonging to cooperative societies before leaving to manage the store on Panaeyati Island. He thanked the Siagara people for their work that day—the cooking, attendance at the funeral, and other kinds of work—and finished by exhorting everyone to keep on working for God.

As people dispersed after the funeral, more grumbling and mutterings were directed at the aid-post orderly who, it will be recalled, had insisted Metana be taken to the hospital. It was said that the nurses returning by truck from the baby health clinic had stopped by Datala's sister's house where Metana was staying at the time of the accident, and advised him to stay in the village rather than be taken to Bwagaoia. That night, *gemanau* (young men) kept vigil in Datala's sister's house to protect her and her family from the *ola* (spirits of witchcraft) who were obviously implicated in the premature death.

The day closed with general feasting. People from other areas gathered together with friends and relatives and were given cooked food prepared by Lailoga people.

As I reflected on the day I realised that in the interim between their arrival and the time when the actual funeral began, a number of people had climbed up into Nevenak's house. But I had been too busy to notice, determined to do the paperwork I had planned for the day, rather than taking too much time to become enmeshed in the funeral proceedings. I experienced feelings of guilt, because in a role that requires me to act as if I too am a village woman, I should have invited some of them into my house as well. I was particularly conscious of my duty to Wesanta, the wife of one of our translators at the time, who had sat around near our house for some time. But I had ignored her. I became aware

again of the sacrifice involved in caring for people, in becoming caught up in the lives, joys and sorrows of others. For me personally, the sacrifice involved recognising the obligation that required me to behave as one of the village women, and the need to act accordingly—that is, setting aside my own plans in order to devote myself to the welfare of unexpected guests.

The following day another death occurred at the western end of the village, effectively preventing Metana's matrikin from going ahead with *highig*, the second main feast for the dead which releases village residents from immediate restrictions. Metana's relatives were forced to delay their preparations until the period of Naken's funeral and *highig* was over. Naken's relatives sent three clay pots of cooked food and pig meat from Siagara West to be shared out amongst all the households in our eastern section. That same night, Metana's brother Molato arrived. Molato, who had been pastoring in a distant village, was the nearest kin, *tontututun*, and thus the main decision-maker.

A week after Metana's funeral, Datala gave Molato the first instalment of *powon* (compensation payment), known as *niman vaiyovaiyo* or *niman ununa*.¹¹ Abilaba and other Lailoga women contributed, but it seemed to be a sudden decision to gather things together, for many people had already left to work in the gardens. *Egowa* (baskets), plates, spoons and cups were given to Molato, plus a ten kilo bag of rice. When it came time for him to leave, two girls—one of them Datala's daughter Daniela—carried the filled baskets, and accompanied him back to his village of Bwagabwaga on the southern side of Misima.

¹¹ *Niman* means 'hand' and *ununa* is the coconut cream used to grease food or pots in order to waterproof them for cooking. *Vaiyovaiyo* is the action of greasing a clay pot for the first time before use. See Chapter four.

Metana's widow Datala was also responsible for giving the *hagali* prestation. On the day of the funeral she gave the first part—bunches of bananas and baskets of nuts—to Siku, a member of Metana's father's clan, the *tongamagaman*. There had been no *kahin lau* ('crying the widow/widower down' out of seclusion), so there were no restrictions placed on Datala, since before he left, Pomas had forbidden Datala to follow those particular mourning customs. There was in fact no formal *highig* either; the reason given was that *anaan i kaubwa* (there was a shortage of food, a lack of available resources). It seemed that the only marking of this man's passing was a few days of quiet in the village, with no loud noises or sounding of a *bwagigi* (conch shell). Then it was all over, at least for the time being.

Three weeks later, however, a contingent of young men came to collect a cow from the small herd kept at the river. After butchering it there, they took the pieces by boat to Bwagaoia for use in a *highig* sponsored by Datala's only brother, Pibona. The meat was also to be used to 'pay' the *tosilawa* (those who watched over the body at the wake). Then early in January, Datala's youngest sister Ebel, who as a child had been raised in Metana's household, gave a *highig*. One cow and two pigs were killed. *Minamina enona* ('the fruit of the staying around'—referring to food sent to the different hamlets to be shared out amongst the houses) was distributed and *mwahalahi* (pot-luck) cooked also. I personally did not contribute to the *mwahalahi* by cooking a pot of rice (my usual), so I was surprised to receive a large portion of *kolena* (uncooked meat). It was a symbol of the friendship I share with Datala.

This account of a death touches on and illuminates certain behavioural patterns vis-a-vis Misiman ways of being-in-the-world. In addition, the narrative highlights some of the beliefs, values and themes that I see at work in that society. I

will elaborate on these aspects of Misiman culture later in the thesis. But first let me describe a little of my own understanding of my voice and position in Misiman society during the years my husband and I have lived there and raised our children.

Many voices, multiple personalities

As Atkinson has pointed out when considering the notion of reflexivity, 'texts do not simply and transparently report an independent order of reality ... there is no possibility of a neutral text (1990:7).' I deem it important, therefore, to establish at the outset of this thesis the view that has molded and shaped my representation of the social reality of Misima.

I speak as an 'outsider' and yet not an outsider. In Turner's terms, 'an outsider is a person set apart and outside the social structure of a particular cultural system (1974:233).' He distinguishes this from a marginal person, who belongs to more than one social grouping, where the mores and values of each separate group may be in conflict with each other. Certainly the notions of conflict and internal struggle are relevant to my particular situation, as are the feelings of being outside the cultural norms and social definition of the Misiman world. I can also take up the voice of an 'insider'—at least temporarily and in some areas—and yet my skin is irreversibly 'white', so different in appearance from a Misiman.

Atkinson also refers to the tension that exists between the position of 'member' and 'stranger,' by stating that the ethnographer is experientially the 'marginal native' (1990:157). This latter phrase seems to resonate very nicely with my position, as I reflect on my 'self' and the 'other' that I become each time I enter into

the Misiman world. And yet I have taken on permanent aspects of Misiman 'otherness', which highlight my 'difference' in my own culture.

Many times I have asked myself—Who am I? What is my identity? Where am I situated? How do I relate? I therefore speak from and position myself in many different places and perspectives.

I am an outsider because I have questioned and observed, learned and participated, been inquisitive and at times horrified. So the different voices I utilise are multiple: I am and have been—it seems simultaneously at times—a participant-observer, researcher, student of language, *bwabwali* (guest-visitor), rich *dimdim* (whiteskin, with the connotation of 'alien'), a *gamagal* or human being (at least to myself), a translator and linguistic analyst (in addition to the more common roles— dare I say 'normal'—of mother, wife, cook and homemaker within my own family).

I am an insider because I have desired to belong, to be accepted, to understand—and to show love and acceptance in my turn. Over the many years I have shared in the life of the village and raised my children during their formative years in the Misiman context, I have developed an awareness of personalities and interrelationships; I have seen friends and neighbours give birth, and die. I have grudgingly tolerated the appellation of *wala dimdim* (our whiteskin) as I have accompanied the Siagara women on their forays to other villages for meetings or conferences. I have overheard them 'story' about me to strangers, with awe and pride in their voices, as they recount (sometimes fictitiously) the ways I am like them—my frequent garden trips with a basket on my head, and my contributions of cooked food at feast times. The different voices I utilise within the village are those of sister, daughter-in-law, grandchild, mother, wailing woman at funerals,

cook at feast times, village woman at community tasks, congregational member, preacher, teacher, and neighbour.

Conflicting emotions, confusing passions

As a *bwabwali* (stranger-visitor), I was the recipient of many gifts of food in the early days of our living in the village. As time has gone on, however, I am no longer treated as a visitor but more as one who belongs. Yet there are still many women who come onto our verandah from time to time and emphasise my difference by declaring proudly:

'I have never seen inside your house, this is the first time I have ever been up here'.¹²

In accordance with custom, everyone sits on the floor when attending church. On the occasion of a visit to a church service in another village during the early years of our time at Misima, a chair was brought for my use, and placed in the women's section of the congregation. How I longed to sit on the floor with the others instead of being elevated to a 'throne' supposedly appropriate to my status as a *nevenak bwabwatana* (large-important, respected older woman). Alternately, I am considered a sinebwana, the Dobu language equivalent of *nevenak bwabwatana*, with overtones of Christian ideology indicating my connection with the Church and Christianity. To me, however, this appellation had overtones of paternalism and colonialist thinking. Generally the only other white women Misimans were accustomed to in the past were the wives of the tonugana, the white ministers who tended to live exclusively at the mission station on the other side of the island.

¹² Personal communication, Siagara village, 1994.

Reflecting on this labelling, I remember that when we first arrived and were staying at that same mission station, I had a new baby and was breast-feeding him. Eloba, who had never seen a white woman partially unclothed, was surprised to note that I had breasts like the Misiman women. I too was surprised at this insight into Misima thinking — were white people such an anomaly and so alien as to be constructed as non-human, even though outwardly the bodily form or profile would seem to be similar? This reflection led me to the concept of *kamakama*, the outward 'skin' which was often construed as a disguise, as a mask for the true character and being of a person. In Misiman myths, an old woman could masquerade as a young beautiful girl; a monster could change his shape to become a comely young man. Is that how I am conceptualised—as an unknown quantity appearing to be human? What constitutes my humanity? How am I constructed—as a social being, a supernatural monster, or ...?

I realise that for a Misiman it is essential to allocate us to a category, because then people know what is appropriate, and how to relate. Often we were questioned about our clan—we owned no clan, so who were we? How could we be categorised? Where did we fit?

While we were bathing at the river one day with our children, an old man was curious about our very fair-haired son, and asked: 'Whose ancestor is he?' His white skin and hair obviously betokened an ancestral spirit returned from the dead.

Another old man, Jada, came to visit us before we left the village for an extended time; he had a request to make. When we returned to our place of origin, would we visit one of his ancestors and ask them to come to the village and

live near him so that he, like our adoptive family, would be a recipient of all the good things in life to which ancestors had access.

Perhaps I really am the epitome of the mythological Kantutubwai.¹³ I certainly feel pigeon-holed, and constructed into a different self when I enter a more remote village and surprise a group of young children playing. Regretfully I watch them as they run screaming from the *dimdim* apparition, feeling some resentment toward the results of this particular method of parental control. I am the innocent embodiment of a child's worst fears, as conveyed by parental warnings, the 'whiteskin' who will eat the child who ventures into forbidden territory.

On one occasion, Diso, a 'daughter-in-law' of mine, came up the back stairs with her small daughter and requested some *konin* (medicine). She was embarrassed to stay too long, but her seven year-old daughter felt inclined to linger. In my hearing, Diso reminded her daughter that the *dimdim* 'has bad ways', that she 'will beat you up if we don't remove ourselves very quickly'. Then she laughed. My own reaction was far from amusement, for I felt hurt, discouraged and humiliated by this description of me, reinforcing as it does my 'otherness' and representing another blow to my struggle to belong. I was startled as well to find that part of my reaction centred on the realisation that Diso had actually put my deepest feelings into words. I really did want them out of the house so that I could resume the tasks that had been interrupted! What kind of unsociable monster was I?

I recall my own childhood in Australia, times in the night when I was scared to put foot to floor for fear that the crocodiles hidden in the subterranean depths

of under-my-bed would get me. In another place and another time 'others' deconstruct my humanity and constitute me as their Other, one to be avoided or feared.

Some, however, see me in a different light. Wabeyalu's husband, Nalina, most often comes at night, just after dusk, trailing two or three of her children. She usually chooses our mealtime to come up on the verandah and sit quietly, obsequiously waiting for attention. Whenever I see her creep quietly up, my inner conflict distresses me. I realise that she is from another language group and has never been quite accepted in our village.¹⁴ I know also that she has many children and is looked down upon as being *gulagula* (poor'), and that her husband is a younger son who has never upheld the mortuary feasting expectations on his clan's behalf. So he has no one's respect. I am the rich *dimdim* with access to all sorts of goods; accordingly, my own belief system tells me to give cheerfully whatever is asked of me. Yet in a different way Nalina constructs me as an Other, an object of her desire, a commodity rather than a person, a source of material blessing rather than the living, breathing being that longs to be appreciated for who she is. Yet who am I?

Will the real me please stand up?

My drive to learn elementary skills—washing clothes in the river, going to the garden, weaving baskets—was motivated by pride, a desire to be oriented in this society where I understood so little, where my behaviour and language skills were

¹³ A monstrous, people-eating giant in Misiman mythology.

those of a child. Yet I was encased in an adult skin. I wanted to prove that I was equal to Misiman women and able to cope with 'real' life. How quickly I gave that up, though, after I had achieved a certain mastery—and when the going got too tough!

I was filled with a frustration that compelled me to ask repeatedly to be allowed to go to the garden and experience first-hand the joys of weeding and of planting the yams. My thirst for understanding and knowledge was at last indulged—I found myself fending off clouds of swarming mosquitoes and other flying pests that infest the gardens in the wake of the monsoon rains. Unwittingly I brought my skin into contact with the nettles and the bristly, spongy weeds that grow in abundance. As I followed Labula home down what seemed to be near-perpendicular slopes, I had only two fixed ideas. The first was to keep from slipping on the muddy ground (and so humiliating myself and her as well, proving that I was indeed inept and needed to be coddled). The second was to keep the small basket I carried on my head on an even keel until I reached home, without giving in to the sharp pains shooting from my neck and radiating across my back. To keep my dignity was my prime concern.

My relationship as 'daughter-in-law' has been an interesting one. From the outset my husband was accepted into the family of Nalina, the woman who had provided our initial housing in the village. Her father, and especially her mother, held my husband Bill in particularly high esteem, perhaps because he was more willing to show his vulnerability and was neither shy nor too embarrassed to admit failure and express his desire to be corrected. Misimans cherish this kind of

¹⁴ I use 'our' deliberately, not to indicate paternalistic possession but to show the sense I have of belonging.

openness in a person; openness seems to describe a warm friendliness and an accepting nature, more than a transparency based on revealing inner feelings.

Bill was called either *natu* (my son) or *tonowak* (respected older man). By contrast, I was called 'Stephen's mother', thereby having my identity fused with that of my children, and, at the same time, being firmly relegated to the status of 'daughter-in-law'. There was for many years a distance between myself and my mother-in-law, who was known by most people as Nevenak.¹⁵ I tried repeatedly to engage her in conversation, to ask questions about things that I didn't understand, but she would only respond with short answers. It seemed to me like there was a lack of warmth, an appearance of just tolerating me. (Didn't she understand what agonies I went through merely to approach her and begin my faltering attempts to frame my queries, thereby revealing, yet again, my lack of basic grammatical skill in the language?) But perhaps it was only my imagination: did her manner mask an equal shyness and inability to cope with the complicated demands of a 'daughter-in-law' relationship with a *dimdim*?

However, our seeming lack of relationship at a personal level did not hinder Nevenak's efforts to do her duty towards her 'son' and his family. Many were the times she cooked yams supplied from her own garden for us. She bought rice and other food items from the local canteen in order to 'help' me cater for the workers—who came to weed the area in front of our house, to plant yet another garden for the *dimdims*, or to cut down trees, thus preventing the leaves from decomposing in our gutters and tainting our water supply.

¹⁵ She was so respected by people in the village that her own name was rarely used; instead, *Nevenak*, the generic word for an older, respected woman, was the way most people referred to and addressed her, thus effectively becoming a proper noun in this instance.

When schooling was finished for the day and my children were off playing at the seaside or in the garden, I would often sit alone in my house and hear the raucous sounds of laughter issuing from my mother-in-law's house, as she sat with her daughters and grand-daughters and put on a performance for them. Her favourite ploy was to deliberately say the wrong word, either in situ or in recalling to everyone her past 'mistakes.' I felt shut out from the sociality, the sense of community; I felt marginalised in my identity as the none-too-bright, 'difficult' daughter-in-law.

On one occasion a group of men went to the bush to carry out the huge tree trunks to be used for our house posts. I was nervous about catering for them—how many were there? When would they come? Would I have enough food? How was I to serve it? To my Western way of thinking, the important factor in catering is to ensure the food is hot when served. Accordingly, I decided to wait till later in the afternoon before cooking— but I waited too long. The men arrived in our yard, dropped the posts to the ground, and sat around chewing betelnut, while I sat stewing over a huge pot of rice which refused to even come to the boil.

I learnt a lot that day about preparing food for workers. While I watched the pot boil, the men drifted away to their own homes, having become tired of waiting for the food, *galabela*, the appropriate payment for those who labour on behalf of another. There are only a few catering rules at Misima: provide plenty of food—much more than you think would be needed—have it ready and waiting when it is needed, and ensure that nobody misses out their share. I had failed on all three counts.

To make things even more uncomfortable, I felt compelled to apologise to Nevenak. She had cooked food too and had it ready to serve; it was my tardiness

that made it a less-than-successful venture for all concerned. Her answer to my apology was predictable. 'Don't worry, it's no big deal!' But that did not stop feelings of inadequacy and shame from overwhelming me.

I have welcomed small signs of acceptance wholeheartedly. I recall the day when my husband and children were served with Tonowak and the other men while I was waved in the direction of the kitchen to sit with the other women, waiting to eat afterwards. There was the day too when Nevenak's daughter Nalina saw me for the first time since her father's death and collapsed, wailing, into my arms. Over the years Nevenak and I have grown closer: I have a real affection for her gutsy approach to widowhood, for her wisdom and generosity; she has been an inspiration to me in her modelling of hospitality. Perhaps the distance in our relationship has been partly imagined, partly caused by my own feelings of inferiority, and partly due to the very nature of the cultural constraints and expectations of the daughter-in-law/mother-in-law dyad.

Familiar routines, discordant values

Over the years I have become acculturated: yet there are many things I still don't know.

I know what to do when I hear the wailing, I know the sequence of events — when to turn up for the funeral, when and what to cook for it and so on. Yet I struggle with my desire to follow my own plan of work for the day.

I know to be friendly and warm in greeting people, yet I battle with my feelings of being taken advantage of when someone comes to the door.

I know things take time to come to fruition, yet I experience inner conflict based on frustration, exasperation, and impatience. Why can't they see things as I

do? What does the value of efficiency encapsulate for Misimans? Is there such a concept?

I appreciate values of generosity and hospitality; in fact, I have learned from these and try to model my own life on them. Yet it still infuriates me to see people give away food or clothing which is special or scarce, simply because that it is the cultural rule. I marvel at that cultural inscription that dictates the rules of giving and receiving, even as it comes into conflict with my own individualistic upbringing.

I understand how significant a person is, how the individual becomes an integral part of the collective group by virtue of interlocking and multiple relationships; yet I am amazed by the profligate sacrifice of resources in honour of the dead. The maxim 'waste not, want not', learned in my childhood through constant repetition, resounds silently in my ears when I see huge slabs of pig meat taken from house to house, or when I see parents pile high the plates of their offspring with much more than they can eat. All this is in the name of nurture through feeding, an important Misiman value.

I understand the importance of consensus during the decision-making process. I understand too that public criticism is to be avoided—yet I often go away from meetings wondering exactly what was decided, and whose voice it was that had the deciding vote. I have had difficulty learning the rules of social etiquette that insist I must first praise the wisdom and expertise of the previous speaker, before providing my counter suggestion to the subject under discussion.

I have been horrified by the method employed in the slaughter of pigs, and by the plight of dogs left to starve; yet I have also come to realise how much more

important human beings are, and not just human beings as individuals—but as people in relationships.

The underlying principle of a Misiman's life-in-the-world seems to be epitomised by the saying: 'Don't do today what you can put off till tomorrow'! I have been accustomed to run my life on very different lines. Key values include doing things quickly and efficiently, and finishing what I set out to do. I have had to change and modify my expectations as I have been confronted by the ideal of relationships informed by actions, rather than work done speedily and plans accomplished. Relationships are based on sharing what resources each partner in the exchange can access. On the one hand, it may be a cake of soap, half a betelnut, or an electric guitar—on the other, the more intangible qualities of respect and friendship, enacted through the provision of assistance when there is communal work to be done.

And so I continue to face both the challenges and opportunities for growth in maturity and understanding that living at Misima provides me with, and I seek to examine my western upbringing and associated values in the light of what I see and recognise as worthy and worthwhile at Misima. My aim is to integrate my knowledge—along with my appreciation for different ways of acting and reacting—into who I am, becoming more whole and more completely human in the process. And yet, as Herzfeld (1983:151) notes vis-a-vis the anthropologist, I also continue to negotiate my status in the community; there is a sense of imperfect closure, an ongoing realisation that I am 'neither fish nor fowl,' neither researcher nor a local.

It is with certain feelings of trepidation that I commit to writing my understanding, realising that my lack of systematic study may surface as lacunae

in some places, while description may be thin in others. Yet I am encouraged to proceed with this account by the thoughts of Hirschkind:

By taking a local role, one is in a position to grasp complex relationships and tacit understandings as they are played out. Perceiving and learning take on urgency because one's survival and social existence depend upon them. By having a personal stake in local affairs, one cannot back out of involvement, or claim exemption from the exigencies of local mores, expectations, and routines. By being a potential threat, in the sense of occupying social space, integration into the community is assured. ... Long-term residence teaches which questions are interesting to ask, and how to ask them (1991:248).

I believe that my local role over many years has given me 'a foundation for a more thorough, truthful and accurate ethnography' (Hirschkind 1991). In an attempt to make sense out of Misiman actions and words, and, by extension, to grasp their underlying values and assimilate them into my being, I have focused on mortuary feasting with its associated entangled relationships, complex exchanges, and the diverse and varied discourse that express and embody these commemorative occasions.

Reflections on a Grief Observed

Monday 15 April: It is the day before we move yet again, and there is still so much sorting and packing to do. You'd think it would get easier with frequency, but in truth the remembrances of past moves serve to enshroud the present and cast a gloom over each new venture.

Then comes the news that Pelen's daughter¹⁶ has killed herself by taking an overdose of anti-malarials. This kind of news always spreads like wildfire. I am again amazed at how reports of a death flare up, travel furiously in all directions, and envelop more mundane concerns. The women cease all activity the moment they

see the truck carrying mourners speeding into the village on its way to the death site. Immediate concerns are forgotten as they call to each other, pull up their skirts and race to scramble over the side of the truck. Everything else—including other tasks that are usually approached in a leisurely fashion—is dumped. With what alacrity do they respond; the news motivates and invigorates as if it is almost a vicarious joy to hear of another death.

I ponder the paradox of death at Misima and the mixed emotions that underpin it. Is it the prospect of the cycle starting again, the cycle of feeding and consuming? or the opportunity to publicly display the grief buried from the former funeral of a loved one and still awaiting expression? Is it the sociality and sense of community that is anticipated, a time to chew betelnut, meet with acquaintances from distant places, and catch up with the gossip? Or is it the prospect of a sudden change in routine, the chance of a good cry with the resulting cathartic effect that crying has on one's well-being? Is it the unexpected intrusion of crisis into everyday life, constituting a familiar tragedy wherein a well-known pattern of events are even now starting to unfold? Is it that the contemplation of another's pain moves one to share that pain in time- and custom-honoured ways that permit the celebration of oneness and relationship? Or is it just the desire to be where the action is, see it all first-hand, mingle with the crowd—be there?

My thoughts return to myself and to the tasks I still have to accomplish. How does this death affect our plans? But notwithstanding, feelings of grief overwhelm me, primarily for the father whom we know well and admire with affection. I imagine myself in his place—how guilty would I feel if my daughter committed

¹⁶ I refer to her in this manner because this is how everyone speaks of her — kin terms and teknonyms are used at Misima, rather than names.

suicide while I slept. I would ask myself what should I have done to prevent this, why didn't I know about her problems. But then grief turns to anger—anger at the daughter for choosing an easy way, knowing that her father would beg, borrow and pauper himself to enact the Misima way of death. I imagine that as he sits by her corpse in his house, he would already be mentally evaluating his current resources, and planning a feast appropriate to his own status in the community. I feel anger again, this time for a different reason. Pelen's daughter has left her two young children to the care and responsibility of grandparents already burdened with the responsibility of other extended family members. But then I attempt to dredge up some compassion, and imagine what it must have been like for her. I try to empathise with the agonies of mind she must have endured. I hear more of her background. It seems that her husband has recently left her with a new baby to care for. His parents had imputed fault and blame to her. Such is the power of words at Misima that feelings of shame, rejection and anger could have resulted in a depression too deep to climb out of—and so she has ended her life.

But these thoughts only come as I have leisure to think. In the meantime I am busy with the packing which must be done, and which keeps my mind occupied. When I do have space to reflect, I realise that I have experienced a little of the therapeutic effect of 'busyness' in times of grief. I know that as Pelen and his wife start treading down the path mapped out by a death, they must shoulder many burdens. There is the immediate necessity to organise and arrange for the burial and the funeral feast; they must also think ahead to all that is entailed in following through with the mortuary rituals for their daughter. I imagine what might be passing through Pelen's mind as he seeks to focus his thoughts in the midst of grief:

the coffin, where do I get it, where do I find the money for it—who can I send who is reliable and not prostrated with grief. What trucks can be hired for obtaining supplies and bringing mourners—and for how much? Who still needs to know the news, how do I send messages? When should the funeral be—do we keep vigil overnight? How many people will need to be fed at the funeral—how many pigs can I afford? Who will offer assistance, can I depend on my sons-in-law to be there for me? How will people react, will they gossip about my lack of care, blaming me for the event? Then there's the police coming to ask questions, like where she did she get the chloroquine for the overdose—how to satisfy officialdom? The women are alright—it's expected that they wail. I've already done my crying—enough for now, I need to get busy. What pig is suitable, have I got one that is not already spoken for, that I can kill immediately...

And so the mind moves along familiar channels, falls into the easy grooves of custom and its demands. The mind sets aside temporarily the overwhelming grief that threatens sanity, and concerns itself with problems of organisation, with feeding the multitudes of visitors today and with calculating of the risk and timing of future mortuary rituals. The mind almost gratefully immerses itself in the many facets involved in memorial feasts for the dead at Misima.

Chapter 2 The Centrality of death

Part I

Common themes in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere

... the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed ... People's customary responses to death provide an important opportunity for sensitive probing into the nature of human life (Metcalf 1991:25).

Why should this be so? Death is fundamentally a change, not only for the individual life that is lost but also for society at large. A loss has occurred, and readjustments need to be made. In the words of Goody, a rent has occurred in the social fabric of life (1962). How can one mend this tear and make the fabric whole and functional again? To use another idiom, an organism has lost a vital part. How does it accommodate to that loss? Death is central because of its inevitability; for this reason, it must be central to an understanding of life, to a functioning worldview. The whole philosophy of life of a people must weave the inevitability of death into its way of being-in-the-world, for death is not just an adjunct to living. Rather, it is a part of the fabric of life.

Early anthropologists linked death and belief in an afterlife with the origin of religion; more recently, scholars who were not comfortable with that limited perspective investigated the function and meaning of ritual within the context of death (Hertz 1960; Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). Particularly useful for my purposes has been the isolation and description of the liminal or transitional phase, especially as it pertains to a discussion on death. Connor (1996), following earlier analyses, suggests that in many localities throughout the world, the rituals performed after a death has occurred are believed to fulfill three main purposes: 1) the material remains of the deceased need to be disposed

of; 2) the spiritual part of the person must be freed from earthly ties and responsibilities; and 3) the spirit will be able to join the ancestors. This last is often conceived as a spiritual rebirth, so that death rituals—and the beliefs underlying those ritual—have elements in common with those held after the birth of a baby, as has been recorded for the Melpa (Strathern 1982:120 ff.) and the Lodagaa (Goody 1962). I will return to this notion later in this chapter to further analyse the parallels that exist between birth and death rituals as they are enacted at Misima.

The concept of transition is a very apt one. A definitive change has occurred but its impact is far-reaching; a transformation is evolving as bodies pass from one stage to another, the effects rippling out into the social sea of both the living and the dead. The relatives most closely connected to the deceased are undergoing transition: the surviving spouse, in particular, needs to realign himself or herself as a social being, to process and incorporate a new role into his or her psyche and behavior, thus effectively replacing the old one. As Bloch and Parry (1982:4) suggest, new social identities are grafted onto individuals during the rituals associated with both birth and death, identities that entail a number of responsibilities and obligations.

Responsibilities include the proper disposal of the deceased's remains, thus facilitating the smooth passage of the spirit to its new place of residence. Obligations to the living must ensure that social relations are mended where necessary, and that the continuity of the group or community, which has been threatened by the death of one of its members, is reasserted. A literal regrouping needs to take place—especially where death affects not only individuals or nuclear families, but groups of people who are allied through marriage or blood.

Anthropologists have interpreted the rituals surrounding death as symbolically asserting life. In some societies, where death is perceived to be chaos or disorder

affecting the ordered structure of life, fear and panic threaten to overwhelm the community. Vitality and fertility must be celebrated vigorously in order to establish an equilibrium in the face of the pure order of death,¹ while the spirits or witches causing the disaster must be either appeased or sought out and punished.² Mortuary ritual changes death into life in an attempt to overcome mortality and allow social reproduction to continue (Foster 1990).

The human body has always been a vehicle for symbols; society and its values live in the human body. Parallels have been drawn between the decomposition and decay of the corpse over time and the obligatory seclusion, the wearing of black clothing, and the taboos that are imposed upon both the widow and widower. Leach notes how the handling of hair—whether shaved or uncut—has significance worldwide in the context of funeral ceremonies.³ The final resting-place for the spirit—or its incorporation into the spirit after-world—can be understood to coincide with the final decay of the corpse. Secondary burial occurs as a widespread ethnological marker for the completion of the rituals in honour of the dead (Hertz 1960).

Mortuary rituals not only reflect a society's values and beliefs, but also construct that society. Bloch and Parry isolate some important questions related to the significance of death and mortuary practices, asking what, in a particular society, is put in jeopardy by death, and what are the resources which are 'culturally conceived to be most essential to the reproduction of the social order?' (1982:7). These, they assert, are the ones threatened by the inevitability of death, and about which rituals need to be activated. For the people of Misima, social relationships are the core of their being: the very essence of life itself is a combination of the need to belong (relationships) and the need for sustenance

¹ See Huntington's comments pertinent to the Bara of Madagascar (1973).

² See Metcalf's work among the Nyakyusa (1991 quoting Wilson 1939).

³ (Metcalf 1991:63, quoting Leach 1958).

and nurturing. Misimans find these two fundamental needs met within the intricate and complex twisting of relationships between three groups of kin i.e. the matrikin, the patrilateral 'line' and the affinal group. Linked with these kin relationships is the embodied side, centred on food and its production and provision, and connected with land and its usage.

Community values and beliefs are emphasised and reconstructed through mortuary rituals, thus providing a chance to reaffirm the societal structure and the eternal values underlying it. Grief, expressed publicly through the wailing that the women perform over a corpse, is to a certain extent assuaged and transformed into something creative—the act of 'feeding' people. This, in turn, provides Misimans with a platform for showing generosity, for making reciprocal exchanges based on equivalence, and for a conspicuous display of wealth along with the power and prestige that such a display generates. In this way, death facilitates the expression of Misiman values of being-in-the-world.

Bloch and Parry (1982:8) also point out that the loss entailed in death must in some way be regained. The loss must be transformed into life so that the life of the community is reasserted, and, by extension, control over destiny is regained. This is a simple equation involving power. The unpredictability of death must be controlled and turned into an asset, with grief transformed into joy, and loss transformed into gain.⁴ During the rituals entailed by death, there is celebration.⁵ Relationships are renewed and developed, resources expended, and the prestige of both individuals and groups becomes enhanced. A party for everyone is held, a glorious social occasion at which Misimans can reassert everlasting values of generosity and hospitality on a grand scale.

⁴ Lepowsky, writing about the mortuary rites of nearby Vanatinai and Sabarl, expresses a similar sentiment: "paradoxically it is mainly a happy event and a celebration." (1989:226)

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the ambivalent nature of death as experienced by Misimans, based on evidence from myths, see Chapter six.

Another important area wherein ambivalent feelings and attitudes become evident is in the paradoxical role played by Misiman women in the spheres of death and birth. Women inhabit the marginal regions, constantly transforming or being transformed in their femaleness. While they are key players in both birth and death—reproducing, nurturing and feeding—in many societies the power that they have in these realms is somewhat offset by accusations of witchcraft. A high degree of male sex anxiety in patrilineal societies in Melanesia has led to male initiation rites connected with the subordination of females in terms of both the division of labour and the taboos placed on menstruating women (Allen 1967). These attitudes encapsulate fears inherent in PNG Highlands societies, i.e. men's fear of the mystical and polluting power of females which must be controlled.

But how to explain witchcraft in a matrilineal society? In a patrilineal society, the woman is the stranger, the outsider, and the one who marries into the group and upon whom suspicion can be usefully focused. Fear and hatred focused on women draws the insiders together, enhancing their solidarity as they oppose the outsiders' potential malice and power. On Misima, it is through women that the descent line is traced, and through women that inheritance and land rights are transmitted. Women's power is great and one of the givens of society. As Macintyre observes for Tuketube, another matrilineal society:

An individual woman's power to give birth, to nurture and regenerate the lineage, is one facet of her body's potency. But it is not an unequivocal instrument for the transmission of life and identity. As witches, women also mediate the supernatural forces of death. (1987:211)

It seems to me that witchcraft accusations function in order to balance the female principle on Misima, to destroy their solidarity as a gender, fragment their power, and keep suspicion rife—and, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, balance is an important underlying concern of Misiman society.

Women are constructed as agents of both death and birth, of completion and

creation, and of order and disorder. Women in all societies are linked with the sorrow of death; in some societies they are 'given' death, taking on its pollution in order to transform it into power for their menfolk (Bloch 1982:226).

The subject of exchange opens up one of the significant sub-areas discussed by anthropologists in connection with death. Strathern notes that a payment of pigs or wealth amongst the Melpa of the PNG Highlands ensures the transfer of the spirit of the dead, and its consequent incorporation and acceptance into the new world (1982). There is an underlying notion of balance can be detected here: equilibrium must be maintained in the social order. A loss has been incurred, and an equal payment must be made to redress the loss. This is a fundamental theme in Misiman culture, the interconnection of indebtedness and reciprocity.

Exchange is concerned with social identity. Writing about mortuary feasting among the Tanga of New Ireland, Foster states: 'By means of exchange, agents—persons acting with reference to their constitutive social relationships—continually redefine their identity for others' (1990:432). Exchange is the essence of Tangan sociality, with mortuary rituals the 'most satisfying and sustaining elements' of life (Bell:291 quoted in Foster 1990). Foster considers that an ideal world for the Tangans is one of ceaseless exchange, which brings together sexuality, eating and death. In the ongoing exchanges which occur during mortuary rituals, matrilineages are involved in a process of being constructed first as consumers and then as the consumed. This process is embodied in the transactions that occur between the host lineage of the deceased and the affinal and patrilineal relatives who make up the bulk of the mourners. The latter group present the matriclan with shell valuables, a sign of permanence and durability, while the feast givers, in turn, distribute cooked food and pigs—subject to decomposition—to the others, thus constructing them as impermanent and consumable.

At Misima there are no such clear-cut distinctions between the consumer and the consumed. The host lineage primarily distributes cooked food and pigs, and makes prestations of other kinds of wealth—such as money or *bugul* ('things' e.g. plates, dishes, clothing)—at various times during the mortuary rituals.⁶ *Powon*,⁷ which in the past consisted predominantly of a prestation of shell valuables, nowadays takes the form of *bugul* and uncooked food, expressing both an atonement for implied guilt and a compensation payment for a loss. For Misimans, the distinction appears to focus on rightful ownership and responsibility. Members of the clan who 'own' the dead, the *tontututun*, bear its 'heaviness', being constrained to 'finish the death'⁸ in a fitting and appropriate manner. Other relatives and *boda* members,⁹ despite being mobilised to help according to the relationship they bear to the main feast sponsors, do not, in fact, 'own' the *nak* (evil or badness). Their turn will inevitably come at a later date when one of their relations dies.

Underlying the idea of exchange is the familiar Melanesian theme of feeding: the act of 'feeding' someone becomes the main means for creating social relationships and social identities. Feeding signifies power, control and responsibility. A Misiman 'big man,' known as a *topapaan* ('one who feeds others') exhibits the value of generosity as he prodigally distributes his resources to those who both work for him and give to him. The right to control and command others through the mortuary feasting sequence is dependent not only on the availability of material resources but also on a reputation built up over years as a *toguyau* (one who gives). Food is the very essence of life: the one who can feed not just his own family but many people from different clans is powerful and worthy of respect, worthy of being followed. The power to command people's informal

⁶ See Chapter four for further thoughts on what is given and what is received at different feasts..

⁷ See Chapter four.

⁸ 'Own' and 'finish the death' are both literal translations of Misiman terms.

⁹ The personal network of people, kindred and friends who support and help the individual in his endeavours is a *boda*. See Chapter four for further elaboration.

allegiance and cooperation, as well as to produce ample food and pig resources, is also connected with magical power and the power to harness spiritual forces.

The reverse is also true. A *toanaan* ('one who eats')—a term which can be used in a derogatory sense—is a consumer, the implication being that the person has no resources, or at least none that he or she is willing to expend by feeding others.

On the other hand, Misiman mortuary rituals can be viewed as an example of delayed exchanges which, because of their unbalanced nature, perpetuate the community at the level of clan relationships (De Coppet 1981:200). There are always debts pending, due to a never-ending system of transactions associated with continuing cycles of birth and death, linked and marked by appropriate rituals. Debts are created as one set of completed mortuary rituals is carried on to the next set. As long as people are born, marry and die, society is recreated not only in the physical sense, but also in the all-important realm of relationships.

Mortuary rituals mark the passing of an individual, one who simply by virtue of being a human being deserves respect and honour, no matter how young or old. In Misiman terms, society would not continue if the dead were not paid the due respect accorded to ancestors who have made provision during their lifetime for their clan's welfare. This respect is reflected in the profligate 'wasting' and 'throwing away'¹⁰ of food and pig resources at mortuary feasting times. A person, especially a widow with few resources in terms of people she can call upon, can be rendered a pauper and forced to endure a season of little food for herself and her dependents because of the rigorous demands set by society for the honouring of her dead spouse.

Why do relationships so underpin Misiman sociality? Given the psychological need to belong and feel worthwhile, a Misiman person, born as they are into a ready-made

niche, has an identity established from birth, with roles neatly laid out for them. A social entity has been formed, a collective individual (Strathern 1988:13-15). But this person is also an individual in their own right, much freer in today's Misiman society (than was the case in the past) to choose their own marriage partner, thereby creating new alliances. These alliances are forged at different levels, including the 'individual' one wherein another nuclear unit for daily work is created, and the 'generation' level, in particular between the father of the bride and his son-in-law. Clustered behind them both stand their respective clans, enmeshed in a set of obligations and responsibilities that have their main focus on mortuary rituals. Whole villages are set in a new realignment vis-a-vis each other.¹¹

Death cements these relationships, at the same time testing their validity and worth as the social rules which govern the game of mortuary rituals come into operation, and a series of payments in the form of compensation and obligatory 'giving' are made.

Themes and Patterns in Massim cultures

Among the significant features of the predominantly matrilineal Massim societies, located on the islands of Milne Bay Province, is the important role played by both affines and patrilineal kin.

In matrilineal societies, men are often viewed as 'outsiders' in local groups, yet they are paternal inceptors who provide nurture, shelter and care to the members of a different clan, i.e. their offspring. As Foster suggests vis-a-vis the Tangans, this nurture is construed as creating a debt in some societies, and, when coupled with viri-local residence, the debt becomes even heavier (1990:438). All 'work' must be compensated, especially work that involves long-term caring and love directed toward, and for the

¹⁰ These are literal translations of terms which Misiman people themselves use to denigrate ruefully their mortuary feasting customs.

¹¹ People from one village might call a set of folk from a different village *ala muliyau*, "our in-laws," those who are related affinally because of the marriage of one couple.

benefit of, a different group. So a conundrum for these societies is how to pay back, or compensate this debt. Macintyre, writing about the Tubetube people, describes the father's contribution as voluntary love, which is paid for by his children who give a prestation of pigs and shell valuables to their father's matrilineage on his death (1987). Battaglia also addresses this problem as it pertains to the SudEst people, asserting that payback to the father's clan is almost the *raison d'être* for mortuary rituals and exchanges (Battaglia 1985). A classificatory 'father'—ego's cross cousin—is chosen from among the father's sister's children; ego now becomes 'child' to this person. This relationship continues throughout life until the death of the 'child,' when the 'father' takes on the role of undertaker and is paid at the mortuary feast called *segaiya* with food, axeblades and other forms of 'things' or 'bulk wealth.'

On Misima, the role of paternal input is acknowledged first at birth, by food given to ego's father's clan, thus identifying the lineage which now enters into a special relationship known as *gaman*. This gift provides an earnest (promise or pledge) of more to come. The final acknowledgement of indebtedness for the nurturing care, supplied over a lifetime by the father's line, is completed at the time of the *hagali*¹²prestation given by the surviving spouse of the deceased.

From the moment of marriage, two clans enter into a relationship, which while somewhat competitive, is nevertheless one in which reciprocal obligations in the form of a mutual give-and-take constitute the main pattern. The two groups gain their identity vis-à-vis each other in a relationship based mainly on their performance at mortuary feasts: one clan are the *tonyaomal* ('owners of the dead'), whilst the other group, composed of several clans related by the marriages of their members, are the *muli* (in-laws). As such,

¹² Linguistically similar to the *sagali* as reported for the north-west part of the Massim societies, (Campbell 1989; Chowning 1989; Montague 1989; Thune 1989; Weiner 1977), and to the *zagaya* of Vanatinai (Lepowsky 1989), though quite different in purpose and practice.

the latter are required to give live pigs accompanied by uncooked yams, store-bought foods, coconuts, and firewood in order to aid the host clan carry out its responsibilities, including the remembrance of its dead and the feeding of workers and visitors who attend the feasts.

As far as the actual ritual sequence on Misima is concerned, the fourth and final mortuary feast, which is sponsored by a particular clan to celebrate and 'finish' several deaths at one time, is the largest undertaking. Among the Vakutans (Campbell 1989) and the Kaduwagans (Montague 1989), this last stage coincides with the laying aside of the mourning necklaces worn by the chief mourner, and the receiving of the payment given to them for 'taking on' the death in their physical body. Similarly, on Misima the final feast in what I call the *bobuton* (or mainstream series),¹³ held sometimes after a passage of many years, is a cooperative venture. Several sponsors, representative of, and aided by their clans and their own personal *boda* may plan and carry out *lobek* for deceased members of their own clan, and often for some of the dead of their father's clan. In the past, this coincided with the secondary burial of the deceased's skull and the end of all restrictions for the surviving spouse.

It is interesting to note that Misima mortuary rituals diverge from those described in other areas, even those that are the closest geographically and linguistically (Macintyre 1989; Battaglia 1990; Lepowsky 1993). On Misima, there appear to be three distinct strands, predicated on the three groups of relatives as mentioned above and embodied in the activities that each must undertake. One strand comprises the matrikin group of relations who are the *tonyaomal* ('owners of the dead'), with the responsibility of carrying out the *bobuton* (pig burning) which, as previously mentioned, consists of four main obligatory feasting occasions for each dead person. A second strand is the group of affines

¹³ See Chapter three for a detailed discussion of the feasting cycle conducted by the matrikin of the deceased.

connected to the deceased by the marriage alliance. The surviving spouse (or his or her matrilineage if both partners are dead) bears the responsibility for two obligatory prestations¹⁴ that compensate or atone for the death.¹⁵ In this way, the affinal obligations taken on between the couple at the time of marriage are finally ended or consummated, after a lifetime of reciprocal exchanges occasioned by the deaths of other members of the two clans concerned. The third strand, that of the deceased's patrilineal relatives, is implicated at this point. The *hagali* prestation is given to acknowledge the contribution of the father and his line to the deceased.

Taboos operate in order to identify, define and restrict those closest to the deceased, especially the spouse. He or she is still in the liminal space, placed there by the death which has upset the normal progress of life. Taboos and restrictions, including seclusion, serve to mark out this transitional period before there is a return to normal life. The role which the spouse of a dead person has thrust upon them at the time of death is symbolised by the wearing of black clothing (a universal feature among Massim cultures) and in some cases the use of charcoal to blacken the skin. Once the appropriate mourning period is ended, this role is discarded and a new and transformed identity is assumed. The surviving spouse is now relatively free of affinal encumbrances in the form of compensation payments; they are finished with the expectations and obligatory exchanges entailed in a marriage alliance, no longer needing to strive to maintain those exchanges for the honour of the clan. This new role is symbolised by ceremonial washing and cleansing, followed by the donning of colourful new clothes.

But is this a return to 'normal' existence? No, for the normal state of a Misiman is to be in a marriage relationship, and, by extension, to be intensely involved in exchanges,

¹⁴ See the description of *powon* and *hagali* in Chapter four.

¹⁵ In the context of the marriage alliance, affines may choose to carry out other additional feasting ventures such as *kalehe* and *leyau*. The scope is as endless as the resources allow.

and to be always 'working for a death' in association with one's clan. Only through and in ongoing mortuary feasting does true sociality and interdependence lie.

The matrilineal clan are the 'owners' of the dead because they have lost one of their members. But who must bear the blame for the death? On Vakuta as well as on Misima, the father—technically an 'outsider'—is responsible for the wellbeing of his offspring until they marry (Campbell 1989). Upon marriage, however, that responsibility shifts to the spouse. On Dobu Island, the affines are considered a constant threat to the exogamous matrilineage (Fortune 1963). Spouses are confined to the deceased's respective villages until they are released from taboos—after which they leave, never to return. Fortune viewed the Dobuan ideal world as one in which there is no exchange; the matrilineage is all-in-all and has no need to be involved with outsiders. In other Massim cultures, the sense of threat from outsiders is transformed into suspicion of witchcraft perpetrated by the spouse (Chowning 1983). There is a continual undercurrent of competition, marking clans allied by marriage (but remaining very much separate entities) and involved in exchanges within which honour and prestige are at stake, exchanges which must be reciprocal (Young 1971). These themes can be discerned in the preoccupation which Misimans have with witchcraft and the divination of the causes of death; on Misima, these are also acted out in the dancing and posturing which accompanies the feast of *kalehe*.¹⁶

But what of the underlying principle that those who work must be paid? Thune notes that at Lomboda village on Normanby Island, upon the death of a clan member there is a division of the matrilineage susu into two groups: the immediate relatives of the deceased who mourn and the more distant relatives who do the work of grave-digging (1989). Macintyre also describes the socio-centred, paired lineages on Tubetube, which

¹⁶ See Chapter four for further details.

become active in cooking and feeding visitors at the time when a death occurs in their 'sister' *susu*, or lineage (1989). There is also a distinction at Molima between workers (generally the matrilineal kin excluding the deceased's siblings) and mourners (brothers, children and the surviving spouse) (Chowning 1989). The principal male mourner is the one who may host the final *sagali* for his dead kin, while the distribution of both cooked and uncooked food goes mainly to those in the worker category.

On Misima this distinction is somewhat blurred, for there is no clear differentiation between mourners and workers.¹⁷ The matrilineage clan members both mourn and work to feed the visitors at the funeral, as well as hosting the three mortuary feasting occasions that follow. The surviving spouse both mourns beside the coffin and, at the same time, must begin planning when and how to marshal his or her resources to carry out the traditional obligations inherent in the role itself. When considering patrilateral relatives, should the deceased be unmarried, it is the father who is deemed culpable and therefore responsible for the *powon* prestation, because the ultimate care and responsibility of a child rests with its father. It is he who has 'lost' the life. The father of an unmarried child who dies may also choose to sponsor the *bobuton* feasts in coordination with the deceased's matrilineage. In the past, members of the same clan of the deceased's father—but from a different lineage—were traditionally responsible for the grave digging, but in practice today it appears that this particular lineage neither works nor mourns. Rather, they are the recipients of the *hagali* prestation, which symbolically provides 'payback' to the father's line for their contribution to the life of the child they have *pamasa* ('caused to appear').

At all levels, as noted above, the dominant idea is that work—whether emotional or physical—must be paid for. The *boda* (work-group) of the feast sponsor, mobilised

¹⁷ It may be that the distinctions noted for other cultures are in fact not quite as clearcut.

sometimes over the weeks or months which precede the final feast, are assured of an abundance of food and cooked pig meat in return for their labour. Those who dig the grave receive their payment in similar currency; others who set the cement and carve the gravestone at *lobek* are also 'paid' in this way. At the third main feast of *iwas*, those who overtly mourn—specifically the women who go up into the house and wail beside the coffin—are compensated for their 'labour' with gifts of cooked food and the distribution of uncooked pieces of pig.

Chowning (1989) holds that those who suffer due to a particular aspect of mortuary observances are seen as deserving of compensation. The question may be posed then: exactly who suffers at Misima? An immediate and obvious answer is the matrilineage, for they have lost a clan member. Even though the death is socially defined as their *nak* ('badness' or loss), and to them falls the burden of carrying out the *bobuton* series of feasts, the clan members are still owed compensation by either the surviving spouse or the father, if the deceased is unmarried. Compensation may take the form of *powon* (a prestation of cooked food), consisting primarily of *bugul* (lit. 'things' or bulk wealth).¹⁸ The father's contribution is also acknowledged and paid for as noted above; this is done through the *hagali* prestation.

It would seem, however, that those who suffer most are the surviving spouses. And they are not remunerated in any way, but are called upon to give compensation to others. Not only have they (presumably) suffered the grief and pain of losing a spouse, companion, and helpmate in shared labour, but they must also endure the restrictions to their physical freedom imposed on them by the death itself. The surviving spouse and his or her matrilineage is responsible for the two obligatory prestations as mentioned above, one to the matrilineal kin of the deceased and one to the patrilineal kin. By these

¹⁸ I follow Weiner here who coins the term, 'bulk wealth' (1985).

prestations to the other two important groupings recognised in Misima society through mortuary rituals, the surviving spouse acknowledges and atones for any accountability for the death and deflects blame. At the very least, in the local view, death may have been attributable to negligence and lack of care; at the worst there has been direct interference in the form of sorcery or witchcraft.

Other affines may voluntarily take on certain taboos. White states: 'The human body is a potent symbol of personal well-being' (1985:333). Most of these voluntary restrictions affect the body in an obvious way, thus revealing aspects of the inner state of the person, including their aspirations and desire for prestige. Men usually allow their hair and beard to grow, while women don black clothing or a long grass skirt. The taboo period ends with a feast and a *hagali* prestation. In this way, the matrilineage's burden is shouldered by someone else, who 'suffers' to remind people of the one who has passed on. This constitutes 'work', and, as such, requires the appropriate return. The matrilineage must compensate the *tohagali* (the one who prepares the *hagali*) for taking on the burden of the death that belongs to them. They do this by assigning rights to use certain betelnut palms or coconut plantations, an act that involves an alienation of matrilineage land, and that appears to be the only way ownership of traditional land can be transferred to another clan.¹⁹

Language anomalies reveal key themes

On Misima, possession is a key feature, both linguistically and culturally: three classes of possession (as is common in Austronesian languages) denote varying degrees of alienability.²⁰ Linguistically, all kin are inalienably possessed,²¹ as are, for example, parts

¹⁹ Land rights may also be transferred to children who sponsor *bobuton* feasts on behalf of their father's matriclan. The example of Nalina and her efforts to show honour to her father's dead relatives is a case in point. See page 117.

²⁰ The three ways nouns may be possessed are known, in linguistic terms, as alienable, semi-alienable and inalienable. These forms showing a decreasing sense of distance from and increasing intimacy towards the possessor.

of the body, branches of a tree, and abstract concepts. The one kin relationship (in a matrilineal society) which however provides the exception and is alienably possessed is the dyad composed of the *valehe* (mother's brother) and his *gamalok* (sister's daughter) and *gan* (sister's son). These kin terms are part of the class that includes inanimate objects or possessions belonging to people—for example, one's house or one's pig. How to explain this? One might speculate that this unusual form marks the *valehe* as someone quite different and apart from normal life, indicating that he is the authority figure and the important person in an individual's life. On the other hand, it could point to his servant nature, the responsibility he has to represent the clan and embody the collective in himself.

The semi-alienable possession class applies to food or drink which is about to be consumed, as distinguished from the food in the garden that has not yet been assigned a consumer. Similarly, the clothes one wears belong to this class, indicating a more intimate connection with the body. Depending on what the speaker desires to emphasise, parts of a whole which are inextricably connected to inanimate objects can be inalienably or semi-alienably possessed (e.g. 'the sea path' contrasted with 'the path that leads to the sea' respectively). Abstract qualities, expressed by verbal nouns such as 'love', can also be distinguished in this way. When the semi-alienable form of possession is used, the abstract noun has an objective force e.g. *Yehoba ana nunuwana* ('the love we have for Jehovah') as contrasted with the alienable form *Yehoba wana nunuwana* ('Jehovah's love for us').

Subtle distinctions are thus made possible through the use of the appropriate linguistic form. To illustrate some of these fine differences, let us take the case of a woman who makes a prestation of uncooked yams and gives it to someone from the matrilineal

²¹ Inalienable possession is signified by a suffix appended to the noun which declines according to person and number, while alienable and semi-alienable possession is indicated by the corresponding free clitic.

kin of the father of the deceased in-law. She is known as the *tonhagali* (the one who sponsors or owns the *hagali*) and it is her alienable *wana hagali* (feast). She presents it to the *tongamagaman* (the one who owns the food) and it becomes his or her semi-alienable *ana hagali* (feast).²² The ritual is performed in honour of a dead relative of her husband, and is called inalienable *hagal-ena*.

It is interesting to note that the above linguistic forms highlight the importance of the notion of possession which permeates Misiman society, at the same time underpinning the focal interest that people have in relationships. To be able to place another person in relation to oneself successfully defines that person, creating a role and a behaviour both for oneself and for the 'other'. Among the Misima, it is important to allocate even white people a place in the universe—they are *wala dimdim* (alienably possessed, 'our inclusive white person').

In the words of Foster: 'Throughout island Melanesia, mortuary ritual often defines the primary locus of social reproduction' (1990:431). Because of the importance of mortuary rituals, death for Misimans both divides and unifies people: in this way, death constructs society, as it causes groups to coalesce and consequently, to be identified and reified, as group members assume the roles expected of them. As each of the three main groups of relatives²³ carry out their mutual obligations within the context of mortuary rituals, each group reconstructs those roles, at the same time as asserting and affirming the importance of the relationships which bind them together. In this way, continuity of those relationships is ensured and mutual worth and esteem of the individual groups reinforced.

²² In other words, the food given to the representative of the deceased's father's line is their food, to consume or distribute as they see fit.

²³ In this thesis, I descriptively refer to these groupings by the metaphor, 'a cord of three strands.' The three strands are the matriclan, the patrilineal relatives and the affines.

Part II***Some Contrasting and Controlling Themes and Values***

Within the frame provided by mortuary feasting rituals, it is possible to isolate several significant Misiman themes and the values which underpin them. I will now proceed to describe how Misimans function in their world, beginning with a discussion of food and feeding and the importance of generosity. I will then examine the relationships Misimans have with each other and the harmony so crucial to their wellbeing, which is predicated variously on attitudes of respect and honour, and on notions of reciprocity and appeasement in times of loss. As well, mortuary feasts also provide a vehicle for attaining status and prestige, and for using power in both direct and indirect ways.²⁴

food and feeding

While food is the basic resource, feeding, and the food production associated with feeding, represents the fundamental activity of subsistence societies. Besides being a biological necessity, food and feeding comprise the crucial elements of sociality. The word *aanan* (food) is also the word for yam (*aanan*): thus in the linguistic sense, yams and food are synonymous. It is rarely that a person decides to voluntarily taboo the yam in honour of a dead relative, though on occasion it does happen.²⁵ In terms of diet, the yam is the staple food. A person cannot feel adequately fed or full unless he has consumed his yam for the day. A sensation of fullness is desirable (though not to the point of bursting!), and this only comes with the consumption of yams.

²⁴ Having said this, I do not intend to provide an exhaustive treatment of power in the course of this thesis, as space does not permit it and the subject is only partially relevant to my concerns here.

²⁵ Refer to the example of Ine on p.218.

In Eves' words, speaking of the Lelet of New Ireland, 'food is seen as an idiom of nurturance and sociality. [It] is widely used to create, maintain and manipulate social relationships' (1998:36). Fajans, in her comparative essay analysing the importance of food in Melanesia, also writes: ²⁶ 'Food is not just a symbol or metaphor for social and cultural processes ... nor simply a signifier that reflects or embodies aspects of a culture. Food is not only transformed, it is transformative' (1988:143).

In Melanesian societies, feeding is the ultimate act of love. At the nuclear family level, the activities involved in the end product of feeding are shared by both mother and father. Both are engaged in cooperative ventures in the garden and house in order to feed and care for their children. The father's line contributes the 'blood', they are the *topapamasal* ('the one who initiates' or 'causes to come into being'). The mother's line preserves the continuity of the social group, granting clan membership and dealing with inheritance and land rights for the child. Although both contribute to nurturance, in some ways the father's share is greater because he is expending his energy to feed and nourish members of another clan. Young (1971), observing the Goodenough Islanders, notes that the social process of feeding allows a father to have certain claims over his offspring. Misimans expect the father to continue to nurture his children, because he is the one considered responsible if a child dies.

Within the Misiman household, there is a general division of labour along gender lines. The man does the hard physical work of clearing and digging the garden, maintaining garden fences, and building the house. The woman attends to the daily chores of sweeping, washing, cooking, feeding pigs and weeding the garden, as well as planting and harvesting the yams. In practice, however—and where necessity dictates—either may attend to these chores. Men will often be left with the care of the children

²⁶ Fajans compares the social value and attributes of food as reported by Michael Young in *Fighting with Food*, Miriam Kahn in *Always Hungry, Never Greedy*, and Anna Meigs in *Food, Sex and Pollution*.

while their wives are gardening; in the absence of readily available male relatives, widows, of necessity, will repair the garden fences.

Food in itself is hugely satisfying. During feasting times, people gather around the tables, hungrily and even greedily 'tucking in.' On communal feasting occasions, especially those connected with church meetings, the men and children usually eat first, with women eating last and usually separately. Huge helpings of the more unusual delicacies—like sago cooked in stone ovens, bread and scones, or turtle meat—are grabbed by the first 'shift,' with seemingly no thought to leaving some for those coming later.²⁷ Children's plates are piled high, even those of quite small children, not because they are expected to eat it all but because that is part of the idiom of food. There must be plenty to eat, and plenty left over to feed to the pigs. Shame is incurred if a feast sponsor does not supply an abundance of food that will satisfy the guests' appetites (as well as provide them with enough to take home).

The sharing of food, and sharing in the labour needed to produce that food in particular, is part of the giving that takes place amongst matrilineal kin. A *mulolu* ('free' gift) is an offering without expectation of *lahena* (return or payback).²⁸ The term *mulolu* has, in fact, a wide range of meaning, from a simple greeting that is extended by one friend or co-resident to another, to the sharing around of a large bunch of bananas because there are too many for one family to eat. The term also extends to the giving of *bugul* or a pot of cooked rice or a basket of yams, all of which will help out at feast times. (See Plate 2.)

²⁷ The cooks know this, and deliberately do not serve out all the food, but keep some aside to be shared amongst themselves at the second sitting!

¹⁹ This is the 'ideal' meaning of *mulolu*. In reality, a rough estimation of gifts given and received is kept in people's minds, with the view that there should be balanced giving. Macintyre refers to this abstract concept on Tubetube as the 'gift par excellence, it is freely given as a token of love, ideally offered without thought or expectation of repayment and carrying no obligation or debt (1982:25)'.

Cooperative ventures are entered into by groups of people from a given village. They involve projects considered too large for one person alone to accomplish, like the hauling of house posts from the bush or the planting of yams in a garden. A meal at the end of the day (and a cup of tea with rice and bread to sustain the person in the middle of the day) is always the *galabela* (payment). Nowadays, when money is much more widely used in transactions, individuals might contract to do certain jobs for pay. Food, however, is still the medium of exchange. A good meal of yams, rice, tinned meat and a cup of tea carries fair and proper exchange value for a person's time and energy. Larger ventures, such as erecting house posts or tying sago leaves onto a roof, require a greater investment of labour with more concerted and concentrated effort—and, by extension, more payment in the form of a pig killed and cooked with yams, served with rice and tea. In this way, food manipulates social action, and mediates between groups of people involved in cooperative labour.

In mortuary rituals, food is the medium of social exchange. Fajans summarises the attitude of the Wamirans towards food as follows: '[C]ontrol over food is control both over self as social being and over social relations' (1988:149). Control over food—shown through a plentiful supply of resources at all stages of the feasting cycle—determines the prestige, reputation and status of both the individual Misiman feast sponsor and his or her clan. Food is the key element of all the rituals, its preparation, form and content being prescribed by custom. A plentiful supply of yams is the first requirement, and, to that end, gardens must be planned in advance and additional garden space allotted for the larger feasts of *hagali* and *lobek*. *Moni* or sago porridge pudding is a necessary accompaniment to all feasts that require the killing of a pig. The *hagali* prestation dictates that the sago porridge be prepared in a particular way, i.e. must be both boiled and baked. Cooked food presented as part of *powon* and *hagali* should include some clay pots of *ligabwayabwaya* (yams cooked in their skins and piled high in the pot), in addition

to *tamtam* (pots of yams cooked in the normal way using coconut cream as liquid).

However there appears to be only one way to prepare the pig. First it must be butchered by the sea, its belly bashed with an axe, and its hair singed using *dam* (dried coconut branches set alight). The pig meat is then distributed to individual women who place the piece of pig meat on top of the yams and other vegetables in one clay pot, cooking vegetables and meat together usually without coconut grease. An excessive amount of pig meat—and a shortage of chefs—would see some of the meat cooked by the method of *liga palo* (loaded in together and cooked) in a large kerosene drum, or made into a stew.

Custom prescribes the number of food items required to be given at a *hagali*. Pre-gifts are made up in groups of *nimala panuna* (five or 'the hand'). Five bundles of firewood or five bunches of bananas are presented as resources become available. Five pigs are customarily brought in procession during the dancing and mock fighting which accompanies the *kalehe* (mango) festival. Ten is another significant number used in the *leyau* presentations between affines, when sets of five or ten stone axe blades are displayed for the 'opposing' clan to collect and subsequently match on another occasion. Ten baskets of yams are required for the prestation of *hagali*. Varieties of food resources and prescribed numbers and styles of presentation thus construct, transform, identify and validate feasting occasions that are linked with death.

Food controls social being, mediating between social relations, genders and generations. People who 'help' at feast times are differentiated by the different roles they play. Female neighbours and female matrilineal kin from elsewhere gather to help with the cooking, often providing the raw vegetables from their own gardens. Young men are assigned the job of building platforms, which function both as additional work space and as an area used to display butchered and dissected pigs. They also collect firewood,

scrape the coconuts needed for producing the oil which is mixed with *moni*, and cut up the pigs by the sea shore. Older men have the responsibility of mixing the raw sago fibre and oil together to make *moni*, and of supervising the building of *pwasiu* (platforms) and *abaanan* (tables).

But it is the affines who constitute the most important group of contributors. Pre-eminent amongst this group is the *tovelam* (son-in-law). He must prove the *gasisi* (strength) and reliability of himself and his clan, thus confirming that he is a fitting consort for the daughter of the feast sponsor. He does this by being amongst the first to bring a live pig, carried on a pole or small platform. This pig leads a procession of the women, young girls and men who carry uncooked yams, firewood, coconuts, and store-bought goods such as cartons of tinned fish or meat, bales of sugar or rice. This is accompanied by a literal fanfare, with the procession—either on foot (or these days by truck)—preceded by the sound of the conch shell being blown. It is a triumphant procession, a public display of affinal obligations successfully performed.

Food—and the production, distribution and consumption of food—divides people into specific social groupings. Misimans, however, are not confronted with consumers and the consumed, as Foster suggests is the case with the Tangan (1990). Rather, at any particular feast, people coalesce into groups of those who give and those who receive, of the host and the hosted, the employer and the employees, and the *towoho* (land-owners) and the *bwabwali* ('visitors,' those who don't belong by right). On all feeding occasions—whether small (when a meal is prepared for the 'casual' workers who weed around the pastor's house) or large (when a feast which feeds hundreds of people on several occasions over a period of weeks in the lead-up to and on the final feast day itself is given)—food temporarily separates people into specific, socially defined categories.

An interesting insight into food may be elicited if we investigate insults and their

meanings and contexts as Franklin (1979) has done, noting at the same time the values of a society which can be extrapolated or confirmed from such a perusal. Insults traded back and forth by young Misimans naturally enough explicitly refer to food, excretion or sex. The term *toanan* (one who eats) has connotations of a person who is greedy, who eats more than their fair share—a share the person doesn't deserve because they have not worked for it. The appellation *toalatau* (eater of excreta) is used in situations of food abuse: boys go diving for fish, and while they are gone, one boy who has not been 'working' with the rest eats all the cooked food.

Food is the basic currency of exchange; however, it has symbolic value as well, in that it serves as a reminder of the love and nurturance extended within the nuclear family and between kin. In addition, it represents the reciprocal giving that allows social groups to function and carry out their obligations. But it is important to analyse the way in which food is consumed, produced, and given. For Misimans, food actualises and objectifies the ultimate acts of generosity and sharing, and of cooperative ventures. Yams, for example, are reminiscent of society itself and its foundations, focused as they are on mortuary feasting. Misimans recognise a similarity between the manipulation and production of yams—whereby the holes dug by men in the garden are filled with seed yams planted in these 'nests' by women—and the sexual act of conception and nurturance which takes place in the womb. Yams are not conceived of as 'people' in the same way as for other Massim societies, among the Tubetube, for instance (Macintyre 1987), though Misimans do refer to yams anthropomorphically as having the ability to *alasiya* (eat fish). The leaves that cover the pot in which *koyatut* (marine coral worms) were cooked used to be preserved for later burning in the garden at the time of the planting of the yams. It was believed the yams would smell the essence of the *koyatut*, and that feeding on it in a

metaphorical and magical sense would result in an enhancement of and increase in, the yield at harvest time.²⁹

On Misima, as elsewhere in Melanesia,³⁰ food signifies good relations: people in conflict refuse to eat together, nor do they even speak to each other. So food is the approved way of achieving reconciliation during a ceremonial feast which involves the symbolic feeding of the offended parties.³¹

That food has social value is also evident in the restrictions that surround the rituals of *yagowau* (the first-born) and *luna* (the seclusion period enjoined upon a widow or widower after the death of a spouse). Certain 'hard' foods must be eschewed by the young mother so that her milk will flow freely; food qualities are thus considered to be imparted to the one who ingests them during a vulnerable time and liminal phase of her life. A widow or other close relative of the deceased may choose to avoid a food that was intimately connected with the dead person's last living moments. Meigs notes that social value also accrues to food because food contains part of the substance of those who have been involved in its production or preparation (1984:20). For Misimans, food taboos prohibit the consumption of the totem animals belonging to one's father's clan in particular; likewise, an affinal relation is forbidden to eat the meat given in honour of a deceased in-law. The sharing of substance through food is also expressed in the etiquette requirement that a woman contributing to a feast may not, at the conclusion of the feast when the guests have eaten their fill, take home any of the food she herself has cooked; she must be given the left-overs from someone else's pot.

²⁹ See Chapter five for further discussion of the marine coral worms and their connection with the ancestors.

³⁰ For example, amongst the Lelet of New Ireland, 'The good person is one who calls out to the passer-by and invites them into their house to eat. ... The selfish being is the paradigm of the incorporating individual who holds back food for their own consumption (Eves 1998)'.

³¹ See below for further details of the feast of reconciliation, *maninin hi abubun*.

Food is integral to the Papua New Guinean concept of wholeness and well-being, of health, happiness and fertility. On Misima, this concept is found in two words, viz. *mibubun* ('well-staying') and *yaliyaya* (joy or contentment). A condition of well being—and accepting that it applies also to material benefits—depends primarily on good relationships with others (who are the ones to provide the cooperative labour which results in possessions). Joy, on the other hand, includes being well-fed and healthy, and thus able to participate in and enjoy social intercourse. Whereas food is implicated in personhood, personal identity is transformed through the various stages of the life cycle, especially as it pertains to mortuary rituals. Fajans observes: 'The result is a cultural construction of a person over a wide range of ages and contexts ... people create, transform, and control their essences through the foods they eat ' (1988:155). In a Misiman context, people create their identity not so much in terms of kinds of food, but through the use of food, which in turn defines and constructs individuality as it produces and exploits ties between social groupings. I will explore these concepts at greater length in later discussions.

generosity—give freely to those who ask

Food is used to express the basic value of generosity. Berde (1974) demonstrates in his thesis how basic values traditionally inherent in Misima culture were reinforced by the arrival of the Christian message. Among these values, generosity—giving freely and widely, even sharing to the extent of being in need oneself—is fundamental to understanding and appreciating Misimans and their behaviour. A reputation for generosity is ideally the goal of every Misiman, for the person who is a *tau papaan* (a feeder of men) is an esteemed and productive member of society. The main arena for displays of generosity is the mortuary ritual, because primarily these rituals consist of feasting, feasting and more feasting.

While the social value that generosity has for Misimans is intimately connected with food and the giving of food, it can also be subsumed under the basic social interactive attitude of giving. The ideal 'good person' in Misiman society is one who has *wana pagan / waisi* ('good ways'; lit. his behaviour is good)—the term *waisi* indicating the one who gives when asked, who shares what he or she has, and who does it all in a cheerful and friendly fashion. Through giving and sharing, the channels of social relationships are kept open and clear, and people relate well to each other.

Between both friends and relations, and also with strangers, the main item of exchange is betelnut. It is expected that betelnut be shared freely and in all situations, because it is an integral part of what people do when they meet together both formally and informally; they chat and chew, work a little, then chat and chew some more. It is also connected with food: for the passing around of the betelnut at the end of a meal is considered the appropriate and satisfying end to this epitome of a social occasion.

The maxim that underwrites Misiman society is that 'those who have should give' (even if it means the shirt or dress off one's back). To refuse to give to someone, especially one who *awanun* (requests), is to figuratively put an end to any relationship with that person, and by extension, to imply that the said person is 'rubbish', not worth caring about or knowing. Of course, in practice there are realistic limitations to the requirement to give in all circumstances; various ploys are adopted in order to circumvent the obligation to give. A man carrying fish or betelnut back to the village may deliberately wait till dark, so that he can elude recognition, and so avoid becoming a target for *awanun*. Someone desiring to ask for kerosene will similarly wait for dark, so that they will not have to bear either the shame of their *awanun* becoming common knowledge, or the shame of a possible refusal. An *awanun* for betelnut can be countered by revealing the empty inside of one's *nabwa* (betelnut basket)—but without lifting the false bottom as well. A garment or large item can be denied to a plaintiff by stating, whether truly or falsely, that the

article in demand is really the property of yet a third person, and so cannot be given away in response to an *awanun*. The main diversionary tactic is to regretfully deny the request—accompanied by vehement apologies—because the prospective giver simply does not (supposedly) possess the particular item requested.

Generally, however, unwritten sanctions—plus a commonsense understanding of what is appropriate—operate to keep the practice of *awanun* within reasonable bounds. The person who is forever asking and never giving acquires a certain reputation, and actually becomes, in the eyes of the community, a *togulagula* (poor person). The implication is that this person is either incapable or unwilling to work for themselves and their family, but must be continually encroaching on the fruits of the hard work of others. People ask '*Nige wali puluwawi?* Don't they have any shame—don't they know what is reasonable and appropriate?' Conversely, someone who is too *puluwawi* (timid, embarrassed, or shy) to use the social convention of *awanun* when it is necessary, thereby distancing him or herself from the normal channels of social interaction, is similarly condemned. In this case, *puluwawi* is seen as a negative force that keeps people from actively participating in the social system.

In the context of mortuary feasts, generosity is the *sine qua non*—the quintessential quality. Feasts are the expected arena for generosity on a large scale; here many people have the opportunity to both observe and receive the generosity of the host, and it is in this context that reputations for generosity are acquired, maintained—and also lost. Prestige accompanies generosity. One who does a good job of feeding during a mortuary feast is assured that he is doing the right thing by providing people with the fundamental necessities of life—food in the context of social interaction. Doing it with *elan* and *largesse* 'adds icing to the cake'.

However a no-win situation can result. What people do—and what they say about

what they do—is located between two poles of social constraint. A group of older men, discussing this whole area of *bobuton*, ruefully commented:

If we kill many pigs, we run the risk of sorcery being worked against us; if we kill too few, then the gossips will be at work, telling how poorly we performed.³²

But still they run the risk. The desire for acclaim and praise based on one's generosity and ability to marshal resources of people and food runs deep, constituting one of the main motivating factors in Misiman ways of being-in-the-world. Mortuary feasting is the main avenue by which prestige and status in the public eye may be achieved.

relationships

connectedness—harmonious living with kin

Harmony is important and desirable, and concomitant with *mibubun* ('well-staying'). In a closely-knit community where each person's character, behaviour and entire life history are known to everyone, surface harmony must be preserved; friendly (or at least overtly friendly) social intercourse is the order of the day. Someone who jokes and laughs a lot is welcomed. When groups of women gather for gossip or work, the laughter and loud voices that signify easy relationships are common and expected. On the other hand, a person who does not participate in social occasions, who is quiet and appears to be wrapped in her own thoughts, is considered to be exhibiting emotions of anger, fuelled perhaps by notions of exclusion or envy, or provoked by another's good fortune. The fear is that she will proceed to more antisocial behaviour, culminating in the plotting and performing of sorcery or other forms of evil against another person. Similarly, sick persons may by definition be unable to partake in normal social activities with others, unable to

³² Personal communication, Siagara village, 1996.

perform their part in the system of relationships and associated responsibilities. Much concern is felt and expressed—not just for the individual and their health but for the loss of an active member belonging to the social organism. There remains a gap to be filled.

Deep down, however, grudges infected by the poison of anger and resentment often tend to fester. Animosity is not necessarily directed towards strangers but often towards one's closest relatives and village co-residents. This happens generally when a person feels slighted in some way or omitted from the social circle. Young men seek refuge in drink, thereby establishing what they believe to be a legitimate excuse to lose self-control and express their anger. Beten's son and his companion stumbled through the village one night, complaining loudly and bitterly, to the accompaniment of many oaths, about his father's sister who had employed the son to build her house, and accusing her of not paying fair wages. Observers noted that the proper steps to have taken would be first to approach his father's sister in the daylight and then discuss the matter in a reasonable manner so that the dispute could be resolved. But he was too *puluwawi* to do this to his classificatory mother and so used this more indirect method to vent his anger. The tactic resulted in much tongue-clicking and tut-tutting amongst the gossips, as well as discomfort and shame for Lilo—the father's sister—who was implicated.

When the surface of social harmony has been obviously disturbed—and disharmony and grudges become public knowledge—a mechanism called *maninin hi abubun* ('mend the face') can effect reconciliation. A feast is given either by the offended party or by the one taking the initiative to bring about the reconciliation. Enatu and his sister Suba had not conversed with each other for several years because of a past offence and resultant hurt; so Enatu made a feast, and invited clan members and others from the village to attend in order to witness the reconciliation. He symbolically fed his sister some food, and she in turn did the same for him. Then they exchanged money. Fences (or in this case, faces) were mended, and the offence presumably forgotten. The

ritual served as a channel through which negative and disruptive emotions of anger, resentment and unforgiveness could be disposed of and the breach in social relations healed.

indebtedness

Indebtedness is a theme that runs throughout Misiman society, but nowhere is it more evident than in an analysis of mortuary feasting customs. The idiom of debt and credit is used in the context of sports, wherein a losing team's points are expressed in terms of *vaga* (debt). People say '*Siagara Boyou ali vaga hi pek*' (the Siagara team won; they gave Boyou a debt). In the context of the church and Christianity as well, *vaga* has been interpreted literally as a necessary part of the admonition to forgive sins ('debts', according to some modern English translations). One elderly lady recently expressed to me her conviction that

if we clear our debts, then Jehovah will be pleased with us and we will go to Heaven. But if we don't attend to our debts we will have no place in Heaven.³³

The lady was speaking specifically in the context of returning the pigs received in the course of her mortuary feasting career. She made a particular point of assuring me that having cleared all her debts from her past endeavours, she was now concentrating on being a church person, no longer interested in *logogomwau* (acquiring wealth).

The proper channels of social discourse are activated by giving and receiving. As noted above, it is imperative that a balance be achieved. Misimans live by the axiom 'for each action/force there is an opposite and equivalent reaction', known in the Misima language as *lahi* ('payback' or reciprocity). The root meaning of this word—'substitute' or 'replacement'—aptly translates the notion of payback, both in the positive meaning of equivalence and reciprocity, and in the negative sense of vengeance or punishment.

reciprocity—pay what you owe

The appropriate way of paying back a debt is through equivalence. The concept of using food and other resources to show superiority and provide an outlet for a competitive spirit is evident on Misima (though to a lesser degree than that detected by Young (1971) among the Kalauna of Goodenough Island. The strict rule is 'tit for tat' at all levels and in all circumstances of social interaction. On the occasion of a mortuary feast, exchange obligations, which are carried out by affinal relations, materially comprise at least one pig, accompanied by dishes of *anaan* (food), a carton of tinned fish, one bale of sugar and one of rice, and some other optional extras that may include bundles of firewood, coconuts, and *bugul*. A new son-in-law should be among the first to bring such 'gifts' to his father-in-law. This activity on his part, however, does not constitute a *mulolu* (gift offering); it is a *vaga* which must be returned in kind when it is the turn of the son-in-law's clan to host a mortuary feast.

Careful record is kept of all stages of each transaction. Nowadays 'gifts' are listed carefully in an exercise book; in former days, however, a piece of vine was tied with the appropriate number of knots and hung from the house rafters as a reminder. The payback, when it eventuates, is as near to equivalent as possible. The initial gift of a medium-sized pig commands the payback of an equally medium-sized pig, together with the exact number and kind of the other food and items which accompanied the pig on the original occasion. A *tonowak* (respected older man) could justifiably reject the return of a debt if the pig was not exactly as large as he remembered his own gift to be. And this mechanism has been used in the past—to the extreme shame of the *tovelam* (son-in-law) concerned with trying to pay off his debt. Relationships with *muli* (the group of affines) need to be punctually and rigorously attended to, so that neither group can claim

³³ Personal communication, Siagara village, 1997.

ascendancy or superiority over the other through unpaid debts. The ongoing and mutually satisfying exchanges that cement relationships and construct identities, also work to inhibit attempts by clans to assume an ascendant position, and by extension gain the right to control members—whether living or dead—of any other clan. Failure to honour these traditions gives rise to the spread of gossip among community members, thus inducing an emotion of *puluwawi*—public shame—that adheres to the defaulting clan.

Women who wail at a funeral must also be paid for their 'work', and this constitutes the primary aim of *iwas*, the third main mortuary feast. At the time of burial, one of the deceased's matrikin will be given the task of recording the names of all the women present beside the coffin; these will all be given their *vinakahin* (payment for tears) at the appropriate time. This distribution is not done haphazardly however; the size of the piece and the particular section of the pig that is given to each woman is selected according to the remembrance of former wailing occasions and previous debts. Another consideration is the prestige or power of the particular woman. If there is a desire to *payaliyaya* (please) a particular woman, then she will be given one of the more greatly preferred pieces of meat, like the ribs or the head.

During the series of *bobuton* mortuary feasts, *mwahalahi* (the exchange of dishes) is a common feature, otherwise known literally and figuratively as 'pot-luck'. This allows an opportunity for the women in the village—and their families—to taste pig meat, and to share in the communal feasting events. The feast sponsor provides the slaughtered pig meat, while the women's share consists of vegetable produce from their own garden. This constitutes a mutual helping venture.

Mwahalahi takes place towards the end of the feasting day, when the work is complete and the pig meat has been distributed for cooking. One by one, women from all over the village bring their clay pots filled with cooked yams, bananas and other root

crops topped with pig meat, and place them on the *pwasiu*, (platform) especially built for that purpose. The women belonging to the deceased's matrilineage lift them down off the platform and line the pots in a row in front of the house where the dead was laid out. Perhaps twenty or thirty pots will be assembled, each with their 'lid' of banana leaves tightly folded and tucked down over the bulging food into the sides of the pot. Accompanied by female consultants, the main feast sponsor walks back and forth along the line, reading the names written on the sides of the blackened pots in white chalk, and lifting the lids to check on the kind of pig meat inside. Then they deliberate together on how to apportion the pots of food so that each woman receives what a neighbour has cooked. The pots are distributed two by two: each pair is conveyed to participants who live close by each other in order to facilitate the return of the washed and empty pots the following day. *Mwahalahi* is a popular exchange for it unites the community in a social activity through the medium of feeding each other, and consuming the gift of pig provided by the feast sponsor.

The paying back of debts is a primary consideration at all levels of social intercourse and the basis of all exchange. Between members of matrilineages and amongst friends who are neighbours, the ideal is that *tutunau* (matrikin) will 'help' without thought of repayment. However in practice, informal record is kept of gifts given and received. At the ordinary daily level, the plate on which a gift of cooked food or raw fish has been placed is washed first and then carefully set aside, to be returned with a similar gift as opportunity and availability allows. Maintaining and discharging one's debts punctually and appropriately is a vital part of all relationships, suggestive of an underlying attitude of respect for the other person, signifying that the relationship, and the person, is valued.

Reciprocity permeates all areas of life: within the church, an amount of money given by one village to another at the time of the annual *mulolu* is carefully noted so that

it can be returned equivalently at another time. Those who turn out regularly to join in cooperative work ventures in another's garden are the ones who will receive help in return when they have a need.

Mortuary feasting is inscribed with the rhetoric of reciprocity or payback. Kanolo, discussing the idea of nurture and provision, observes:

We give away a lot, *aliyoho bwabwatana*, we just waste our resources, *bugul ta apanak*, at feasts for our [deceased] relatives, because they have prepared everything for their descendants' use—coconuts, betelnut, garden land. We are eating off the fat of the land because of their labour on our behalf.³⁴

The concept of repayment for labour undertaken in the past is a key motivator for Misimans when they perform their mortuary feasting rituals. It is a way of saying 'thank you', of showing gratitude to clan members' ancestors. Pigs, food and other resources are freely given away as a form of thanks for all that the matrilineage has received in the way of land and access to plantations. The payment of obligations is also an occasion which, when transformed into a lavish and generous display from which all benefit, causes considerable public acknowledgment to accrue to the sponsor.

appeasement—payback for loss

Compensation or appeasement is part of the felt need amongst Misimans to reciprocate, or pay back what is owed. This is especially articulated in the custom of *powon*, a mortuary prestation given to appease or atone for a death.³⁵ The recipients are always the matrilineage of the deceased for theirs is the loss. They entrusted one of their members to another clan's care—whether it be to an unmarried child's father or to the surviving spouse—but that clan has *payaomal* (lost) the valued member to death. In practice, while there is usually very little actual animosity felt and few accusations made, there may still be some residual suspicions of foul play—that direct interference through

³⁴ Discussion with Kanolo, March 1997, in Siagara village.

³⁵ See Chapter four.

sorcery caused the death. These feelings and reactions have been ritualised in the form of the *powon* prestation which is obligatory and expected. If performed well, then the channels of social relationship are once again cleared of obstructions—the debt has been paid.

respect and honour

Tied into the obligation to pay one's debts is the notion of respect for person—*awatauwan* (literally glossed as 'to be called a man'). This theme is elaborated in many ways, chief of which is through the mortuary rituals discussed in more detail below.

From childhood, Misimans are taught to respect other human beings; they express this respect by adherence to certain etiquette requirements, word taboos³⁶ and avoidance customs. Etiquette demands that one should not walk either between or in front of people who are conversing together. People within a group should face each other as much as possible because turning one's back on another person is indicative of disrespect and dislike. A person entering a room will bow at the waist as they move past others who are seated. In former times, this would mean crawling to one's place in order to avoid occupying a higher space than those seated, and thus giving an impression of superiority. Even kinship terms can be altered in order to show respect: someone who has a relationship of "brother" to ego may, in a public situation, be addressed by the term "mother's brother" in order to show due respect, because of his age and status (example taken from Whiting 1976:63).

The names of certain relatives who are included in the respect-avoidance category must not be mentioned—these particularly include the affinal relations of mother- and father-in-law. In earlier times, the father-in-law / son-in-law dyad was especially marked by avoidance customs, chief of which was the prohibition against

eating in each other's company. Labouring under these restrictions, the son-in-law who accompanied his wife's father on a sea voyage in search of pigs for mortuary feasting must have become very hungry as he waited for land to be reached, at which time he could reasonably separate himself from his father-in-law and satiate his hunger.

The gravest taboo is that associated with the dead. A dead person's name can only be mentioned by a member of that person's own matrilineage; any other person doing so is committing both an offence against the memory of the dead and an act of defiance and disrespect towards living kin. In the event of the latter, a compensatory payment of money or even a pig can be required, even today.

A way of showing respect at the individual level is evident in a certain phlegmatic acceptance of each person's actions and temperament by their relatives and co-residents. Commenting on someone whose actions give rise to criticism or gossip, people say resignedly: '*Wana pagan i ola to, he i ola ya*' (That is their way, they're just like that).³⁷ The individual is an important unit of society and must be treated as such, no matter the age or how productive the person may be. This notion of acceptance and the respect it involves may take—from a Western viewpoint—somewhat extreme forms. At about 10 p.m. one night, Danitu asked her three year-old grandchild whether she wanted to continue singing with the rest of the group in church, or whether it might not be time to go home. Danitu herself was tired and had an infected foot that was paining her.³⁸ When the child expressed her enthusiasm to remain, Danitu resorted to lies, saying that the child's cousins were already back at the house—'let's go join them'. The child was however first given the illusion of choice, an important aspect of the value of personhood.

³⁶ See Chapter five.

³⁷ Here—in the use of the terms 'their' and 'they'—I have adopted the increasing acceptable method of using the plural form for the singular. This dispenses with the ongoing problems surrounding the use of 'he-she' and 'him-her'.

³⁸ Another literally translated Misiman expression!

Where community meetings are concerned, respect dictates that the church service or the distribution of work duties for the day should not begin until a 'critical mass' of people appears. (This makes things very unpredictable for a Westerner accustomed to going by the clock.) Consensus at these meetings also is another means of showing respect. Each male or female who wants to contribute must be allowed the opportunity to speak and give their³⁹ opinion; that opinion should be delivered in a respectful and humble manner and prefaced with expressed admiration for the opposite point of view.⁴⁰

Respect for the person trickles over into an attitude of *henapu* (obedience or appropriate behaviour) to authority, and deference for the position that a person holds, whether elected or appointed. Pewanaka, who was elected for one year as President of the Women's Fellowship, was unable to put a programme into effect throughout her term of office because of a sick mother who needed her attention. As a result, the women's fellowship languished that year and fell into disarray. The women showed respect for Pewanaka's position and the *logugui* (authority) she had as a result. To be *henapu* means to be law-abiding and obedient; it is offensive to attempt to take over anyone else's job or usurp their authority, even when that authority is obviously being abused or neglected.

There are, of course, certain limitations to this somewhat rosy and idealistic picture of the obedient, law-abiding and humble citizens who inhabit the island of Misima. One of the unwritten sanctions implicit in society is the threat of *loloba* (gossip) which has repercussions of not only in embarrassment or emotional upset in the person under scrutiny, but is believed to take a physical toll as well. Children are particularly vulnerable. Their wishes must be acceded to lest *nuwana ta apanak* (we upset the child). As I have already demonstrated, the way out of this dilemma is to lie. In order to distract a child

³⁹ I have translated this phrase using the plural form instead of the singular.

⁴⁰ At one time we distributed a petition protesting against the local government council allowing liquor outlets in the village. When asked to sign, one section of the community showed reluctance, because it was felt that those

from becoming aware that her mother has left for the garden without her, the carer will excitedly divert the child's attention to the 'truck' about to appear around a corner. To dissuade a child from going outside the house in the dark, adults will play on its fears of monsters, magic and the supernatural. They will use threats like *Olal nasi ni aniwa* ('The spirit of witchcraft will eat you!') or an even worse scare tactic like *Dimdim ni ahewa* ('The white person will get you!').⁴¹

Loloba and its effects have caused people to become so full of shame and embarrassment that they actually commit suicide, though this is a rare occurrence at Misima. *Loloba* caused Pisel to leave one church denomination and join another after both her daughters became pregnant by the husbands of girls whose families lived in Pisel's own village. In a choked voice and with tears streaming down her face, she admitted to me that she felt people were talking about her, so much so that she could not face joining again in the church fellowship in which she had played an important role all her life. Her escape route was to join another denomination currently being introduced by her son who had brought its teachings from the mainland.

In addition to the possible physical repercussions caused by an emotional upset, *loloba* can often mask a deeper hatred or envy on the part of someone who has the ability to work sorcery. So there is a very real danger associated with being disrespectful to, or slighting, such a powerful person. The fear of sorcery lies at the root of reluctance on the part of the Misiman people to attempt to rise above others by indulging in public boasting, or by making a display of possessions. For this reason, store ownership at the village level is best carried out as a cooperative venture within the clan or family unit. But this may have its drawbacks, as there are then too many people who assume, by virtue of

who wanted liquor should also have opportunity to circulate a petition presenting their side; in their view, it didn't seem right to sign the one we distributed.

⁴¹ On a similar vein, see Wormsley, *The White Man will Eat You!* (1993)

their kin relationship to the owners, the right to 'book' their goods.⁴² Because of the fear of sorcery, there is also a certain risk attendant on sponsoring large mortuary feasts, but the risks are generally considered worth the prestige which can be acquired.

The ultimate cultural way of showing respect is worked out through mortuary ritual. When a person dies, the whole village takes on mourning restrictions which prohibit the large projects of any kind being undertaken by community members, save for the ordinary everyday chores of cooking and washing. A loss has occurred to the social organism—and respect for this person and for their relatives must be shown in a tangible way. Depending on the importance of the deceased, visitors may arrive from other villages. Relatives especially should attend the funeral. In a show of respect and deference—and an exhibition of solidarity with the grieving family—women from the village gather to wail over the body before the burial. Gifts of bedsheets, mats, perfume and powder are brought and laid over the corpse. The public display exhibited at a death indicates the prestige not only of the deceased person but also of their clan. The larger the crowd, the greater the number of mouths to feed; there is more opportunity to marshal resources and more opportunity to gain prestige and an enhanced reputation through the feeding of the multitudes.

Respect also dictates that an event should be carried out with propriety and order, and in accordance with an appropriate time schedule. This is evident in the activities that occur on important days in the church calendar, as well as during the mortuary feasting times. Easter Sunday requires four preachers. People must sit in church for several hours in order to reinforce the sanctity and importance of the occasion. And accordingly, mortuary feasting performed with undue haste results in disrespect and dishonour.

⁵⁸ In spite of what I have said above about the Misiman concern with repaying debts, store debts are not considered in the same light as mortuary ritual debts, often being last on the list of priorities for spending when a little money is obtained.

Nalina⁴³ spoke of the ritual feasting that she needed to perform for her father, a respected church and clan leader who had died the previous year. She felt that even though her father's clan members were eager to go ahead with the feast of *iwas* during that year, everyone needed a rest in order to regroup and make adequate preparations for the event. She herself had just helped her mother complete both *powon* and *hagaliin* honour of her father, with the result that the family's own yam resources were very much depleted. She planned to plant a special garden the following year so as to be ready for the feast. She stated vehemently: '*Nige tage tonowak iya wawaya ge bugul gegewena ta pwamweyaha*' ('It is not as if Tonowak was a child that everything should be done in haste').

Nalina was in conflict with his matrilineage over this and expressed her anger at being omitted from discussions concerning the timing of the next feast. She considered that she had earned the right to speak (and for her words to be obeyed) because of the numerous feasts she had sponsored to honour deceased members of her father's clan. She had performed *tuwalali* (work) for them, so they in turn had an obligation to take her wishes into account. Accordingly, she issued both a challenge and a threat. If the clan members wished to pursue their own thinking, they could go ahead with *iwas* for her father—but she would not give assistance by using her own resources. She would also prevent them from using the area near her father's house for the building of the obligatory *pwasiu* (platform).⁴⁴

While too hurried a schedule of mortuary rituals for a particular deceased shows a lack of respect, conversely, if the final feast is delayed too long, gossip can begin. This may express doubt about the ability and willingness of the matrilineage to honour their

⁴³ I discussed this with her at Siagara, in 1996.

⁴⁴ The platform where the work of cutting up pigs and scraping coconut is done, and on which are placed the gifts brought by in-laws, is traditionally erected either close to or on one end of the house where the body was laid out in death.

dead in the appropriate fashion, thus bringing shame and the opprobrium of weakness upon them. As in all things, there is a balance to be sought and achieved, an equilibrium to be maintained, and certain unwritten rules and customs to be followed. Having said that however, in more recent times a tendency to abbreviate the feasting cycle by combining two feasts in one can be discerned. This is known as *liliihighig*, or *liliiwas* (*lili-* being a prefix denoting movement). The former refers to the more modern custom of the second mortuary feast of *highig* being held at the same time as the funeral, while the latter describes a blending of the second and third feasts—*highig* and *iwas*. These new 'traditions' are acceptable as long as each feast provides an abundance of food, and people's appetites are sufficiently satiated.

The reason for hosting this kind of combination affair is located in the efficient management of resources. Misima people are pragmatic in their thinking, weighing up the costs and benefits of each mortuary affair. If it is expedient and more effective to combine resources (when, for example, there may be a good number of pigs available and in prime condition) then they do so, unless other considerations such as what is thought appropriate in terms of respect take priority. In practice *liliiwas* commemorates the death of those who have less prestige—like children or unmarried adults. *Liliiwas* was performed for Pisel's stillborn child, and for Gali, a deaf girl of about seventeen years of age.

power and status

avenues to prestige—through church, clan, government

No one likes to be devalued or regarded as worthless or 'rubbish'. Each person desires to be held in esteem, not only in their own estimation, but there is also a need to see that positive self-image reflected in the attitudes and opinions of others. This is true for Misimans, for whom certain avenues are marked out as routes to the prestige

and power that will ultimately generate esteem.

The primary means for achieving *alan* ('name'; reputation) lie along the path of mortuary feasting. Even more so than their clan, the individual feast sponsor is the one who achieves a name for being a strong and powerful person because of an ability to influence and persuade others to work for him. In the past especially, the cultural understanding of power has included skill in practising magic, an endowment from the spiritual realm that is exercised in order to recruit the support of the ancestral spirits for the activities of the living. The spirits help the yams to grow well and in abundance, thus providing the foundational resources necessary to host any feast. Men's names are usually associated with the hosting of *bobuton*, though particularly 'strong' women like Nalina and Katen may sponsor feasts in their own right, particularly if they have access to money resources, enabling them to provide the requisite store goods to feed both workers and visitors.

While men may meet to discuss and plan their feasting strategy at length, it is the women on whom they depend for the provision of ample supplies of yams from the garden—without which no feasting enterprise could be contemplated. Domesticated pigs must be looked after carefully and fed regularly so that the requisite number of pigs is available to be slaughtered at the appropriate time. A further necessity is money, which can either be obtained from relatives who work on the mainland, or nowadays from those who work in the gold mine on the island. Store-bought goods such as rice, tinned meat and fish, sugar and tea, along with luxury items like biscuits and cordial, are essential fare to be provided by any self-respecting host who wishes to acquit himself well and desires that his feast be judged successful.

Within the context of mortuary rituals, the sponsor must fulfil his obligations to deceased parents or to a deceased clan member by initiating a series of *bobuton* (pig-

burnings). He may, however, choose other ways to achieve and maintain fame as a *topapaan* (people-feeder). In his capacity as a son-in-law, he may decide to perform the rituals known as *kalehe* or *leyau*.⁴⁵ Each feasting ritual, properly performed, redounds to his credit in more ways than one: it reveals a force of personality, and an ability to organise and manage resources on a large scale. The man demonstrates his ability and willingness not only to feed others but also to prove himself dependable when called on for help, cooperation, and the discharging of debts when it is the turn of others to host feasts.

While Misiman men build their reputations mainly through mortuary feasting, there are additional avenues open to them. Leadership in the church or in government are two further channels which may lead to enhanced prestige and status, and, by extension, to informal power and control over others. According to Misiman notions of power, leaders are only the first among equals. They may possess a certain amount of authority by virtue of their position but they should not use this to coerce their constituents. If they are respected and listened to, it is because of the quality of respect that they show to others, by encouraging consensus and refusing to abuse the power of their position. Who is elected as a leader rarely depends on an objective weighing of respective merits or an estimation of the gifts and abilities best suited for the position. Depending upon the position, other considerations are important; such as who possesses a greater educational standard, is seemingly fluent in English and wise in the ways of dealing with white people and government officials (even if this person is of dubious moral character and given to 'borrowing' money in times of personal need). Another important consideration is based on the maxim, 'share and share alike'. One person or one clan should not monopolise a particular position, as it is fairer and more equitable (also less dangerous in light of envious sorcerers at work) to pass the position around so that others may try their skills. The village

⁴⁵ See Chapter four.

komiti (Ward Committee man) is one example of the application of this particular principle of electing officials; in fact, it appears that good reasoning underlies this method of making a choice. The *komiti*, in consultation with the Local Government Councillor (who is usually absent from the daily routines of the village), is responsible for assigning the work duties twice a week; if he is inept at his job and does not blow the conch shell regularly to summon people for the meeting, community members are left in peace to get on with their own lives.

Church lay leaders, who convene meetings, initiate discussion on problems, and are foremost in contributing suggestions for possible solutions, tend to be more vocal and more obviously in control. But they, too, are constrained by the need to show basic respect for others, and the need for consensus. Theirs is a leadership style that must reflect a desire to work alongside others, rather than to pull from in front or push from behind.

In former times, a major path to fame, fortune and spiritual power was through warring and raiding. A man could become a *toematana* (fight leader), leading men on raids to near-by hamlets or villages. Because of the fear of raids, mortuary feasting, though still an important part of Misiman life, was somewhat confined in scope. With the advent of government control and imposed pacification, raiding ceased and mortuary feasting increased, the two being inversely proportional. But the same spirit of competition and a certain warlike spirit can be discerned in the present-day mortuary rituals, most notably in the activities performed by affines. The *kalehe* prestation, generally initiated by a *tovelam*, includes dancers from an opposing village who advance in warlike formation, threatening (and, in previous times, succeeding) to demolish both the platforms erected for the feast and the house belonging to the feast sponsor. The culmination comes as one of the dancing 'warriors'—armed with a spear—advances to the main house, and,

throwing a challenging spear toward the rooftop, shouts '*Am vaga i hewa e!*' (This is the debt you have incurred, going up to you here!)⁴⁶

Unwritten rules of Misima society

As Hirschkind comments, most ethnographers do not like to dwell in their writings on the unpleasantness of life, as '[t]here appears to be an unspoken ethic that counsels against unflattering portrayals of chosen Others. (1991:240)' I have the advantages (and disadvantages) of long-term exposure to—and involvement in—the Misiman community. I have experienced the mundane and the extraordinary, and I have come to share some of the moral precepts of Misiman society. But I have also had work to do⁴⁷ and a vested interest in how that work is received. From that viewpoint, I would like to encapsulate in the form of rules, some of the unwritten mores and guiding principles that appear to me to be basic to understanding the Misiman way of being-in-the-world.

Tread warily, show due respect in your words (by obeying name taboos) and actions (by being diligent in mortuary feasting responsibilities and payback obligations) towards everyone; and watch your back ...

Be generous—do the feasting properly and make sure no one misses out on the distribution of food, or doesn't receive their full share—otherwise you will cause anger and sorcery to erupt. But don't be too generous, lest you excite envy and jealousy in the hearts of those who receive the generosity and know they cannot match it in future feasting. They might think you consider yourself superior.

⁴⁶ See Chapter four for a more complete account of the *kalehe*.

⁴⁷ As well as translating parts of the Christian Bible into Misiman, my husband and I have established a vernacular literacy programme for pre-schoolers and adults who have not formerly learned to read.

Share what you have with others, thereby making a name for yourself as a people-feeder and giving others the respect they feel is due to them. Don't refuse to give when asked, otherwise you will be gossiped about as one who does not share and threatens the harmony and sociality of the community. But don't make a display of your giving, at least not a major display, for then people will get the idea you are better off and more successful than they are.

Be committed to the ideals of humility and keeping a low profile as much as you are able. Don't be quarrelsome and arrogant, or overstep the boundaries of your authority. You might upset others, implying they are lesser creatures, and so cause them to sicken, or alternatively provoke them to lash out at you and yours.

Honour those who honour you. Give back to those who give to you. But remember the poor, especially those in your own family, and your obligation to help—as long as they don't take too much advantage of you.

Obey the authorities, for then you will have a quiet and peaceful life. But talking about obedience is better even than doing it—at least be overtly law-abiding