

4. Lihir Custom as an Ethnographic Subject

The cultures of New Ireland have long held a certain level of anthropological attention, which is largely due to the Western fascination with the elaborate mortuary rituals and the production, form, use and iconography of *malanggan* mortuary carvings found in the northern part of the province.¹ The Lihir Islands are situated between the ethnographically better known islands of Tabar and Tanga, and are easily visible from central mainland New Ireland, where there has also been extensive ethnographic documentation, yet somehow Lihir remained comparatively blank on the ethnographic map. However, since mining activities began, Lihir has been more ‘anthropologised’ than any other part of New Ireland, with attention mainly directed to understanding the social changes associated with such activities.² In this chapter, I provide an outline of Lihirian *kastom* as it appeared in the period before mining. Any description of Lihirian culture cannot be detached from history, and as we have already seen, there was a pronounced articulation between Lihirian culture and external forces during the previous century. However, the cultural shifts experienced during that period were relatively gradual, and were generally not accompanied by the feeling of dislocation, whereas the transitions that have taken place since mining activities started have produced a profound sense of cultural rupture. Nevertheless, as we shall see in Chapter 7, Lihirians have responded to mining in a rather cult-like fashion that has generated an efflorescence of custom, using newly acquired resources to ensure that *kastom* remains relevant and strong in an entirely altered context.

These cultural adjustments have also been accompanied by broader social changes. Some Lihirians have recalibrated relationships and ‘cut’ their networks with people in neighbouring areas — and to some extent across Lihir itself — in order to contain the distribution of mine-related benefits. This has given rise to

1 *Malanggan* carvings include figures, masks and large woven disks that are produced and used as part of the mortuary ritual cycle (see Lincoln 1987; Parkinson 1999; Küchler 2002; Gunn and Peltier 2006; Billings 2007).

2 Since exploration started, there is a long list of social scientists who have conducted research projects on Lihir, all of which involved fieldwork that concentrated on some aspect of Lihirian culture. Consultants have been engaged to undertake social impact studies and genealogical investigations (cited in Chapter 2), to provide advice on the management of community affairs, the design of relocation exercises and community development projects, and more recently to develop a cultural heritage management program (Bainton et al. forthcoming b). Most of these consultants have published some of their findings. There have also been at least nine independent research projects that involved fieldwork in Lihir, resulting in one Pre-Doctoral Diploma, four Masters and three Ph.D. theses (Skalnik 1989; Awart 1996; Benyon 1996; Lagisa 1997; Kowal 1999; Hemer 2001; Bainton 2006; Burley 2010; Haro 2010). In addition, LGL has directly employed two expatriate anthropologists within its Community Liaison Department and established a Cultural Information Office that employs a Lihirian graduate anthropologist.

a distinct sense of ethnic difference which is in some respects a crude extension of the distinction between 'landowners' and 'non-landowners' (Bainton 2009; see also Nash and Ogan 1990). To some degree, the efflorescence of *kastom* is also contingent on these changes. The desire for greater unity in the face of increasing atomisation, and pressure to redistribute mining wealth across the wider community, has simultaneously transformed existing cultural practices, increasing the competitive elements of *kastom*, while the ideology of *kastom* places a greater rhetorical emphasis upon unification.

In light of these recent transformations, it is worth noting the extent to which different groups throughout New Ireland were historically inter-dependent. Indeed, it is more appropriate to understand Lihir as part of an 'areal culture' than as an isolated 'cultural area' (Schwartz 1963). Groups from Lihir, Tanga, Namatanai, Lelet, Lesu and Tabar are integrated through matrilineal descent and kinship relations, leadership structures, the men's house institution, mortuary rituals, and traditional forms of trade and exchange. Regardless of scale, the boundaries of any areal culture will always be fuzzy (Knauff 1999: 6). Despite political atomism, and a corresponding particularism in all institutional spheres, these New Ireland groups are socially and culturally integrated to the extent that they constitute a single areal culture, and each must be considered as a 'part-culture' which is neither self-sufficient nor fully comprehensible by itself.

Birds of Afar?

At the most superficial level, Lihir is a matrilineal society divided into two exogamous moieties which bear the vernacular names *tumbawin-lam* (big people cluster) and *tumbawin-malkok* (small people cluster). *Tumbawin* is a generic term that literally refers to a bunch (*tum*) of bananas (*win*), and is often used to refer to all groups of people — be they moieties, clans, sub-clans or lineages (see Wagner 1986: 84–6). The metaphorical reference to a bunch of bananas conveys the idea of a group with a common ancestress that is already in the process of dividing into separate branches, if it has not done so already. At some point in the past century Lihirians adopted the New Ireland Tok Pisin names Bik Pisin (big bird) and Smol Pisin (small bird), identified with the White-bellied Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) and the Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*). It is likely that these terms were introduced through marriage connections to mainland New Ireland. In Lihir these terms may also be used to simply mean 'signs', because unlike their mainland counterparts, there is no strong identification with these 'totemic' markers. There are numerous theories and myths that

account for the origin of the moieties.³ However, the totemic designators cannot be understood in the Durkheimian sense of the term. Lihirians do not imagine a sacred or ritual relationship between a social group and its 'totem' as an emblem of membership and the focus of social solidarity. This may be an instance of what Kroeber (1938: 305) once described as a situation in which totems are merely epiphenomenal.

The practical significance of the moieties was mainly limited to marriage preferences, although genealogical records suggest that the moiety system was compromised at some point in the past, so the principle of dual organisation no longer served to regulate marriage.⁴ Although most Lihirians insist that there were once strict prohibitions on intra-moiety marriage, the taboo now applies to marriage within the clan.⁵ Eves (1998: 123) notes that, among the Lelet people (on the New Ireland mainland), moieties might be the largest and most fundamental kinship category, but they are not corporate groups; they are the means by which marriage is ordered and structured, not the means whereby people gain access to land, resources, valuables or property (this is the role of the clan). Wagner (1986: 51) argues that Barok moieties (also on the New Ireland mainland and closer to Lihir) cannot adjudicate or settle matters, and 'are less a means of organisation than one purely of elicitation', as exchanges and alliances between the two groups elicit important social values. Both of these arguments can be applied to Lihirian moieties; for the most part, they do not play an overly practical role in Lihirian social organisation.

Social Units

In Lihir, the pre-capitalist (and pre-mining) concept of the clan is of a social unit that fuses three core symbolic elements: *a le* (shell money), *rihri* (men's house), and *tandal*, otherwise known throughout New Ireland by the Tok Pisin term *masalai* (spiritual beings that inhabit the cultural landscape).⁶ While

3 Powdermaker (1971: 34) notes a similar situation among the Lesu of the New Ireland mainland, but mentions that the origin of the moieties and clans can be found in stories about an ancestral heroine.

4 This complex system, often referred to as the 'classificatory system', is readily accounted for by dual organisation. However, as Levi-Strauss (1969: 72) points out, it is the principle of reciprocity, not dual organisation itself that constitutes the origin of the classificatory system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Lihirian moieties were at one stage connected by reciprocal prestations and counter-prestations through the feasts and exchanges associated with mortuary rituals.

5 Unlike people from Lesu or Lelet, Lihirians do not readily recall times when breaching the rules of moiety exogamy were met with violent death at the hands of kinsmen (Bell 1938: 318; Powdermaker 1971: 41; Eves 1998: 133). As early as the 1930s, Groves (1934: 239) notes that it was common in Tabar to see marriages between individuals belonging to the same moiety, and that these were not regarded with particular 'disfavour' if there was sufficient residential distance or no traceable degree of consanguineous connection between the spouses.

6 A quick glance through the Melanesian literature soon reveals that the Tok Pisin term *masalai* has a wide variety of local connotations, covering various permutations of what can generally be regarded as 'bush spirits', yet in each place people have very specific ideas about what these are (see Lawrence and Meggitt 1965).

the nature of Lihirian clans is culturally determined, in so far as they exist they are units of social structure. Big-men were necessarily implicated in this symbolic trinity as the 'owners' and leaders of the men's houses, the mediators and human counterparts of the *tandal*, the custodians of each clan's store of *a le*, the arbiters of protocol and the organisers and chief orators at feasts held within the men's houses. It was impossible to conceive of big-men outside of the cultural conception of the clan and vice versa. Through the autonomous actions of big-men, these elements gained symbolic and practical significance, drawing people together in ways that created and maintained group unity and identity. This image is structurally similar to Wagner's (1986: 84) depiction of Usen Barok clans, but in both cases this no longer adequately captures the dynamics of contemporary leadership or group organisation.

The structure of Lihirian clans has been transformed since the inception of mining activities, particularly as the distribution of mine-related wealth (ideally) occurs along clan lines, ultimately defining clan membership according to the eligibility to receive such wealth. The boundaries of Lihirian clans have always been extremely permeable and 'thick', not clear and incontrovertible. What Ernst (1999) calls the 'entification' of clans as a result of mining has meant that relationships with non-Lihirians have become more circumscribed, and incorporation of outsiders has become the source of some tension.

Although Lihirians often speak of a 'clan system', it has proven exceptionally difficult to reach consensus on how the various clans, sub-clans and lineages are systematically linked. However, insistence from all Lihirians that the clans can 'fit together', despite inconsistencies between all the models on offer, indicates the extent to which Lihirians have come to believe in the ideal of 'organised' group membership and unity. Regardless of the difficulty of working out how or whether all of the clans connect in a cohesive way, the important thing is that Lihirian clans are not recent fabrications made out of economic and political necessity for the distribution of mining benefits (Filer 1997a: 177). On the other hand, there is a sense in which Lihirian clans have become bureaucratic units organised around the administration of mine-derived wealth, with some (re)forming themselves as businesses and corporations built around contracts with the company.

After presenting four versions of the 'clan system' in their social and economic impact study for the mine, Filer and Jackson (1989: 55) concluded that 'local people's models of the system are as diverse as the interests which they express', and that the 'system' as a whole is 'best understood as an ideal world which must be constantly adjusted to a set of personal relationships whose instability it is intended to conceal'. Given the economic and political changes that have since taken place, this observation is doubly pertinent.

In the late 1960s, Yngvar Ramstad identified six major clans in Kunaie village. He acknowledged that some clans may be known by different names in other parts of Lihir, and that the major clans were best understood through the local idiom of the Canarium nut, the kernel of which contains several parts, illustrating how numerous clans can be included or 'covered' under the one encompassing clan name. When viewed from one or two villages, it is easier to make sense of the relationship and ordering of the clans: the number is usually limited, and there is more likely to be consistency between various versions of the 'structure'. On the small island of Mahur, Susan Hemer (2001: 16) found that isolation, a smaller population and fewer clans made it easier to comprehend how groups were ordered. However, my own investigations have only multiplied the number of models on offer and established that there is no single authorised version. Given that my research was not restricted to a single area, instead reflecting the high level of mobility in Lihir, it was only when I considered Kinami village as an isolated area that I could draw limited conclusions about how the clans 'fit' together. Difficulties arise when Lihir is considered as a whole — as a group of five islands, some 35 villages and over 400 hamlets.⁷

The 'official' version used by the Lihir landowners association (LMALA) contains six major clans divided between the two moieties, which contain approximately 70 sub-clans. Many of these are further divided into lineages, although some lineages can be considered sub-clans in their own right. However, the concept of six major clans is partly a political fiction that lumps groups together for bureaucratic organisation and collective representation. As a result, this model has been heavily contested. In most instances, it appears that Lihirians only maintain a basic comprehension of the clans and sub-clans to which they are immediately related. This enables people to work out their own position in relation to other people and clans, and more importantly to know what resources they can access.

Perhaps it is better to understand the 'system' as 'organic', in that it appears to have adapted to changes in population size and settlement patterns over time. It does not possess an easily recognisable two-dimensional structure in which clans and sub-clans are evenly distributed between the two moieties, with clear lines of relationship between individual groups. Lihirians can usually only recall ancestors two generations up, meaning that genealogical knowledge is quite shallow (see Foster 1995a: 73). This has some implications for reconstructing

⁷ The number of hamlets is taken from maps produced and used by Lihir Gold Limited in 2004. In recent years, Luke Kabariu from Masahet Island, who works as the Cultural Information Superintendent in LGL's Community Liaison Department, has attempted to synthesise the various models into a definitive account. Although there is some level of community consensus about the overall structure, not everyone accepts all of the relationship lines. Given the highly politicised nature of clan relationships within the context of mining, I have not attempted to include the variety of structures or relationships, or present a synthetic example that may later be construed as reality or taken as a single authoritative version.

the ways in which the different clans are related to each other. Anomalies may be the result of an earlier breakdown due to a small population, or because the system of dual organisation (moieties) is a foreign structure imported and imposed on an already asymmetrical arrangement.

A number of Lihirian clans are represented in language groups from Barok, Patpatar, Susurunga, Tabar and Tanga, where moiety division is a common structuring principle for marriage and exchange (George and Lewis 1985: 32; Clay 1986: 55). Moieties may well have been 'introduced' or 'adopted' from alliances with these groups, through which Lihirians also gained access to land and resources. There may be cultural myths which attempt to explain the presence of moieties, but as Levi-Strauss observes, we are likely to remain ignorant of their origin, and the 'problem of whether clan organisation resulted from a sub-division of moieties, or whether moieties were formed by an aggregation of clans' continues to have little importance (Levi-Strauss 1969: 74). What we find throughout most of the southeastern part of New Ireland are 'differences of degree, not differences of kind; of generality, and not of type' (ibid.: 75). Lihirian patterns of social organisation reflect those found throughout the region, and although people subscribe to the structuring principles of dual organisation as a stated ideology, there are relatively few domains where it affects their practice.

The variety of local opinions does not imply the fragmentation of a once shared understanding, nor that the system is now somehow broken. Rather, it reflects a common Melanesian pattern of fluid social organisation and group identification. Therefore, it is more informative to consider the types of relationships between groups that are expressed in clan origin stories. These are often a mixture of metaphors and history that describe how certain clans were created by others or came into a partner-like relationship, and recount the migration of people and the mothering of new lines as people and groups broke away from each other for various reasons. Origin stories reveal at least four types of relationship: identity, inclusion, partnership and separation. Some depictions reflect how the same clan can be known by different names throughout the islands, while others emphasise a relationship of identity or show how larger clans encompass, include or 'cover' a set of smaller clans. Many of these stories also reveal a strong attachment to place and serve to illuminate the Lihirian cultural landscape. Place names act as mnemonics for historical movement and action, emphasising the relational qualities of the landscape, and prompting our comprehension of landscape as cultural process and the more phenomenological understanding of place as *event* (Weiner 1991; Casey 1996).

In some instances, these origin stories conform to the actual relationship between clans and sub-clans. In other instances they contradict one another. It is then difficult to decipher whether particular clans have a certain relationship with one another because of this 'pre-existing relationship', or whether certain

events, or new alliances or splits, have generated a new set of relationships, around which people reconstruct their image of the system. Disparities arise because different people consider the relationships between certain clans in different ways. Many of the stories are disappearing, particularly as the tradition of transmitting knowledge to younger generations is in decline, which will only render future attempts to reconstruct the system increasingly futile.

Collective Rights

The principal benefit of clan membership is the right to access clan land and resources in order to subsist. There are several main categories of customary land rights: clan land, lineage land, individually owned land, and land provided for newcomers or adopted clan members. Lihirian clans consist of a large number of lineages which may be dispersed across the islands. This means that collective rights to cultivation or use are generally associated with the lineage, and they are distributed, in practice, by the senior males in each one. By contrast, the ownership or transaction of land generally occurs at the clan or sub-clan level, and ideally any transactions or decisions must have the consent of all significant clan leaders and be publicly agreed upon. Clan land generally includes bush and gardening land, beaches or fringing reefs, and sacred sites that are usually prominent physical features such as rocks or water sources. Lineage land tends to be more specific, often including hamlet areas, men's house sites, and gardening land.

Land rights have always been intricately connected to feasting and exchange, which is the most important avenue for securing rights within the clan. Land which is exchanged or 'purchased' in the context of customary feasting and exchange is generally held by individuals in perpetuity and inherited by specific matrilineal heirs. In the past, inter-clan exchange debts (and in some cases compensation debts) could be settled with land transactions. With the commoditisation of land, these practices have become increasingly rare because clans are increasingly reluctant to part with potentially valuable resources. Due to a long history of outside influences, Lihirians have come to view traditional land rights as neat parcels that can be handed out to clan members, reflecting the hardening of previously flexible group boundaries and the more precise delineation of group territories.

Primary rights include access to clan resources and land. Adult clan members generally have equal access to, and proprietary claims over, garden land and residential hamlet land. Individuals have rights of access to clan land for purposes such as gardening, hunting, and gathering food, timber and other materials. Although individuals can claim damages for destruction of land

and resources that they own, this process will generally be arbitrated by clan leaders. Secondary rights are those of usufruct, where individuals can use land and have certain rights over trees or gardens on that land. In-marrying people will generally be granted usufruct rights over the lineage or clan land of their spouses, and other immigrants can be granted usufruct rights on their acceptance as residents in a new area. Secondary rights can be converted to primary rights if the person in question has been accepted as a member of the clan and has significantly contributed to feasts with gifts of pigs, shell money and cash. Ideally, these rights must be conferred by all members of the clan who decide on the incorporation of the newcomer.

In the distant past, there was a practice known as *erkuet* by which a clan leader might instruct his fellow clansmen to strangle his own wife after his death so that she might be buried with him as a mark of respect for her own involvement in the feasts and exchanges that produced his high status (for similar practices, see Groves 1935; Chowning 1974; Goodale 1985). The husband's clan would then provide her clan with a parcel of land as compensation for her death, which was then considered to be inalienable. Some men have suggested that widows happily submitted out of love for their husband. Women's accounts indicate there was some coercion by the husband's brothers, who feared that the wife might remarry and thus transfer any status, knowledge or wealth she had accumulated through her first husband to a rival clan. Regardless of the motivation, this form of transfer is no longer an option, and the certainty of title which it is believed to have had can never be tested, which is somewhat different from transactions that arise through customary feasting (Burton 1993, cited in Filer 2006).

While there are instances where fathers can give land to their children, as happens when children hold the customary *ikineitz* feasts for their fathers, land is normally inherited through the female line. Since mining activities began, there has been a growing tendency to 'bend the rules' of inheritance as fathers increasingly concentrate on their own children's needs at the expense of their sisters' children, or as people attempt to isolate parcels of land from the customary system of inheritance. While mining has produced the most profound impacts on Lihirian land tenure and ideology, the emergence and acceptance of individualistic (or at least restricted) 'ownership' owes its origins to earlier cash cropping ventures that encouraged individual holdings, and also to missionary emphasis on the nuclear family.

Not surprisingly, Lihir reflects a typical Melanesian pattern of chronic fission and fusion between individuals and groups of various sizes. The colonial administration conveniently construed this reality as a rigid expression of customary land rights, by abstracting things like social groups and land boundaries from the existing social landscape. The irony of the situation is that

Lihirians have since adopted a similar conception of their ‘clan system’ and the rules of land tenure. Despite administrative folly, or local assumptions that owners and rules are easily identified, it is the inherent flexibility of customary land tenure that allows Lihirians to adapt the forces of development for their own purposes, which also makes formal delineation all the more difficult. Tensions have emerged due to a reluctance to acknowledge the extent to which contemporary land tenure practices differ from those of a supposedly immemorial tradition (see Ward and Kingdon 1995: 36; Weiner and Glaskin 2007). Local attempts to maintain an image of an idealised traditional system continually confront the fact that land has become a commodity.

Organising ‘Principles’

Clans (*tumbawin*) and sub-clans (*tsiretumbawin*) are comprised of lineages (*bior*) each of which can theoretically trace descent from a common female ancestor or point of origin. When people are born, they are immediately accepted as members of their mother’s clan and the men’s house which is looked after by her brothers (of which she is also member). This aspect of one’s identity is axiomatic and immutable.⁸ People differentiate between members of a single clan through lineage affiliation. In reality, a lineage is that group of people whose lives revolve around a particular men’s house, who work and garden together, and come together to host various feasts. Genealogical knowledge of the lineage tends to be lateral rather than vertical: people who were not renowned as leaders or for some other prominent reason are sometimes dropped from the collective memory.

Lineage identity might be fixed at birth, but in practice membership is defined performatively rather than genealogically. This is partly attributable to the fact of co-residence, as people within a single hamlet pool their labour in gardening and custom work. The flexibility of residence attests to the ‘openness’ of Lihirian ways of calculating relatedness. Thus people living away from their own land, sometimes because of marriage arrangements, may find that, for all practical purposes, they have become incorporated into another lineage. This similarly applies to people (both Lihirians and non-Lihirians) who have been adopted by other families: they are expected to contribute to the well-being and maintenance of the adoptive group.

8 Lihirians also refer to lineages by the term *dal wana pour* (matrilineal blood line). In addition, people regularly use the Tok Pisin term *famili* (family). This can prove confusing, given that *famili* is also used to describe the nuclear family unit, including the husband, who is certainly not a member of his wife’s matrilineage. This partly reflects education and social changes that place greater emphasis on the nuclear family. Nevertheless, identity — and more importantly, access to resources — is still primarily constructed in terms of matrilineal reckoning.

People who arrive in Lihirian villages, hamlets or men's houses, regardless of whether they are Lihirians from another village, or non-Lihirians from another area, are generally called *wasier*, although there have been recent changes in the ways that people regard outsiders. In the vernacular, the term means guest or visitor. *Wasier* differ from members of the household or lineage because they are seen as recipients of the work and hospitality of the household or the lineage associated with a particular men's house. Implicit in the use of this term is a sense of obligation to *pinari wasier* (to provide food, hospitality and gifts for guests) — a vital function of households and men's houses. *Wasier* are an accepted category of relations across the spectrum of villages and islands, and traditionally *wasier* from neighbouring areas knew that they would be assured of hospitality, and if they wanted, they could stay on as incorporated guests.

The fluidity of relatedness is illustrated by the ease with which people can reside in other hamlets. Often people will be closer to those with whom they are in daily contact, meaning that, even though there might be other kinship categories that stipulate a close relationship, if these people are not present then closer bonds will be established with those who have a more direct bearing on people's daily life. However, it is also common for the 'relationship' to overrule residence; distant relatives often appeal to the relationship category in order to establish claims for assistance. This means that, despite the flexibility of incorporation, there are certain kinship categories that carry greater purchase on the demand or obligation to render gifts.

Individual Relations

The structures of Lihirian kinship generally resemble those of neighbouring communities. While there are minor variations, the most prominent relationships common to this region of New Ireland involve a strong connection with maternal uncles, cross-cousin relationships marked by forbearance and conviviality, avoidance between cross-sex uterine siblings, and relationships between in-laws that are constrained but highly respectful.

The strongest relationships in Lihir are those between a man and his sister's children. Mother's brothers are referred to as *motung* by their nieces (*liling wehien*) and nephews (*nunglik*). Mother's brothers are supposedly the most important men in a child's life, and the child can expect nurturance, guidance, assistance and discipline from them. Ideally, they will pay a man's bridewealth and provide him with access to clan land and resources. Traditionally, *motung* would hold and control any shell money or cash gained by their nieces and nephews, which is a good reason why the mother's brothers were regarded as their 'big-men' (*tohie*). For males, this was a relationship of co-dependency: younger men relied upon their uncles for their own growth, knowledge, development and support

(for both cash and shell valuables), while older males relied upon their nephews for labour, political support and lineage succession. Younger age mates existed in symmetrical relationships of relative equality until they were old enough to begin displaying personal qualities that set them apart from others. Senior men exerted control over younger male labour power, time and economic resources.

Women were also subject to direction by their male kin and their husbands. Despite the payment of bridewealth (*rapar*), there is a tension between a woman's brothers and her husband. Brothers often attempt to keep control of any wealth gained by a sister, fearing that her husband may convince her to part with it and hence place it at the disposal of another clan. This gendered hierarchy is played out in numerous situations where men assert their influence and authority over women in daily affairs. In contemporary contexts, this dominance is often maintained through appeals to tradition and *kastom*.

Lihirian cross-cousin relationships exemplify classic textbook joking relationships. These are most obviously contrasted with the strict avoidance between uterine brother and sister (see Bell 1935a; Clay 1977: 47; Wagner 1986: 70) and the sense of competition and latent tension between uterine brothers. The level of competition between brothers is not matched by similar competition between sisters because, unlike brothers, sisters are not vying for leadership positions within the lineage. Relational strains emerge from political pursuits: essentially brothers utilise the same resources in their competition for influence and esteem. Given that brothers are united under the influence of the same man (their senior *motung*), jealousies inevitably arise as one brother gains more favour than another. Jealousy between brothers is said to have complicated the relationship between kinship and residence, which has continued to discourage them from settling in the same hamlet. Previously, it was typical to find within a hamlet one senior male member of the lineage, who usually 'owned' the men's house, while the remaining male residents were related as either sons (*zik*) or sister's sons (*nunglik*), or even as sister's husbands or sister's daughters husbands.⁹ Previously, high levels of village endogamy meant that brothers were not split by marriage, and younger nephews were in constant contact with their uncles.

The close bond between cross-cousins and the idealisation of this relationship must be seen against the background of uterine sibling relationships. Cross-cousins are typically separated by belonging to different moieties or at least different clans. They exist under the influence of men who are related as affines and avoid one another. The relational distance between cross-cousins, and the

⁹ This is only a general outline as there are numerous qualifications. In some cases, where there are no brothers or sister's sons to succeed to ownership of the hamlet, the son of the current owner may then become the senior male of the hamlet, even though he does not belong to that clan, or technically 'own' the men's house. In such cases, he looks after the men's house until younger males in the clan can take over.

existence of different authority figures, means that they are not likely to be divided by jealousy or competition. These links are extremely strong, and it is particularly difficult to resist demands and requests from cross-cousins — whether they are for betelnut, money, beer, or in one sordid case I was told of, assistance with a pack rape. In times of warfare, one could supposedly seek refuge behind a cross-cousin and be assured of safety, because even enemies recognised the importance of this relationship. Cross-sex cross-cousins are similarly close, and this relationship is equally characterised by joking and conviviality and stands in marked contrast to opposite-sex uterine sibling relationships. Between opposite-sex cross-cousins there is a taboo on the use of personal names and kinship names are used instead. In the past, cross-cousins who were not first cousins were seen as ideal marriage partners, which was consistent with the practice of moiety exogamy.

There is a close bond between fathers and their children that was said to be expressed through their relationship with their father's *tandal*. It is believed that when children, especially sons, ask their father's *tandal* for assistance it will oblige. In addition to feasting and exchange relations, these relationships unite people across moieties and clans. In the past, relationships between in-laws (*poas* in the vernacular; *tambu* in Tok Pisin) were more circumscribed, involving the strict avoidance of names and not entering the other's house. Females had to avoid being physically above, or walking directly past, the heads of their male in-laws if the latter were lying down. This relationship was not symmetrical: it is the spouse who had to show respect towards their in-laws. A man generally avoided or felt shame towards those people who shared a part of the bridewealth paid on his behalf. As a result, people might find reasons not to accept part of the bridewealth in order to maintain a pre-existing relationship. Likewise, some would take the opportunity presented by marriage to assume a relationship of formal avoidance in order to alleviate difficult or stressed relationships. As Clay (1977: 43) remarks of similar Mandak practices, 'people often have a choice among two or more alternatives in determining a particular social category, and individuals often seem to emphasise certain relationships for political purposes'.

Regardless of firmly stated ideas, in practice there is variation. It is becoming evident that many of the former rules of avoidance are no longer adhered to by younger generations or enforced by their elders. People are active agents in relationships: kinship sets the boundaries or the field of action, often establishing what is impossible, possible or probable, but it cannot wholly determine the decisions that individuals will make or the character of a given relationship.

Dead Men and Persistent Values

It may appear like a tired truism to state that Lihirian kinship and traditional politics (by which I mean male leadership roles and mortuary feasting), both as ideologies and contexts for meaningful action, are coterminous with one another. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) made this point in relation to African kinship and political systems, and Allen (1984) has reiterated the same point for Melanesia. In consideration of Lihirian male leadership and sociality, it is worth noting the extent to which both kinship and politics were intimately bound — a point which has assumed greater salience as men now seek to divorce their kinship obligations from their personal, political and economic aspirations.

Filer and Jackson (1989: 185) concluded that Lihirian big-men, for the most part, were essentially ‘dead men’. This might seem overly pessimistic if not for the fact that the sort of leaders who could actually qualify as big-men ceased to exist when the traditional economy which bolstered their position was subsumed by capitalism. The ritual and esoteric knowledge they alone possessed no longer provided appropriate responses to their changing environment. While Lihirians often claim that they have contemporary big-men, and readily point out men believed to possess the requisite qualities, the proliferation of leadership types has meant that there is little unanimity on the question of what is a big-man (Bainton 2008).

Male and Female Status

Lihirian leaders are referred to in the vernacular by the term *tohie*, which finds translation in Tok Pisin as *bikman* (big-man). Although *tohie* is used as a title of status, it is also used generically to mean leader. It is not the sole reserve of males, as it can be applied to senior women who have proven themselves in customary feasting and exchange, and where they are the sole surviving senior member of the lineage and have thus become the ‘owner’ of the lineage’s men’s house. These women are described as *wehientohie* (big woman), and in the past some wore shell armbands (*kual*) to signify their status.

Although women can achieve status and renown within their clan, this does not mean that they enjoy the same level of influence accorded to senior male leaders. While they might be recognised as the ‘owner’ of the lineage’s men’s house by default, this similarly does not equate to additional rights within the men’s house. Given that most discussions take place within the men’s house, women are generally excluded from taking an active role in clan and lineage affairs, which contrasts with the situation described by Nash for the Nagovisi of Bougainville (Nash 1987).

Unlike male status, which is cumulative, female status is two-staged. There are no male initiation ceremonies or graded societies, although there were numerous secret societies, such as *Pindik*, *Triu* and the *Tanori* fishing society. Men gradually achieve higher rank through political and economic endeavour, whereas women are generally seen as mature or immature, based on their ability to carry out tasks such as cooking, gardening, rearing children and raising pigs. Although men and women contribute in different ways to gardening work and raising pigs, in the past this work was highly valued. Previously, pubescent women were initiated into womanhood through the *tolup* or *ba'at* ritual, in which they were kept in seclusion for some months before being married, but since missionisation this practice has been abandoned.¹⁰ While mining has definitely provided new opportunities for female leadership and autonomy (see Macintyre 2003, 2006), generally women remain subject to male leadership.

Abilities and Possessions

Traditionally, big-men were rich in land, pigs and shell money. They were outstanding warriors, courageous, excellent orators, and the guardians of ritual and esoteric knowledge. These positions were not hereditary, conforming to other images of big-men throughout the region, where the office of leadership is a personal achievement (see especially Oliver 1955; Powdermaker 1971; Clay 1986; Wagner 1986; Foster 1995a; Eves 1998), although first born sons are accorded an important status (*ziktohie*) and being the son or nephew of a successful big-man may provide an ambitious young man with extra resources and a platform upon which to launch his own career. Nevertheless, theoretically every man is eligible for bigmanship.

In the past a clan's leading big-man was the custodian of its store of shell money, and he controlled the distribution and use of all pigs and garden produce. It is hard to assess the leader's reach and control within the clan, even though elderly men argue that the authority of the clan head was absolute. This is a difficult image to reconcile with contemporary leadership practices and the extensive splitting of all Lihirian clans. Needless to say, this style of leadership has been long contested by younger men determined to assert their own autonomy and retain money earned through wage labour, cash cropping or mining benefits.

10 In this ritual practice that continued up until about the 1930s, young girls were kept in seclusion in a small hut for a number of months. They were only allowed contact with immediate lineage members who brought food and disposed of any wastes. Typically the girls were being prepared for marriage. Upon their release, a large feast was held for which lineage and clan members brought contributions of shell money that were exchanged for pork. These exchanges initiated new exchange cycles to be executed in future *tolup* feasts.



Plate 4-1: Clan leaders at Lambanam hamlet, Lesel village, 2009. Left to right: Benjamin Rukam, Herman Luak and Joseph Kondiak.

Photograph by the author.

Melanesian Managers

In light of anecdotes and ethnographic records for New Ireland prior to the Second World War (Bell 1934, 1935b; Groves 1934, 1935; Powdermaker 1971), it is reasonable to conjecture that the group surrounding a big-man was stronger and more politically integrated than modern alliances. These big-men were different in so much as they were more active in their recruitment of followers, seizing opportunities to provide security, pay bridewealth and compensation on behalf of others. As we saw in the previous chapter, individual access to cash through wage labour, market sales and *bisnis*, combined with gradual atomisation, meant that most Lihirians no longer solely depended upon big-men or clan affiliation for access to wealth. The situation is somewhat different within 'landowning' clans where wealth is highly concentrated in the hands of those big-men designated as 'block executives' and 'signatories' to clan accounts into which royalty and compensation payments are deposited. Individual clan identity might be self-evident and unassailable from birth, but the clan as a cultural entity (as opposed to bureaucratic political units) could only truly come into existence through the organising efforts of big-men.

Traditionally, men achieved their status and authority through a mixture of fear and love. A big-man's benevolence would endear people to him, and the

love he expressed for his followers through his actions on behalf of them was reciprocated through their commitment or love towards him. At the same time, he was respected because people feared his powers and capabilities. Military prowess played a strong part in the construction of a leader. Even if claims to cannibalism cannot be validated (Obeyesekere 2005), Lihirians did fight internally with other clans, and practiced raids on other villages. This is somewhat confirmed by the various stories of 'culture heroes' who brought peace to Lihir, and tales about success in warfare and the competitions between big-men as one sought to avenge the offence of another. While men had to be competent hosts and competitive in exchange, it was imperative that they display their physical strength, usually through fighting, to initiate their status and provide a base for their political careers. Apart from their own autonomous actions, big-men also gained status from *rarhum* feasts held by their clan in their honour.

Assembling the Spirits

Big-men usually held vast amounts of knowledge on matters of sorcery and magic, and would boast of their strong connections with the local spiritual environment. While a man may gain a reputation as a sorcerer, this does not always mean that he will become a significant big-man. On the other hand, big-men without knowledge of sorcery and magic often aligned themselves with those who possessed such knowledge, for their own protection and to boost their own abilities and resources. Big-men who were sorcerers would usually align themselves with similar men. Controlling knowledge was vital to the continuation of their authority, especially given that 'power based on knowledge control may be more subtle than power based on economic control, but this sort of power is also more persuasive in that it involves the communication and validation of cultural categories and truths' (Lindstrom 1984: 299).

Knowledge of the spiritual world was most commonly expressed in the relationship between a big-man and his clan *tandal*, or *masalai*. These are the most frequently mentioned and encountered spiritual beings and remain an important source of power (see Wagner 1986: 102, 107). *Tandal* are simultaneously singular and plural, and incorporeal and manifest in different physical forms. They inhabit prominent physical features around the islands, such as cliffs, caves and large rock formations, sections of reef, creeks and river mouths, points, bays, and even large trees. The connection between *tandal* and certain portions of land is regarded as a sign of ownership by the clan identified with a particular *tandal*. Jessep (1977: 172–202) records similar beliefs in the mainland New Ireland village of Lokon, where clan *masalai* are said to legitimate claims to ownership of certain tracts of land. *Tandal* are also able to

transform themselves into animate beings, such as eagles, sharks and snakes, and even incorporeal forms such as strange lights or sounds that can be seen and heard during the night.

Tandal inhabit a central space in the cultural conception of clans. Each clan is said to have their own *tandal* that inhabits particular places and takes the form of certain animate beings that are recognisable to clan members, especially big-men who are expected to maintain close rapport with *tandal* on behalf of the clan. Clan origin stories often feature *tandal* locations as points of emergence. *Tandal* are both benevolent and frightening, and when called upon they inspire awe (particularly when big-men call out the name of their *tandal* during exchanges in final stages of the *tutunkanut* feast). They are metaphorically glossed in Tok Pisin as *strong bilong graun* (the strength of the ground), which reflects the belief that *tandal* provide a kind of invisible moral shield around the islands, protecting them from negative outside forces and thus assisting social harmony. The connection between different *tandal* is crucial to this balance. Negative human activities and changes to the relationship between humans (especially big-men) and their *tandal* weaken the bonds between *tandal*, allowing the further intrusion of socially negative forces. Big-men are morally required to maintain close relationships with their *tandal* for collective benefit.

Paramount Authority

In addition to *tohie*, Lihirians recognised men whose status and authority exceeds all others. These men are referred to as *pukia*, and might be regarded as the biggest of all big-men (see Clay 1977: 22). *Pukia* is the term for a fig tree that has many branches, houses many birds and provides shelter. Its wide-stretching branches are symbolic of the reach and remarkable networks of these men. This image conforms to Hogbin's (1944: 258) description of the North Malaitan 'centre man' who, according to Sahlins (1963: 290), 'connotes a cluster of followers gathered about an influential pivot'. Such men provide advice which is sought by other big-men, and their status is due in part to their ability to unite clans, often across moieties. Some people suggested that these men received deferential treatment, indicating that in the past there were more recognised status differences: certain material and behavioural attributes were said to be the exclusive prerogative of *pukia*.

These men were not 'elected' by any sort of council, but rather as their influence grew they slowly reached a position of paramount authority. Apart from their political prowess and exchange capacities, such men held stores of knowledge on ritual, sorcery and magic, and had the deepest affinity with the spiritual realm. Numerous people mentioned several such men (now deceased) from Masahet and Mahur islands (see Plate 4-2). Others pointed me in the direction of several

elderly men described as *pukia*. But in such transformed times, these men hardly exercised a comparable level of influence traditionally characteristic of the title. In addition to being ritual experts, these men now have to be tertiary educated bureaucratic managers, preferably with training as a mining engineer, and for good measure experience in international investment, community development and local governance.



Plate 4-2: Thomas Kut was widely regarded as one of the last great leaders on Mahur Island. When he passed away in August 2009 he was estimated to be at least 100 years old.

Photograph from 2007 courtesy of Chris Ballard.

The House of *Kastom*

The centre piece of Lihirian social, economic and political life is the men's house known locally as *rihri* or in Tok Pisin as the *hausboi*. All females are connected to a men's house through their clan, but it is typically a male domain. Women may enter the men's house which they are connected to in order to bring food, sweep or speak with relatives, but it is rare for them to spend extended time within the enclosure. It is taboo for women to enter the men's house of their husband and his kin.¹¹ The men's house was more than just the arena for enacting political roles and affirming kinship relations; it legitimated Lihirian culture. It was the locus of social reproduction, containing ancestors and maintaining current generations, and embodying the status of the clan. It was the physical and visual manifestation of social value. Its primary function can be understood in terms of nurturance and social reproduction — the essence of the men's house ethos. It was (and has since become even more so) the most distinctive and recognisable feature of every hamlet.

Theoretically, the men's house is open to all men. Lihirians prided themselves on their ability to provide hospitality for visitors throughout the duration of their stay. At the most basic level, male leadership has always focused on the maintenance of the men's house as a social institution and physical edifice, and the guidance, discipline and nurturance of its younger members. Typically the eldest man within a lineage is regarded as the leader and 'owner' of its men's house, but there is often competition between younger brothers and younger nephews for succession. The men's house is considered inalienable from the clan, which is mainly because it contains deceased clan members. Yet there are cases where it passes from father to son at the expense of the matriline. Typically this occurs when there are no suitable inheritors, the lineage has 'run out', or if particular sons have a strong connection to their father's men's house and can make a special case for inheritance upon his deathbed.

Most Lihirian men's houses are easily recognised by the dry stone wall (*welot*) that encompasses the actual house and the distinctive large Y-shaped entrance (*matanlklak*) (see Plate 4-3).¹² These carved, upturned tree forks are said to symbolise female legs; entrance into the men's house (symbolic of the womb) emphasises the containment of the matriline. Even when men's houses are in a state of (temporary) discontinued use, the *welot* remains as a reminder of the significance of the site. They are the pride of every hamlet and its associated

11 In recent years this rule has been relaxed in the context of funerals. It is not uncommon during burials within the men's house for portions of the *welot* (fence) to be removed to allow grieving widows to enter the rear of the enclosure where their husbands are being placed. In many cases affinally related women choose to remain outside.

12 Some men's houses on the western side of Aniolum are enclosed by wooden fences, which is mainly due to a local shortage of stones in this part of the island.

lineage. Great care is taken to ensure against dilapidation, yet the emphasis is more economic than aesthetic. The men's house is comprised of feasts, as every aspect of its construction must be marked with a pig, which similarly applies to all major maintenance. The construction of the *welot*, the shaping and planting of the *matanlaklak*, the erection of the house frame and the placing of the walls and roof, down to the bed or table-like structure upon which feasting food is placed, all require validation through a small-scale feast of at least one pig within the men's house.



Plate 4-3: Lemdaplo men's house on Mahur Island, 2004.

Photograph by the author.

The necessity to consummate all aspects of the men's house through the consumption of pork also partly accounts for the cases where men's houses are left seemingly unattended and in disuse and poor condition for long periods of time. (Re)construction is more than a matter of building materials and labour supply. Depending of the amount of work required, it may take years to assemble the necessary resources (pigs, garden produce, shell money and cash). The use of permanent materials and new building styles (Plates 4-4 and 4-5) means that men's houses are now symbolic of clan wealth and markers of economic difference. Many of the newer men's houses, especially those in Putput, are reconstructed entirely from permanent materials, with cemented floors and electricity.



Plate 4-4: Distributing the feast food in the men's house, Kunaie village, 2004.



Plate 4-5: John Yaspot's two storey men's house, Laksunkuen, Malie Island, 2004.

Photographs by the author.

Lihirians often describe the men's house as their own 'parliament house'. Historically this is a fitting description; it is where the majority of politics, feasting and exchanges occurred, and where men have made their renown, where they lead, nurture and discipline. This is where men gather to make decisions at the hamlet, clan and village level, and it is where men may simultaneously feel among equals, or realise their position in relation to others. While this description has continued to hold, the political realm — especially the politics of development — has largely shifted outside of the men's house into the domain of the local government, the Church, or institutions and groups connected to the mining company. At the same time, the men's house has become the focus of policy making, identity construction and political authorisation. Often called the *as bilong kastom* (the origin of custom), it has become the objectified stage of customary performance.

The Money of *Kastom*

Lihirian *kastom* explicitly involves the exchange of pigs and shell money (and cash and other commodities) in the series of feasts that surround specific life-cycle events. While trade and exchange historically occurred between the islands of this region, the majority of exchanges were between established partners within Lihir.¹³ In the past there was a high level of village endogamy, meaning that most exchange relationships were between residents of a particular area. This seems to increase the impression of parochial exchange patterns, in marked contrast with other notable inter-island exchange regions like the Massim Kula (Seligman 1910; Malinowski 1922; Wiener 1976; Leach and Leach 1983; Macintyre 1983; Munn 1986; Damon 1990). However, internal exchange has always been underpinned by external exchange relations, which is especially the case now that Lihirians rely upon pigs from the neighbouring islands to meet the demands for domestic exchange.

Lihirian shell currency as shown in Plate 4-6 is known as *a le* in the vernacular and more generically as *mis* in New Ireland Tok Pisin, was commonly used throughout the region for a broad range of transactions involving pigs, land, compensation and other ritual purposes associated with the men's house and the life-cycle. In Tok Pisin *mis* is best glossed as *moni bilong kastom* (the money of custom). Ultimately the aim was to have as many high ranking *mis* as possible to purchase large pigs to be used in exchange. *Mis* consists of minute highly polished shell disks (approximately 3mm in diameter and 1mm thickness) strung together in fathoms called *param* in New Ireland Tok Pisin.¹⁴ Commonly known

13 See Kaplan (1976) for a reconstruction of these trading routes.

14 Measurements are usually taken as the span from the end of one arm to the chest, thus the distance between two outstretched arms would be two *param*.

types in Lihir include: *pangpang*, *pabang*, *emiras*, *tsien pangpang*, *tumgiet*, *met*, *bobreu*, *kauas*, *lolot*, *tingirip*, *kolmoni*, *malyang*, *zikilde*, *puas*, *lerau*, *zilerau*, *lemusmus*, and *nuas*.



Plate 4-6: Shell money belonging to the Ilam sub-clan on display in the men's house during the final *tutunkanut* feast, Matakues village, 2008. Decorative adornments (*leku*) are attached to the strands of shell money.

Photograph courtesy of David Haigh.

The colours usually vary between types, from dark red through to bright orange, as well as browns, blacks and whites. The production of *mis* (Plates 4-7 and 4-8) has become the specialty of the smaller islands (known as Ihot). Although a certain amount was made on Aniolam, typically the people of Ihot exchanged *mis* for pigs reared on Aniolam. Filer and Jackson (1989: 63) noted that by the 1980s Ihot people were referring to the production of *mis* as their main business. It has since become an even greater source of income for them, which they now refer to as their 'cash crop'. While this pattern of exchange has long served to supply the people of Ihot with pigs for customary feasting, the local manufacture of shell money is a fairly recent innovation.



Plate 4-7: Gastropod shells (*Patella* sp.) used to make shell money. In Lihir these are known as *gam le*.

Photograph by the author, 2005.

Elderly men have described times when Lihirians did not know the origin of *mis* or the craft of producing it for themselves. Prior to World War Two, Lihirians from Ihot regularly travelled to Tabar with pigs, tobacco and dances, and in return they left with ready made *mis* and certain foods (Groves 1935: 360). Supposedly, the people of Tabar received their *mis* from New Hanover. Consequently, the people of Ihot served as 'middle-men' between Tabar and Lihirians on the western side of Aniolam. The varieties of *mis* originated from different places. *Pabang mis* was acquired via partners from Tabar, *lolot* and *ermiras* were acquired from Kanabu in New Ireland, and shells for making *kauas*

came from Lamusmus, Tukul Island, and Djaul Island via Kuat (George and Lewis 1985: 33). Lihirians on the eastern side traded *mis* with Tanga and the Barok and Namorodu area where they acquired pigs for domestic exchange. This exchange pattern where *mis* followed a path from the northwest to the southeast, while pigs travelled in the opposite direction, is captured in a Central New Ireland saying which states that the ‘eye’ or the source of *mis* is to the northwest and the source of pigs is to the southeast (ibid.).



Plate 4-8: Mathew Bektau of Masahet Island producing shell money, 2007.

Photograph by the author.

A senior man from Malie named Utong once described to me how as a young man he was among the first Lihirians to be shown the art of producing *mis* by people from the Kavieng district. It seems that the skill became more common in Lihir after World War Two. Men worked in secrecy with a great deal of ritual and formality, which undoubtedly increased the value of *mis*. With the gradual loosening of constraints, production now involves teams of women sitting around the hamlet slowly grinding and drilling away at the rough shells. Clay (1986: 193) suggests that, after Independence, Lihirians increased production as the new provincial government actively encouraged *kastom* throughout the province. Although a surplus of *mis* has emerged due to the expansion of production, elderly men continue to hold on to invaluable items which define political rank. However, these items are generally hoarded and have ceased to play an active role in the exchange economy, and as a result, few people know what these look like.

Mis was certainly a genuine shell currency, similar to the Tolai *tabu* (see A.L. Epstein 1963a, 1963b, 1969; T.S. Epstein 1968; Salisbury 1970; Gewertz and Errington 1995). It had more token value than use value, so that it served as a means of exchange — an indirect bridge between goods (Sahlins 1974: 227). At the time of European contact, it probably functioned more as a divisible form of currency than contemporary practices suggest. Lihirians recognise different categories or ranks of *mis*, some of which are used for everyday transactions while others might be regarded as clan heirlooms considered priceless and without exchange value. It is likely that there were more varieties of *mis* in the years prior to Independence. Macintyre (personal communication, August 2003) recalls seeing another type called *ndolar*, which is a thicker, deep red disc and made from a mollusc shell. These have been out of circulation for some time, and even as far back as the 1930s they were regarded as archaic. Many of these valuables have been lost over the years when big-men were buried with their wealth, or else disposed of it prior to their death by either throwing it out to sea or burying it somewhere inland. I found that, while most Lihirians identify *pangpang* as one of the highest ranking *mis*, many are confused or unsure of a definite ranking system for the other types. This differs from Kula ranking systems where people have maintained certainty about rank.

Mis has a definite cash value, which has doubled since the late 1990s, not through scarcity, but through general market inflation. When mining first began, a fine *pangpang mis* was sold for around K40 and *kauas* sold for K30. By 2008, *pangpang* could fetch well over K100 and *kauas* was sold for K70. Access to cash has enabled people to purchase greater supplies of shells from the mainland for local production. These are later used in exchanges or sold to Lihirians or other New Irelanders. Until the 1960s, low-ranking *mis* was used to purchase trade store items, and Ramstad (n.d. 2: 16) notes that *mis* was used

interchangeably with cash for minor transactions in the village. Given that it could be easily divided, it is not surprising that Lihirians substituted cash for shell money.

Contemporary pig transactions invariably involve both *mis* and cash payments, and have experienced a similar inflation in price. In the 1930s, a large pig traded with Tabar received between six to ten *mis*. One fathom was worth around five shillings (Groves 1935: 351). In the late 1980s, a large pig may have cost around K100 and 20 fathoms of shell money. In 2004, a medium-sized pig would require at least K1000 and up to five fathoms of *mis*, but it is not unknown for people to spend over K4000 on a single pig. The amount of *mis* exchanged is dependent upon the type used. Occasionally people request a total *mis* payment, but it is unlikely that a Lihirian pig would be purchased entirely with cash.¹⁵ The cash value of pigs and *mis* has become highly important; as we shall see in Chapter 7. Pigs are not just valued in themselves, but also for their total cash value, as increased prestige results from the amount spent for their purchase (and delivery).

Although *mis* has long been used in conjunction with cash and has a monetary value, it primarily derived value as a 'moral' currency. It was prized for 'buying the shame' between newly established in-laws, for uniting clans, and representing the 'honour' or 'social merit' of a particular big-man and his clan or lineage, as an objectified visible validation of the social transactions in which he and his lineage or clan have been involved. It was the big-man who held the clan's store of *mis*, including heirloom and decorative *mis*, and those intended for circulation. The store of *mis* was thus a moral evaluation of both the big-man and his lineage. The same can be said of pigs. Jaw bones (*trias*) from pigs butchered during ceremonial exchanges are often hung up in the rafters of the men's house. These mark the ability to host feasts, provide hospitality, and actively engage in exchanges which create, maintain and confirm social relationships. Together pigs and *mis* are the principal media in Lihirian *kastom*.

Finishing the Dead

In the 1930s, F.L.S. Bell remarked that death is the leitmotif of Tangana culture (Bell 1934: 291). This observation still stands for much of New Ireland. In Lihir, it does not mean that people are suspended in a continual of state of grief and oppression. Rather, ritual and economic life are focused in some way on the various stages of the life-cycle, particularly the series of feasts designed to 'finish the dead', glossed in the vernacular as the *karat* cycle. As in most of New

¹⁵ This is different from those instances where pigs are bought from people from other islands, who only want cash from Lihirians.

Ireland, Lihirian mortuary feasts have always been more than an opportunity to mourn and memorialise the dead. They contain deep symbolic meaning, and are inextricably woven with political and economic struggles, social reproduction and obligations to both the deceased and their lineage. For this reason any consideration of mortuary ritual must be historically located within the changing political and economic climate of the region.

Although mortuary feasting in New Ireland is normally associated with *malanggan* carvings, Lihirians produced very few of these symbolic icons, although those clans with close ties to Tabar, who are most famous for *malanggan* (see Gunn 1987), were more likely to have used these in successive funeral rites. Generally *malanggan* are produced in Northern and Central New Ireland, and range from elaborate wooden carvings (found in just about any Pacific Islands museum display) to large intricately woven disks (Gunn and Peltier 2006: 41). *Malanggan* serve as effigies of the deceased and are central icons in the process of 'forgetting' and 'finishing'.

In the past, Lihirian mortuary ritual incorporated what might be considered a less conventional form of *malanggan*. During the final *tutunkanut* feast for significant men, the skull of the deceased was painted with lime and red ochre pigments and mounted on the ridge pole of the men's house, or stood on a pole in the enclosure of the men's house to which the deceased belonged. Several skulls could be set up depending upon the scale of the feast.¹⁶ The ultimate purpose of these impressive figures (known as *mormor*) was to remind guests who was being remembered (or forgotten). These figures were treated with magic to enliven them, undoubtedly instilling fear into guests and boosting the prestige of the hosts through the display of their spiritual prowess. The skulls were later interred in local caves and were probably used in different rituals to harness the powers of the deceased. Here the dead (*kanut*) are transformed into an asset for the host clan as they help ensure the feast is made memorable. Mission and government concerns over the supposed sacrilegious disturbance of the dead were the main reasons for the gradual abandonment of this ritual, which was last performed on Mahur in 1987.

In order to illustrate past epistemologies and historical transformations and continuities, it is worth speculating on the connection between these figures and the lack of carved *malanggan* in Lihirian ritual. Throughout New Ireland, different types of *malanggan* clearly served as effigies, icons, vessels of the dead, or even 'pictures' of the deceased at the time of death (Billings 2007: 258), or else as a representation of the ancestors in general, as opposed to specific

16 Gunn notes that over-modelled skulls were found throughout Central New Ireland. These were sometimes used on top of carved wooden figures or incorporated into the use of large woven *vavaramalanggan*. There are also instances in Tabar, recorded as late as 1984, where the bones of the deceased were incorporated in *malanggan* rituals (Gunn 1997: 84–85).

individuals (ibid.: 279), stressing collective notions of personhood. Where there is ambiguity or variety in the meaning of various *malanggan* across the region, or perhaps just in the literature, Lihirian *mormor* are quite literally the bones of the deceased. As Hemer notes, this practice was closely associated with a time when Lihirians placed a greater emphasis on the bones still being ‘the person’ (Hemer 2001: 86). With the introduction of Christianity, Lihirians have come to view the world through a sort of classical Cartesian dualism that separates the spiritual from the physical. Post-mortem emphasis has gradually shifted away from the fate of the body (*kanut*) to the spirit (*a tomber/kanut*). And as I demonstrate in Chapter 7, the emphasis has further shifted towards the politics and economics of mortuary ritual, further displacing the centrality of the deceased. The seamless continuity between the body and the soul, spirit or ‘person’, may partly explain why Lihirians were not compelled towards ‘images’ of the dead. Certainly it appears that, where some New Irelanders were more figurative, Lihirians were more literal. Nevertheless, the meaning in these figures, whether *malanggan* or *mormor*, ultimately resides in their use (Gunn 1987: 83). It is to these rituals of social reproduction that I now turn.

Social Reproduction

Although large-scale feasting in New Ireland is primarily motivated by the death or aging of clan members, ethnographic accounts are generally structured by a dualistic approach that emphasises the role and interaction of guests and hosts while largely ignoring the deceased. Hemer (2001) has made similar observations, and she approaches Lihirian mortuary feasting from a tripartite perspective in opposition to the dichotomous structure found in the works of Clay (1986), Wagner (1986), and Foster (1995a). Given that Lihirian mortuary feasts now often occur while the celebrated person is still alive, it is difficult to remove them from the analytical equation, for as we have seen, *kanut* once played a very central role in ritual. In the process of achieving fame and prestige or nurturing the opposite moiety (or at least the assembled guests), individuals and groups are specifically attempting to honour their *kanut*. From a purely political perspective, status is ultimately contingent upon who can show the most respect.

There are over 20 different feasts that mark various stages in the life-cycle and other important events in the lives of Lihirians, all of which involve the exchange and consumption of pigs, garden produce, *mis*, and now cash and commodities. Some of the more significant feasts include: *katipsiasie*, the first pregnancy feast; *kale kiak daldal*, the purification feast that symbolically washes the mothers blood off the new born child; *katipkah*, the first hair cutting feast for the first born son; the *tolup* ritual, which prepared young women for

marriage; *minakuetz* and *rapar*, the exchanges involved with marriage; the sacred *rarhum* feast, which honours important men and women within the clan; the *mbiekatip*, which marks the first mourning period; and the *katkatop* (called *pkepke* on Ihot) and *tutunkanut* feasts, known as the *karat* cycle, which are the most elaborate forms of ‘forgetting’ and ‘finishing’. Although an aspiring big-man will utilise all of these opportunities to increase his influence, *rarhum*, *katkatop* and *tutunkanut* are the most important categories of ceremonial feasting.¹⁷ These feasts are vital for establishing the authority of individual big-men and the organisation of supporters and allies of a given lineage. They are highly relevant to the transfer of land rights and lineage leadership. They provide the opportunity for individuals to honour deceased members from their own clan and from others, thus potentially allowing them to claim the wealth and resources of those groups.

Although most Lihirians agree that there are certain stages that must be performed within each type of feast to authenticate the event, there is not always agreement over the correct order for performing these stages. Similarly, while people often speak of an ideal sequence for the three major mortuary feasts, in reality the timing and order of these feasts is subject to prevailing circumstances, clan requirements or individual decisions. Ideally, as a person approached senior age their clan would host a *rarhum* in order to show respect and commemorate their status (effectively the opportunity to attend your own funeral). When this person died there would be burial feasts and the *mbiekatip*, which ends the mourning period. This would be followed by the *katkatop*, which may be held only a few months later, or if the clan is unable to organise the necessary pigs and garden produce, or decides to commemorate several people in the one *katkatop*, it can be years before this is held. Finally, after a number of years, the clan will stage a *tutunkanut* to ‘finish’ the deceased, which confirms leadership succession and the inheritance of land and resources. It is likely that there has always been some variation. Since at least the 1960s, big-men from Lataul area have been adding innovative elements as feasting became more competitive. Moreover, people’s lives never follow a set trajectory. People often die unexpectedly or at an early age, but certain feasts and obligations still require fulfilment.

17 In the past, the *tolup* ritual was considered highly important and was regarded as the *as bilong kastom* (the origin or base of *kastom*) because this was where the shells for future exchange were initially given. These shells were used for purchasing pigs that would be later used in exchange. The first hair cutting ceremony played a similar role, singling out the significance of first-born children, and allowing their entry in the exchange cycle, as *mis* and cash are given to first-born children so that they can purchase pigs.

Rarhum: Exaggerated Respect

Similar to other feasts in the *karat* sequence, the *rarhum* (taboo) feast also provides the opportunity for direct comparison between clans and their big-men. This feast is generally performed when the tooth of a senior man or woman falls out, indicating the demise of the body and their decline towards inevitable death. The tooth may be put on a section of reef or planted at the base of a coconut tree, rendering the area or the tree taboo (*rarhum*) until the appropriate feast has been held to lift the sanctions.¹⁸

These feasts are intended to celebrate the life of important clan members. Allies and supporters, which include the sons of the honoured person, will contribute pigs, shell money and cash. These cancel any outstanding debts and begin a new round of reciprocity within the *rarhum* cycle. There are strict notions of equivalence within these transactions: pigs and portions of pork exchanged within this feast must be reciprocated exactly at a later *rarhum*. Pork and garden produce are now supplemented by rice and tinned fish which are distributed to the various clan groups who attend. Guests 'pay' for their attendance by contributing shell money and cash to the host lineage. By the 1960s, it was common for Lihirians to use cash in this context. These 'gifts', which are directed by the *rarhum* person (the honoured clan member), are redistributed among those who contributed pigs to the feasts. This wealth is then used for purchasing new pigs that are ultimately destined for use in later *rarhum* feasts.

Besides honouring particular clan members, the *rarhum* feast functions as a mechanism for converting pigs into shell money and cash. Although a group may not necessarily make a 'profit', particularly if they 'spend' a lot in order to honour their member, the prestige gained through their expenditure has greater social currency. Thus *rarhum* provides a material dimension to individual prestige and acts as a vehicle for competition between various social groups. Often the men's house in which the *rarhum* is held is conspicuously marked by a tall woven screen made from coconut fronds placed around the outside of the enclosure, emphasising the element of 'containment' (see Wagner 1986: 153). However, it is said that this feature was introduced in the late colonial period. During this feast, all food within the enclosure of the men's house is *rarhum* (taboo) and must not be taken outside or consumed by women or cross-cousins — separate pigs are cooked for these groups. Only sisters and female cousins (women associated with the relevant men's house) attend this event. The nature of avoidance taboos means that their presence directs male behaviour. In the past, the spatial dimensions of male interaction within the confines of the *rarhum*

18 This taboo (area) may be known as a *mok*. Ideally, teeth are thrown onto the reef in front of the men's house (if it is on the coast). This is usually where people dispose of the blood and offal from the pigs consumed during the *rarhum* feast. In the past, it was taboo for males to wash during these feasts. The area of beach used for washing after the feast would become taboo as substances from the *rarhum* pigs were washed into the sea.

feasting area objectified relational status, and the men's house often remained sacred for some time after the feast, so that only big-men were permitted to enter, ultimately distinguishing leaders from the led.

The most important pigs in this feast are the *ber pelkan* and the *balun kale*. The *ber pelkan* is designated for cross-cousins and served outside the confines of the men's house, where the cross-cousins and related women gather. The *balun kale* refers to a particular style of cooking (*kale*) in which food is roasted on the fire. *Balun kale* signifies the loss of teeth that are necessary for eating this type of food, ultimately symbolising the inevitable decline towards death. These pigs are crucial to the moral framework of the *rarhum*, mirroring the Barok equivalent, the *ararum* feast, which 'amounts to the invocation of exaggerated protocols of respect and avoidance' (Wagner 1986: 174).

Tutulkanut: Cooking the Dead

Karat feasts serve similar functions to the *rarhum* feast, except that they are performed on a much larger scale and generate fiercer competition between social groups (see Young 1971). These are the largest and most spectacular feasts that require months — sometimes years — of planning, and vast amounts of pigs, garden produce, shell money and cash. Held over several weeks, with impressive and competitive dancing, and the slaughtering and exchange of what can amount to hundreds of pigs, they are the most stunning display of clan solidarity, wealth and prestige. These feasts are essentially concerned with 'finishing' deceased clan members and transferring their possessions and authority to the next generation. They provide the opportunity to expunge existing debts which the deceased has accrued in both formal exchange and daily forms of nurturance. People can divest their emotional and social bonds and obligations to the dead and create new relationships.

The term *tutulkanut* translates as 'cooking the dead', reflecting earlier mortuary practices that involved the cremation of the body, usually after it had been preserved and stored in the men's houses for some time. Due to the scale and intensity of these feasts, it is common for several clan members to be commemorated in the one event. *Katkaptop* are normally concerned with remembering (*nanse miel*), and carry a sombre emotional tone, while *tutulkanut* is a time to forget and finish (*nanse baliye*), accompanied by a more festive mood. Towards the end of the colonial period, *katkaptop* and *tutulkanut* were sometimes collapsed into one big feast. This added greater intensity to the event, and enhanced the prestige of the hosts, but also blurred the distinction between the stages.

The most striking moment during the *tutulkanut* feast occurs when clans present their contributions of cash and shell money to the host clan, whose

members use this wealth to purchase more pigs and settle old debts during the next phase of the feast. During this stage, which is known as *roriabalo*, clan leaders will mount a specially prepared round-roofed men's house (*balo*) (Plates 4-9 and 4-10), upon which they publicly present their contribution and indicate their support for the hosts and the next phase of the feast. At some point in the late colonial period, this practice was replaced by one called *roriahath*, in which a specially prepared stage (*hat*) was constructed instead. This 'assistance' is termed either *tele* (help that is given to another person that will later be reciprocated), *yehbi* (meaning 'to put out the fire', a metaphor for the payment of outstanding debts), or *saksak* (which likewise refers to the return of *mis* that has been received previously). The speaker will hold the individual strands of *mis* up for public viewing and then throw them onto the ground one by one to be collected by the receiver. When he dismounts he will remove any *purpur* (Tok Pisin for leaf decorations) to signal that he has rid himself of any burdens (*hevi* in Tok Pisin). Clan leaders who speak at this time will often publicly call on support from their *tandal* as they attempt to display the strength and power of their clan. When *mis* is exchanged in these contexts it must be reciprocated in exact form.



Plate 4-9: Ambrose Silul and kinsmen performing on the *balo*, Matakues village, 2008.

Photograph courtesy of David Haigh.



Plate 4-10: Rongan standing on the *balo* announcing his contribution to the feast, Matakues village, 2008.

Photograph courtesy of David Haigh.

These feasts are ultimately judged according to their memorability. The size of the event, the number of attendants or the range of social groups involved, and the quantity of pigs and other foodstuffs that are distributed and consumed, gauge the status of the deceased and the host clan. Typically, the wealth (which has come to consist of shell money, cash and other material possessions) of the deceased person and their lineage will have been distributed after their death in such a way as to produce a series of pig debts that can now be ‘called in’ for the final feast. Affiliation with the lineage of the deceased is crucial for receiving what remains of their wealth. Lineages rely upon this affiliation for the successful hosting of feasts, and at this stage it becomes apparent who are group members and who are merely supporters or allies. Ideally, the strength of a lineage is formed by increasing the number of supporters while maintaining the solidarity of the core group members.



Plate 4-11: Women from the Dalawit clan from Mahur Island performing at Kunaie village, 2009.

Photograph courtesy of David Haigh.

In short, *mis* and pigs were the central drivers of this mode of exchange. However, the ultimate purpose of this system was not the production of these two things or the simple exchange of one for the other. Rather, these items were central components in the performance of mortuary rituals that elicited the expression and reproduction of Lihirian values — such as authority, prestige and solidarity — through processes that enabled the reconfirmation and sometimes redefinition of group membership and group property. Although the Lihirian lifeworld was progressively transformed throughout the colonial period and the early years of Independence, in the following chapter we shall see how this world has been very abruptly turned upside down.