

Concealment, confession, and innovation in Kwaio women's taboos

ABSTRACT

The extensive anthropological literature concerning menstrual taboos has been dominated by symbolic and structural analyses. It tells us little about how people actually engage such taboos in their daily lives or about how taboos change through time. I argue that a more historically conscious, practice-oriented approach is needed and employ the Kwaio case to demonstrate how such an approach can reveal taboos as emergent and dynamic creations that both shape and respond to social change. [taboo, menstruation, confession, gender relations, religious change, Melanesia]

Something like that happened in my hamlet just the other day. Our classificatory father Siosi was dying. His niece Suusana had violated a [menstrual] taboo, and though we questioned her, she wouldn't confess. We interrogated Suusana for two days, only her, but she wouldn't admit it. She said, "I'm not going to confess to anything. If I had done something then I would tell about it, but you have the wrong person. Even though you've divined that it was me, you're mistaken. I'm being falsely accused." Then, during further divination, one man was possessed by an ancestral spirit, and the spirit said, "All right, if she denies my accusation, then wait for my punishment." And then we other men who were sitting there asking her questions, we all started crying, the ancestor made us cry out like this: "Oh you, if you continue to hide your violation, that man is going to die. You must tell all about it." . . . The ancestor spoke through us all, and the ancestor cried through us while we talked: "If you keep hiding this thing this man is going to die, but if you confess to it then this man will live." It went on like that for some time but it did no good, and by nightfall there were three different men interrogating that woman. But even so, Suusana wouldn't budge. We kept at it for a long time, but it was impossible; she wouldn't tell. And when morning came, our father died.

Then, a group of men arrived to mourn Siosi, and they said, "You people, Siosi has died like this, what are we going to do? Maybe this taboo violation has occurred, or maybe not; maybe you were interrogating that woman for nothing. Let's divine some more." So that group of men performed another divination, and they concluded, "No, it really was you, Suusana, who broke the rule, and that is why he died. You cannot lie about it any more." After a long time Suusana confessed: "Yes, I violated a taboo in the house." The man dies, and only then does she confess it! If she had been a younger woman, I think I would have slapped her. I was so angry. I said to her, "You, did you just get what you wanted? You see this man die, and only then do you confess? But when he was still alive we asked and asked and you wouldn't tell?" If she had been a younger woman, I would have slapped her.

—Excerpt from tape recording of author's 1992 discussion with John

Menstrual and related "women's taboos" sit at the center of daily religious life in much of Kwaio today. These taboos and violations of them are a primary concern of ancestral spirits and therefore also of community divinations and purificatory sacrifice. In this Solomon Islands society, women are believed to

violate the taboos frequently, often at great cost to their communities. A crucial determinant of every woman's status is her proper, or improper, observance of taboos, especially whether or not she reports her errors. Both the prevalence of women's violations and the great anxiety surrounding them are relatively recent, dating from the mid-1940s, and ideas about women's taboos continue to change today, as do the taboos themselves.

As a modern taboo system in flux, the Kwaio case fits uneasily within the menstruation literature, particularly that from Melanesia. Researchers like Langness (1974), Meggitt (1964), and Read (1971) analyzed menstrual taboos as expressing deep-seated male-female antagonisms and stressed how the Papua New Guinea Highlands people they studied conceived of female substances as polluting and dangerous. Later writers such as Faithorn (1975), Keesing (1985, 1987), Meigs (1978, 1984), Poole (1981), and Marilyn Strathern (1988), and outside of Melanesia Buckley and Gottlieb (1988), countered that such perspectives could distort or oversimplify. They argued that in many cultures menstruation has been positively marked or has empowered women, that in others, men too are potentially "polluting," and that purity and pollution, like gender itself, can be fluid, multivalent concepts, grounded contextually rather than absolutely.

Nearly all studies of menstrual taboos in Melanesia have been ahistorical symbolic or structural analyses of abstracted and otherwise simplified taboo systems. As noted by Jeffrey Clark (1993; also Clark and Hughes 1995:330–339), scholars have rarely considered how ideas or rules concerning "pollution" might change, despite the tremendous amount of attention given to shifting gender relations in the region. Beliefs about menstrual pollution, in particular, have often been treated as quintessentially "traditional" elements of the societies that hold them, and recognition of the mutability of pollution concepts generally has not sparked study of how they may be historically constituted. With few exceptions—most notably the innovative work of Clark and fellow ethnographers of the Huli in Papua New Guinea (see note 1)—changes in ideas or practices surrounding menstruation are usually mentioned, if at all, only in passing comments that taboos have persisted, declined, or disappeared.

A second, closely related gap in the literature on Melanesian menstrual taboos has been the striking lack of case material available showing how taboos play out in practice beyond ideal norms (i.e., menstruating women in X society do Y). One is left to wonder, among other things, if they are ever violated and what happens when they are. Contemporary anthropological interests in how symbolic systems are engaged in day-to-day life have inspired little practice-based analysis of beliefs surrounding menstruation in the region.¹ Presentist approaches that focus primarily on symbolic and structural abstractions can be quite valuable but are by themselves inadequate when the goal is to under-

stand how such beliefs actually affect women's and men's lives. Singular pitfalls await the unwary researcher here. The multivalent nature of symbols is especially palpable in menstruation, which can carry remarkably diverse and often paradoxical meanings. Because menstruation is physically exclusive to women, it can be tempting to select one or another of its connotations—negative or positive—and from that draw broader inferences about women's status or power. But such social consequences do not follow smoothly from symbolic values. For example, in Melanesia as elsewhere, sacred power and danger generally go hand in hand, and communities must protect themselves by carefully monitoring and regulating sacred substances and activities. If women, or some women, or particular women are deemed incapable of properly controlling menstruation or other potent female substances, then it may fall to men, or perhaps more senior women, to police or supervise them. In other words, when menstruation is seen as sacred and powerful, this may not empower women or otherwise enhance their status, and it can sometimes justify their subjugation.

The dearth of case studies of menstrual taboos and practices in social play has inhibited scholars' ability to understand how they change. Cases can illuminate how menstrual beliefs articulate with social life, their actual impact on gender and other social relations, and the mechanisms through which they are generated and transformed. In Kwaio, the best way to understand the modern taboo system is, as Barth noted for Ok cosmology in Papua New Guinea, "not by construing more order *in* it, but by better accounting for its production" (1987:84). Kwaio taboos are produced and change through their continual application in real cases, and so one must look to cases to understand them. In this article, I concentrate on a single case that displays numerous aspects of women's taboos as they mesh with men's and women's lives. The case also exhibits unique elements involving religious innovation and experimentation, with implications for ongoing shifts in Kwaio gender relations. More broadly, the article demonstrates how a more historical, practice-based analysis can reveal a radically different and more dynamic picture of menstrual taboos and beliefs than have more purely structural or symbolic approaches. Before I can delve into our case, however, readers must understand some fundamentals of Kwaio ancestors and taboos, particularly women's taboos.

Ancestors and their taboos

Mountain Kwaio religion, like other non-Christian religions on the island of Malaita, centers on the spirits of ancestors, the most important of whom lived ten and more generations ago. These spirits are the moral hub of society: They established Kwaio traditions when they were alive, and today they enforce their prescriptive and proscriptive rules for proper living—what I call here "taboos" (Kwaio: *abunga*)—

among those descendants who sacrifice pigs to them. There are thousands of taboos across Kwaio, some of them general but many specific to individual spirits. Most concern particular foods or words, social interactions, gardening or ritual procedures and abstentions, and women's bodily wastes. Even close neighbors may maintain relationships with distinctive constellations of ancestors, and thus, to some degree, different people observe different sets of taboos (see Akin 1993:ch. 7).

Kwaio hamlets average about ten people in size, and coresidents of hamlets and hamlet clusters are liable to ancestral punishment for each other's taboo violations (and those of visitors). The person punished may even be unaware of the offending act. Particularly significant here is that ancestors will afflict a hamlet's men if a coresident woman conceals a taboo violation involving female substances. This collective liability means people must be attentive to each other's behavior, particularly that of women. Although ancestors are quite concerned with people's intent in following their taboos, they insist that even accidental violations be righted through public confession and sacrificial pigs. In the past, some grave violations could be atoned for by killing the perpetrator or some other person, which would appease the spirits and negate the need for pig sacrifices.

Actions that please ancestors are socially valued and prestigious; intentional acts that displease them—for example, concealing one's taboo violations—are antisocial and stigmatized. Social relations between people and their ancestors, like those between living people, are built foremost on exchange. The spirits, for their part, empower descendants and protect them from malevolent human and numinous threats. Their descendants reciprocate by performing sacrifices and other rituals for the spirits and by following their taboos, as directed. They also must raise special sacred pigs for them, called "*fo'ota*." These *fo'ota* pigs are named after individual ancestors and are eventually sacrificed to them, with the pork shared among their adult male descendants in shrines or men's houses. As will become apparent in the case study, desecrations of a *fo'ota* pig and mishandling of *fo'ota* pork are serious offenses against the spirit to whom the pig is dedicated.

An active ancestor-descendant relationship is ideally lifelong, extremely close, and highly emotional on both sides (see Akin n.d.). Within this relationship, taboos, even proscriptive ones, are not simply rules about what *not* to do; they are also positive prescriptions for ancestor-pleasing behavior. The locus of morality in the Kwaio religious system is not the taboos themselves as absolute rules, which, again, vary widely from spirit to spirit. Rather, it lies in individuals and communities behaving in ways that conform to the wishes of their own particular ancestors. For this reason, that different groups observe different taboos is not morally problematic for the Kwaio religious community as a whole.² Furthermore, the acephalous nature of the taboo system

means that distinct groups within that community may relax, intensify, or otherwise modify taboos along diverse trajectories and at different rates, unhampered by trammels of uniformity. Experimentation flourishes. This is tremendously important for understanding how taboos, particularly women's taboos, have been changing in recent decades, a point to which I shall return.

Ancestors are iconically represented by their skulls and relics, which are tended in shrines and other sacred men's areas, but in spirit they are omnipresent and omniscient, and they have knowledge of the past, present, and future that living people do not. Kwaio sustain an ongoing dialogue with them, particularly when unsure of how to follow specific taboos, when trying to plan or influence future events, and, most important here, when seeking reasons for ancestral anger that is being expressed in some community misfortune. Both men and women may speak directly to spirits, and some do so often (Figure 1), and in our case we will encounter a spirit speaking through a female medium to reveal information to an audience. But the most important channel of two-way communication with spirits is divination, which in some neighborhoods takes place almost daily. One common reason for divination is to diagnose illnesses, and I



Figure 1. A priest in a shrine explains upcoming mortuary rituals to an ancestor whose skull he has just exhumed.

concentrate on that here and in our case. An ancestor who is unhappy with a community will often visit sickness on someone there to compel the people to divine and rectify the problem. Their failure to do so will lead to more serious illness and, if a spirit is ignored for too long, a death.

In the common type of divination, attendees together formulate specific questions, and for each question the augur pulls apart a knotted cordyline leaf; how the leaf breaks reveals an ancestral "yes" or "no" answer (Figure 2). The sequence of questions must narrow down first which ancestors are angry, then why they are angry, and finally what they require to mollify them. What they usually want is confession of any taboo violations at issue and a pledge to sacrifice expiatory pigs. Sometimes they are not angry but merely wish a ritual or other action to be performed. The breaking of the leaves is not random—each affirmative answer requires two consecutive "yes" breaks, and successful divinations typically end in a flurry of these. Leaf breaking is physically controlled by the diviner (even an anthropologist can do this with practice), but the ancestors, at least when they



Figure 2. A diviner breaks cordyline leaves to learn the fate of a woman's missing pig.

are feeling cooperative, guide his movements to reveal answers. While pulling leaves, a few gifted diviners with powerful spirit familiars experience coded bodily twitches that reveal answers more complex than "yes" or "no" and steer the questioning more quickly toward correct diagnoses.

As in so many societies, Kwaio divinations seek causes of sickness in some social disruption in the community: troubles between the living members and their ancestors, or perhaps some intracommunity conflict that the ancestors dislike. When successful, divinations prescribe actions to reconstitute and reharmonize the social whole. The pertinent unity sought is usually small—involving an extended family and their hamlet coresidents, sometimes expanding to include those who together raise or sacrifice sacred fo'ota pigs, and always, of course, the ancestors themselves. In some cases, divinations pinpoint a particular individual's behavior as the root problem.

A Kwaio divination session is very much a performance. But Kwaio diviners do not so much perform for the community as the community performs for the diviner and for the ancestors; when augury fails, the family is as apt to apologize to the diviner as the reverse. Diviners may help to formulate the questions asked, but often they maintain the passive air of simple conduits for ancestral communication. Indeed, like diviners in many cultures and like Western therapists, the Kwaio diviner should be to some degree an outsider—ancestors angry with a group might confound or mislead its own diviners. A certain level of disengagement is necessary. During divination, while the men and women of a community seek answers, the diviner monitors their success, providing ancestral feedback with the breaking of his (or *very* rarely, her) leaves. Although women often take part, men may choose to hold divinations in men's houses, where women cannot go.

Divination sessions can be occasions for serious analysis of taboos and socioreligious meanings. Each divination of illness is an attempt to apply received taboos to a social situation that is always to some degree novel, and in the process, the taboos themselves may be extended or otherwise modified, never to be the same again. Divination is thus a highly creative process, and Kwaio taboos can only be understood as cumulative outcomes of hundreds or thousands of past divinatory sessions—dynamic, unstable, and forever emergent.

Finally, Kwaio know divinations are fallible, vulnerable as they are to human error, ancestral caprice, and interference by sorcerers and hostile spirits (Akin 1996). Some turn out to have been incomplete, having revealed only one of multiple causes of a misfortune. Thus, divinatory findings are working hypotheses, confirmed only when they produce desired or predicted results or when someone confesses to having committed a revealed error (Akin 1993:ch. 7; Keesing 1982:115–116).

Women's taboos and the new pollution

Thus far I have referred mostly to menstrual taboos, but menstrual blood is one of a larger category of female bodily wastes—including also urine, feces, and vomit—that are all subject to rules zealously enforced by ancestors. Kwaio gloss these rules as “women's taboos.” Ancestors make surprisingly little distinction between the different wastes or the taboos surrounding them, particularly between menstrual blood and urine (though the former is, technically, more dangerous). It is these two substances that are by far the most often involved in violations, and when women report infractions, they often need not specify which of the two was involved. Stringent women's taboos also surround childbirth and its wastes, but in the terms of the present analysis, these differ qualitatively from other women's taboos and I address them only briefly here.

Ancestors, most importantly, demand strict containment of all these substances within demarcated women's areas. This must be understood within an overarching spatial scheme that divides Kwaio into two realms: “wild” (*kwasi*) jungle space and the cleared domesticated spaces of hamlets, gardens, and shrines. Ancestors enforce most taboos, including women's taboos, primarily within domestic

spaces. Here I focus on the spatial layout of hamlets, which is key to grasping how women's taboos work. Every hamlet is built along a slope and divided into zones that run across its vertical axis (Figures 3 and 4). Within each zone different people, things, substances, and activities are allowed, prescribed, or forbidden. The middle zone is the family area where all residents can eat, sleep, and socialize. This is relatively neutral space, although family house interiors are partitioned by fire hearths into lower women's and upper men's sides.

Above this family area is a men's area wherein one or more men's houses sit, and above them are often shrines. Men often socialize in the men's houses, but as one moves uphill through a hamlet clearing, sacredness and danger increase, and more restrictive taboos regulate what may pass into and occur within each area. No woman or girl may at any time climb beyond the virtual line that divides the family area from the men's area. Conversely, after men perform sacrifices or consume sacred fo'ota pork, they cannot enter any family house until the following day. After a priest conducts the highest sacrifices, he is secluded for several weeks in his most sacred men's house at the top of the clearing, forbidden for most men to visit or for women to lay eyes on.



Figure 3. A men's house overlooks two family houses and, on the left, a small house on the border of the women's area for an incontinent woman who lives here.



Figure 4. A view from the men's house of family houses and menstrual huts below.

People may not utter the priest's name for the duration, and he is referred to as *suru'ai*. A young man looks after his basic needs, and the priest performs a series of rituals to gradually desacralize himself to where he can again descend into the family clearing.

The men's area is mirrored below the family clearing by the women's area, and as one moves *downslope* from the family area, things become increasingly sacred and dangerous and more restrictive taboos apply. The upper reaches of the woman's area is a menstrual area with one or more menstrual huts. Menstruating women may under no circumstance enter a family or garden area, even momentarily. Yet, these women are by no means in seclusion—they may converse with men and women who are in the family area, they can work special menstrual gardens with other women and visit menstrual areas of other hamlets, and they are visited in their own area by other menstruating and nonmenstruating women. As in men's houses, much socializing takes place in women's areas, free from the everyday demands of men. The rare complaint one hears about menstrual separation is when it prevents a woman from fully partaking in a feast or other social event (though she can visit the menstrual area at the feast site). Below and off to the side of the menstrual area, hidden from view of the family

clearing, are one or more women's toilet areas, where still greater restrictions apply.

After a woman gives birth, she and the baby enter a taboo state that closely parallels the priestly seclusion following high sacrifice. They remain in a birth area surrounded by forest far below the hamlet, strictly forbidden for men to see. Like the secluded priest, the new mother may be referred to as *suru'ai* instead of by her name, and her needs are attended to by a younger woman. Over the following weeks, a series of desacralization rituals are performed to allow mother and child to reenter first the menstrual area and, later, the family area.

Despite the obvious mirroring of men's and women's areas, rules restricting traffic between the middle family clearing and women's area are far more encompassing. Not only can men and boys never enter the women's area, but clothing, tools, pipes, food, and other items from the central clearing are also forbidden; only women themselves may enter. Nor can anything from the women's area be taken farther up the clearing.³ These basic spatial and procedural rules are shared in hamlets all across the Kwaio mountains, though different ancestors stipulate many variations in detail.

Readers familiar with Roger Keesing's book *Kwaio Religion* (1982, esp. ch. 5; also Keesing 1987; cf. Maranda 2001) will

know that analysis of this hamlet design and associated taboos in terms of their symbolic structure can be enlightening. Keesing recognizes in the mirrored women's and men's realms two inseparable components of a single symbolic order that fuses birth and death in a cycle of continual societal reproduction (i.e., death being the birth of ancestors, who grant fertility in the broadest sense). One of Keesing's main points is that the deeper one explores the relationship between the men's and women's realms, the more problematic it becomes to characterize the men's as sacred but the women's as inherently "polluted." Rather, both are sacred, taboo, highly charged, dangerous, and potentially powerful. The key is that marked activities must take place in the appropriate times and spaces. Most pertinent here is that women's bodily wastes are polluting, defiling, *only* when they improperly cross categorical boundaries, when, as in Mary Douglas's famous conception, they are "out of place" (see also Faithorn 1975). Keesing concludes that

the ancestral rules requiring containment of the bodily emissions of women within strict bounds can be glossed as "pollution taboos." But it is more faithful to the Kwaio conceptual world simply to refer to them as . . . "women's rules." These emissions are part of women's essential nature, the concomitants of women's power. *Women are potentially polluting, but they are not polluted.* [1982:69–70, emphasis added]

In the same vein, Keesing (1982:70, drawing on Meigs 1978) notes that bodily substances of Kwaio men—feces and vomit—may, like women's, be polluting when out of place (see also Faithorn 1975). In addition, he presents, both here and elsewhere, voices of senior women asserting that it is their diligent monitoring of women's taboos that maintains the integrity of hamlets, and portraying themselves as "moral keystones of the community" (Keesing 1982:222, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1992:27). From Keesing's analysis, then, one might conclude that the Kwaio taboo system offers a notable example of menstrual and other female fluids being sacred and empowering of women rather than polluting. And in fact it continues to be cited as such (e.g., Dureau 1991:33, 41; Jolly 1998:16, 2001:178, 182, 197, 2002:21; Stone 1997: 170–171).

Keesing's presentation is invaluable because it lays out the taboo system's structure in a way that reveals how female substances fit into a larger symbolic system of power and danger. Yet if one wishes to understand the relationships between that system and actual gender relations, analysis cannot stop with this abstracted model or with Kwaio statements about the system's idealized meanings. Understanding why these substances are believed powerful does not explain how their power is expressed or who wields it. Keesing himself noted this toward the end of *Kwaio Religion*:

Assessing the "status of women" or relations between the sexes is exceedingly complex, and can never be based directly on symbolic systems or institutional forms. We must seek understanding in the texture of actual social relations, in the way real humans live their lives. [1982:224]

With this in mind, in what follows I take up what happens when the behavior dictated by the taboo system is not forthcoming. That is, what transpires when the strict categorical boundaries just outlined are violated, when women's bodily fluids fall "out of place" and the polluting *potential* of women is fully realized in polluting women. This is no small matter, because for many decades women's violations in Kwaio have been widespread and chronic, even epidemic at times, with serious repercussions for the status of the women involved, and indeed of all Kwaio women.⁴

Today women voluntarily report the great majority of their taboo violations to a man or senior woman of their hamlet. This allows the community to appease the spirits in an orderly manner with confession and sacrificial pigs (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A pig on its way to be sacrificed to expiate a woman's menstrual violation.

A very different scenario can develop, however, if a man becomes seriously ill and a diviner discovers that a woman has *failed* to report an error, for which failure the illness is ancestral punishment. The divination may or may not reveal the guilty individual, but in any case an investigation ensues, and nearly always some woman confesses to an unreported error or errors, thereby taking blame for the illness. Without confession, ancestors will prevent the sick person's recovery. Such confessions are sometimes extracted only after verbal interrogation by men and often other women, in extreme cases operating in shifts over several days. Afterward, the woman subjected to the interrogation may be stigmatized as an antisocial "bad woman," depending on her willingness to confess and the number and seriousness of violations she is revealed to have hidden over time. By contrast, when a woman reports her violations, or sometimes, if she quickly confesses to acts found to have angered ancestors, she is generally praised as a "good woman" who puts her family's well-being first, and later divinations will less likely find her hiding something. One might surmise that some voluntary reports, particularly those by women who make them regularly, are contrived in pursuit of "good woman" status, though when I have raised this both women and men generally reject it as even an abstract possibility.

A key point is that *all* of these women, both good and bad, are thought to place a burden on their communities. This is because a violation, whether reported or discovered, requires not only sacrifices of valuable pigs but also immediate and permanent abandonment of any house or garden where the mistake occurred (errors outdoors in the clearing usually require only pigs). Not reporting the violations, of course, can add illnesses to the cost. According to Kwaio notions of strict liability, these episodes leave the women indebted to men: Women damage relations with ancestors through their violations, and men must provide ritual labor and pigs to repair those relations. Men must also work to replace any houses or gardens that have to be abandoned. A young man nicely summarized for us the basic Kwaio take on this sort of social debt:

It's like a man who pays compensation for us, or helps us with expiatory pigs, or the priest in our hamlet. If you think we might scold him, or talk unkindly to him, well . . . that is something a thoughtful fellow will never do. Here is what he will think: "That man paid compensation to protect me. If I make a mistake he'll pay for it. If something bad happens to me he'll sacrifice pigs to protect me. I'm afraid to [upset him]." He will look up to that man. He won't challenge him. And a woman is like that too . . . She will see him the same way. Because she thinks, "If something bad happens to me you'll protect me with compensation, if I break a taboo you'll give pigs on my behalf for sacrifice." No matter what that man might say, she can't talk back to him.

The scenario of female taboo violation and male community repair is pervasive in many parts of Kwaio today, where it is a normal aspect of life for nearly every family. My data indicate that in these places most women, particularly married women, typically run afoul of taboos, or at least confess to having done so, once or twice per year, and Kwaio consistently say this is a normal rate.⁵ Sometimes, as we will see in our case, individual women are pulled into schismogenic spirals of accusations and confessions that leave them deeply stigmatized and sometimes tear apart their marriages and families. The violation scenario not only engenders hierarchy in dyadic relationships of individual men and women, but for Kwaio it also powerfully shapes the general position of women vis-à-vis men in contemporary society. Women are partly defined, by men and women alike, as persons who violate taboos *naturally*, inevitably, and at considerable cost to their communities.

One reason for the high rate of menstrual violations today is that women's taboos are interpreted more strictly than other taboos. In most Melanesian societies where rules of menstrual segregation have been described, a woman should relocate to a menstrual area when she notices her period beginning. But a Kwaio woman must anticipate her period, and if it begins in a family clearing or garden, then a full-blown violation has occurred. The difference is a crucial one: It introduces the possibility and indeed inevitability of accidents, which in turn raises the specter of their concealment.

As I stated in the introduction, frequent women's violations are a relatively new problem, which makes their current attribution as natural to women all the more striking. There have been women's taboos for as long as oral history tells, but until recent decades violations were extremely rare. This began to change in 1946 with an epidemic of spirit possessions of women during an anticolonial movement called "Maasina Rule." For the first time, women were said to be widely violating taboos both openly and secretly. These events opened a Pandora's box of new and terrifying possibilities and initiated a steady escalation of accusations, confessions, and women reporting violations, leading eventually to the *normalization of error*. The forces feeding this process were too many and complex to analyze closely here; but, among these forces were that women's taboos and their observance had been a special target of coastal Christian groups (especially evangelicals) who in the decades before World War II challenged the ancestral religion. This transformed women's taboos and their observance into a core symbol of anti-Christian politics and made them a focus of heightened anxiety and attention. Moreover, Kwaio expect their ancestors to share their anxieties about taboos and to react by enforcing them more rigorously (see Akin n.d.).

Further, the 1920s and 1930s had seen a gradual erosion of key, interlinked aspects of men's power, including their ability to legitimately use violence against women and other

men, their control of formal exchange in the shell money economy and of key aspects of the religious system, and their authority to arrange marriages. These had all formed a foundation for a status quo dominated by senior men and in some realms senior women. It seemed to these seniors that the ongoing diminution of their power allowed some women to undermine that status quo still further by acting in antisocial ways—seeking more control over their own labor, refusing unwanted marriages, and generally pursuing their own interests. They thereby challenged the powerful who saw themselves as representing greater community interests. These women were seen to be acting, in short, like “bad women.” They were just the sort of women—as became increasingly evident as violations increased—who might also selfishly conceal taboo violations and endanger the community as women in the past never would have. Clearly, heightened vigilance was required. In a broader sense, “bad women,” or, more accurately, the *idea* of bad women, personified the decadence and individualism seen to typify rapidly encroaching foreign ways. Younger women in particular became prime targets for both organized and individual attempts to reimpose a more disciplined cultural order ascribed to the past (Akin 1996, 1999, n.d.; cf. Keesing 1987, 1989).⁶

Though for many Kwaio, these tensions eased over time, dynamic processes within the taboo system had been set into motion and continued to transform that system. Very briefly, it is apparent that in the past the practice of Kwaio menstrual taboos resembled the pattern found in many other parts of Melanesia, where women move to women's areas with the onset of menstruation. This practice was relatively straightforward, and errors were easily avoided. But when divinations of illness began to charge women with concealing violations, some of the women accused reported things that they formerly would have ignored as nonviolations or as minor or borderline infractions (see Akin n.d.). In confessing to ambiguous acts, women lessened their own culpability. Moreover, many women were being falsely accused, something very few had experienced before, and this response better allowed them to come to terms with that. When the sick people became well, their recovery confirmed that the confessed, unreported, formerly innocuous acts had indeed been what had angered the ancestors, leading to further, voluntary reporting by women of similar acts. Cumulatively, this generated taboos that became more stringent and onerous, and what emerged over time were taboos impossible to follow without errors. This process continues today, and some things considered safe not long ago are now in some places forbidden. Thus, it is not only taboo enforcement but also the *taboos themselves* that are changing over time.

The case I will now consider dramatically displays the unstable nature of women's taboos and their meanings today, in a community fixated on them as a cause of serious ill-

ness and on their observance as the measure of a woman's character. I also show how taboo interpretation and enforcement can be a medium of intracommunity social conflicts, conflicts in which women can be victimized through taboos, although they may sometimes turn taboos to their advantage. Finally, the case illustrates in multiple ways how expectations regarding how taboos will be enacted based on straightforward gender divisions can be trampled in the rush of real-life events.

Beti's case part 1: The making of a bad woman

Divination seeks to uncover the private malignity that is infecting the social body.

—Turner 1975:16

Beti is a remarkably quick-witted woman, being, among other things, an unrivaled master of sexual joking, a high art in Kwaio demanding creative feats of subtle metaphor and double-entendre.⁷ It holds dangers too: Errors in one's choice of words or audience can ignite anger and compensation demands. But Beti is obviously stimulated by the risk. She has always been outspoken, and when she was younger she was known for flaunting a self-righteous attitude toward women who erred regarding taboos. For instance, one time a woman attending a large feast being hosted by Beti's family accidentally menstruated in their house, and Beti humiliated her by formally announcing this to the crowd of guests (for which cruelty she was later chastised by an elder kinsman). That Beti today remains so lively and even raucous seems remarkable when one knows of her tragic history. Over the past two decades she has been trapped in a tangle of taboo violations, accusations, and confessions that have threatened to destroy her marriage, have weakened her ties to her natal family, and have at times plunged her into deepest despair.

Her troubles began soon after she married in the late 1970s. While growing up, Beti had followed taboos responsibly, only once causing destruction of a house through an error she dutifully reported. But she arrived in her new husband's hamlet to find herself in the midst of a mounting community crisis. The wife of another man there—Beti's sister-in-law—was regularly committing taboo violations and was not reporting most of them until they were exposed by divination. In time Beti, too, was found to have violated taboos and even to have polluted houses, but these incidents were few and far enough between that they raised no alarms, especially with attention focused on her sister-in-law's much worse situation. As time went by, the latter's problems intensified as house after house was destroyed and the hamlet's men suffered from recurrent serious illnesses. The burden was heavy on this community, whose ancestors routinely demand ten pigs to rectify transgressions (typically all but one are piglets or young shoats). In

the end, the sister-in-law's errors became so incessant that both she and her husband—bereft of sacrificial pigs and shell money and weary of asking others to help in purifying her violations—decided that she was no longer capable of living with ancestors at all, so they moved to the coast to become Christians. Desperate hamlet members had been encouraging the woman to leave, but they were devastated when her husband departed with her.

At this juncture Beti's life began to change radically. Since marrying, she had been blamed for spoiling some ten houses in the clearing of her husband's family, but spread across several years. Now, as if she were taking up where her sister-in-law had left off, Beti became the focus of divinations discovering her to be concealing more violations. She would report one or two, but later divinations would discover that she was hiding others. This pattern continued for months, and soon her reputation spread as a very bad woman indeed. As she recalled it to me,

People began to say about me, "That woman there, maybe this kind of thing was happening to her when she was unmarried too, and now she has brought it here to spoil *our* hamlet." But when I still lived at home I had done nothing like that; I had a few errors, but only a few.

Her natal family, too, was puzzled by this new behavior, which weighed on them financially as well because each time a married woman breaks a taboo, her family should contribute the largest purificatory pig:

When a violation was found, the next day I would walk home and I would take away one of my family's big pigs. Other times I was so ashamed—because there seemed no end to my having to ask them for pigs—that I would go elsewhere to try to find them myself. I can't tell you how many pigs I bought on my own, I was so ashamed from pestering my brothers for them. One time my husband said, "We've been asking them for so many pigs, this time we'll just take care of it ourselves." But the ancestors wouldn't allow that! After my husband had sacrificed the pigs, the spirits told him, "Your wife's people have lots of pigs; we want some from their place too."

To make matters worse, Beti began to fear that she was losing her mind. Most distressing was that she could not remember the errors she was divined to have committed:

Sometimes, I would just take a tobacco pipe down to the menstrual area, and then I'd come back up with it, and I was so messed up that I didn't know what I'd done . . . And sometimes I would be menstruating in the menstrual area, and I would just walk up into the clearing, but even though I had done that, in my mind it was as if I *hadn't* done it. To me there was no problem! My thoughts were just full of holes . . . When my husband would get sick, and they would say to me, "You've done

such-and-such a thing," and I would try hard to remember: "Oh, did I do that? I just don't know." And then they would find something else I had done, and I would think, "Oh, well, that was a very bad thing." And I just spent all of my time crying—that was all I ever thought about doing. I was all mixed up.

Sometimes, after divination had uncovered some forbidden act, and after much interrogation and cajoling, she could, with great concentration, recover vague memories of it.⁸ Even though Beti usually could not remember, she would still confess, convinced that her mind rather than the divination was in error. "The diviner would discover what I'd done, and when it was revealed, I would say, 'Oh, that's true!' But even though I said 'that's true,' I would have an uneasy feeling about it."

The diviner in most of Beti's cases was a man named Dimirii (Jimmy Lee). He plays a key role in our case as it develops, so let me briefly introduce him. Beyond his divinatory skills, Dimirii has a reputation as a sort of taboo consultant—people often turn to him for advice and creative solutions regarding problems of religious interpretation, particularly how to apply taboos in unusual situations. He is popular among men and women alike and notable for the intensity with which he tends to his friendships. This can be a problem for him because always hanging over diviners is the danger that they will make personal enemies of individuals whom they reveal to be responsible for community problems. Kwaio do not generally blame the messenger, but they do anger if they feel they are being unfairly blamed for something, as sometimes occurs when women are accused of concealment. Dimirii is like many diviners in his ambivalence about probing such cases. Another seasoned diviner I know always stops when his leaves reveal that some woman is hiding a violation, his hesitation due to a family tragedy he witnessed in the 1950s: Divination had found a violation concealed by his aunt to be causing a relative's grave illness. The aunt denied the charge and promptly hanged herself. Subsequent augury revealed that she had been unjustly charged because of divinatory error.

One day Dimirii visited me and recounted a divination he had just performed, about which he was visibly upset. He had been asked to find out why a hamlet's senior man was ill. A woman named Gelesi had recently married into the hamlet and had twice before been caught concealing violations, thereby necessitating the destruction of two houses; so, no one was surprised when she was discovered to be at fault this time as well:

My divination found first that the illness was due to some women hiding violations, and then that Gelesi was withholding something. After a good deal of divining we found that she had committed and concealed fully seven errors. Then I said, "Hey, this is no good, let's ask about some other women." As the diviner I was embarrassed.

We were just laying all the blame on this one woman, and there are four and five other women who live in the hamlet. Even if there are lots of violations being hidden, there should be one for one woman, another for another woman. Like that. But I'd divined seven for this one woman alone, and as I found each one she would confess to it. We tried divining errors to the other women, but we didn't turn up anything. So then Gelesi's mother asked, "Is that all of them?" So I tested her question with a leaf, and, "Oh, something is still hidden!" And when Gelesi heard me say that she just hit the roof. She said, "When I was living with my own family, when they divined they never found I was hiding anything! I never hid a single violation. And now that you people have paid brideprice for me and brought me here, why are you pinning all of these things on *my* name? You just keep turning up *my* name." And then she burst into tears. She just sat there and cried. I stood up and I went up to the men's house, and when I got up there I turned back around to them and I said, "There are still more violations to find! Ask that woman about them and she'll find them for you!" And after that her mother sat her down and questioned her, and by the time they were done she had confessed to six more violations.

Dimirii was unhappy because the woman appeared angry with him for merely revealing the truth. Why should she blame him when her confessions had confirmed his divination? And yet he clearly found the experience unsettling. To make matters worse, the woman was banished permanently from the hamlet by the sick and now angry senior man, and, with her husband, she returned to her distant natal home, despite appeals by Dimirii and others that the couple be allowed to merely establish a separate clearing nearby. As in the case of Beti's sister-in-law, people were crushed when the husband, a well-liked man with a dazzling intellect, left with his wife, and many wished her to stay also.

Returning to Beti's case, as her social situation and mental state worsened with each new series of errors, Dimirii too grew troubled. In more normal times they had been good friends, and his wife was one of Beti's closest companions. Dimirii liked Beti's spirited personality, once telling her that "though you're a rebellious person, I empathize with you since I'm pretty rebellious myself." He also contributed many pigs toward fixing her errors, errors he himself had divined, even though she was only a distant relative and he was under no obligation to help her.

Eventually, in the early 1990s, Beti followed her sister-in-law's example in seeking refuge from the unrelenting ancestors in a coastal mission village. Dimirii remembered what transpired:

Before, Beti might have one violation, but then over the next month or more, nothing. But now, two or three errors would occur in a single month, every month. I myself contributed ten pigs to repair the damage. And

then it got so bad that she decided to go down to a Christian village to stay with her cousin. But her husband [a priest] would go down and meet her secretly. He would wait for her in the jungle, and through these trysts she became pregnant with a son. But then her husband started to get sick, and we had to sacrifice pigs for him to recover, and I said, "He's sick from meeting her down there. A woman living in a Christian village wears clothing while she is menstruating, and to the toilet, and she just menstruates in her house, and then she comes together with her husband. He said he was going to put Beti aside, but he didn't and she got pregnant, and now because of that the ancestors have made him sick." . . . We divined that . . . and we gave pigs to fix things up . . . and he got better. And then Beti came back up to the mountains.

But Beti brought her taboo violations back with her. Her husband's sickness turned out to have been the start of a chronic illness for which explanations were continually sought and found in Beti's errors and concealments. Before long ten more houses had been torn down because of her errors, ratcheting up the strain on their marriage. Finally, when Beti's husband had built a new house to replace the tenth one destroyed, he made a public curse:

This house, if it has to be demolished due to another taboo violation, well, whoever violates that taboo will have to find men to come here to build a replacement house. If she doesn't, then she defecates on food and serves it to me. She defecates on the roof of my new house and she lives in it with me. She defecates on the heads of any pigs that she feeds here.

His curse boiled down to this: If Beti spoiled another house and did not see to replacing it herself, their marriage would be over. Such conditional curses in Kwaio are performative speech acts and serious business. Ancestors hear them and become enraged if the posited actions (or inactions) are carried through, reacting as if the defiling acts linked to them had also really been performed (e.g., as if Beti had served her husband food she had defiled).

Soon after, however, a divination session discovered Beti hiding three more violations and the new house had to be abandoned. Beti did not try to find anyone to replace it. In an effort to save the situation, our diviner Dimirii built her a separate miniature house, of a certain type sometimes made for incontinent women to sleep in so their errors will be less destructive (Figure 6; see also Figure 3). Nonetheless, Beti's husband, angry and pressured by his family, ordered her to return to her kin—he was through with their marriage. Her natal family also wanted her to come home, fearful that if she stayed and her husband's curse about the house was ignored, dire consequences would follow. "Those people treating you like that; come back home to us," urged her older brother. Beti, as frustrated as her husband, had



Figure 6. Makeshift shelters built for a woman blamed for polluting several houses. Both have been consecutively abandoned after further violations.

made curses of her own, against building a new house and feeding her husband's pigs. But in truth Beti still wanted to stay with him and their children:

I had always thought, "We've stayed together this long, I've given my hand to this person until death, and we have remained devoted to each other. We've married, raised our children, and grown old together, and I don't want to leave him. I still want him . . . and he still wants me." I thought this and I didn't want to split up.

Intermission: Meet two ancestors

Before continuing, I must introduce two characters who are about to enter our story—two pillars of the community: a woman named Lastgasp and her nephew, Hog-Nine. Both are ancestral spirits, widely propitiated, enormously powerful and highly volatile. For reasons that will become clear, we must begin with Lastgasp's mother Subuni, a peaceful woman who some twelve generations ago lived in Kwaio with her husband and her father, an infamous killer named Lone-Taro. For a slight that need not concern us here (a mild curse), Lone-Taro secretly murdered Subuni's hus-

band (some say he killed her brother) and concealed the corpse. But Subuni discovered her father's misdeed and left Kwaio in anger and grief, taking with her the knowledge of Lone-Taro's powerful fighting magics. Subuni's wanderings eventually carried her to northern Malaita, where a man from 'Anaaraba (near the Lau Lagoon) happened on her clearing a garden plot for herself. He took Subuni home, talked his brothers out of eating her, and married her. Together they had eight daughters, four of whom would eventually go mad. One of the sane daughters was Lastgasp.

It came to pass that the 'Anaaraba people began feuding with a rival group, and although their men tried time and again to strike at the enemy, they could not penetrate their defenses and returned home crestfallen. After one such foray, a contemptuous Lastgasp mocked them and suggested that even they, the 'Anaaraba women, could do better. Furious at her insolence, the men sarcastically proposed that the women go give it a try, whereupon Lastgasp gathered her seven sisters, and they set out for hostile territory. They arrived to find the enemy men gathered and, led by Lastgasp, the eight sisters proceeded to seduce them. Afterward, the women used their grandfather Lone-Taro's fighting magic to put the men into a deep sleep. Then, with ribald

humor, the sisters gleefully dispatched their short-lived lovers one by one, bashing their heads in with clubs. They returned home victoriously brandishing the enemy heads, to the great shame of their men. Years later, Lastgasp returned south to Kwaio, and, though she never married, she remains a powerful ancestress who receives pigs from collateral descendants. They fear her quick temper when women's or other taboos are violated and the brutal punishments she sometimes metes out for slights. Lastgasp was the ancestor who, as recounted in this article's opening epigraph, killed her priest Siosi. She is also known for selecting women to become especially taboo for her, sometimes granting them both destructive and productive powers. Until recent years, she employed some women as mediums to communicate her wishes and other valuable knowledge.

Our second ancestral spirit is Hog-Nine, Lastgasp's nephew born to one of her sisters in north Malaita. Even as a boy Hog-Nine displayed an obstinate character that set him apart. A turning point in his young life came when, one day, he saw a fruit pigeon high in a tree and, too young to draw a bow himself, he teamed up with his blind grandfather and guided his grandpa to loosen the arrow and bring down the bird. The old man then performed magic on the boy with the pigeon's feathers so that Hog-Nine would grow up to be a fierce warrior, and before long young Hog-Nine was killing anyone who entered his favorite bird-hunting territory. This earned him the enmity of his neighbors, who posted a large blood bounty of shell money and pigs to be paid to anyone who avenged their dead by dispatching Hog-Nine or one of his relatives. Terrified that he would soon be slain, Hog-Nine devised a plan: In a bamboo tube he concocted a red liquid from milkwood sap and other plants, and at night he crept up to a slumbering kinswoman and poured the liquid onto her pandanus sleeping mat. At first daylight, he pointed to the red liquid with mock dismay: "Look everyone! She has menstruated in the house! We've got to kill her!" He bludgeoned her then and there, and afterward (because one of his relatives had indeed been killed as specified by the blood bounty) he proceeded to claim the bounty himself. Hog-Nine later repeated this trick many times with his fake blood mixture, or he implicated women by defecating by their beds as they slept. At first his people had been pleased to have such a powerful warrior in their camp. But now, as he began to kill off his own, they feared for their lives. Finally, Hog-Nine went so far as to murder and eat his father's brothers (his classificatory fathers), at which point his father, himself a peaceful man, sadly banished Hog-Nine forever. A despondent Hog-Nine built a raft and rode it south along Malaita's eastern coast to Kwaio, where the wanderer was found by two sisters. He soon married one of them and settled with their family near the homeland of his grandmother Subuni.⁹

Here the story of Subuni, Lastgasp, and Hog-Nine has structurally come full circle: The peaceful woman Subuni

flees north from Kwaio after her ultraviolent father murders her husband (or her brother, his son), and she is found wandering northern Malaita by a local man, whom she marries. Subuni bears Lastgasp, a somewhat androgynous spinster who takes on the masculine role of a warrior. In the next generation, Lastgasp's sister bears Hog-Nine, the quintessential violent male, who, after he serially murders neighbors and his uncles, is banished by his peaceful father and travels south until he reaches (and the story returns to) Kwaio. There he is found wandering by a local woman, whom he marries. The stories and their inversions are obviously of a piece, but today they are not told as a single tale. Kwaio mention only the genealogical link between Lastgasp and Hog-Nine (and many are now only dimly aware or even unaware of that link).

This elision is all the more curious because the ongoing behaviors of Lastgasp and Hog-Nine in Kwaio today continue to invert one another (though in some ways the true structural opposites are Subuni and Hog-Nine). Lastgasp possesses female descendants and sometimes gives them what Kwaio see as "masculine" powers, just as she once did her sisters. So too, Hog-Nine sometimes victimizes and "frames" innocent women descended from him, as he did his kinswomen when he was alive. More specifically, when Hog-Nine the ancestral spirit is angry with descendants, he sometimes punishes them by possessing a woman of the family and causing her to involuntarily urinate or menstruate in violation of taboos, sometimes leaving her unaware of having committed the act. This punishment is a severe one because, as I have shown, such violations will cost a community in pigs, houses, gardens, and its good health.

Hog-nine has another distinguishing feature. When Kwaio women marry out to another group they commonly stop raising pigs for and break close relations with most or sometimes all of their own ancestors. But Hog-Nine often refuses to be left behind and *pursues* out-marrying women to insist that they continue their relationship with him. The women's children will usually inherit this relationship, and in this way Hog-Nine has in recent decades spread widely, to the degree that today he is perhaps *the* most pervasive and powerful ancestor in central Malaita. His proliferation has occurred in tandem with the escalation in women's taboo violations. One can infer that the wide spread of Hog-Nine's ancestral influence, in the context of his past and present proclivity for victimizing innocent women with taboo violations, reflects some level of awareness of what nearly all Kwaio men and women will deny if asked: that women today are often accused of and pressured into confessing to acts that they have not committed.

Donald Tuzin's *The Cassowary's Revenge* (1997) is quite instructive here. Tuzin explores a "swan maiden" myth told among the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea, in which a man deceives a woman by concealing the cassowary skin with which she can magically transform herself into the

bird. Because of his theft, the woman is forced to remain human, and she becomes his wife. But after years of marriage she discovers his trickery and kills him. Ilahita say this is their most important myth, and Tuzin analyzes it as an “incriminating charter” that embodies men’s guilt and sense of “moral vulnerability” concerning the deceptions and abuses of their local men’s cult, which until recently dominated and in some cases terrorized Ilahita society (1997:90–91, *passim*; cf. Gewertz 1988; Meigs 1984:45). Ilahita now look on this story’s portrayal of male injustice and ultimate female discovery and retribution as having anticipated the 1980s collapse of (or “killing of”) the Ilahita men’s cult in the wake of a forceful evangelical Christian movement dominated by women.

Reading Tuzin’s account on my last return from Kwaio, I was struck by parallels with ways I had been thinking about Hog-Nine and his myth. Like the rampant menstrual violations in Kwaio today, the Ilahita men’s cult was relatively new there (imported in the previous century), and Tuzin argues that the swan maiden myth rose to prominence in tandem with the cult’s ascension. In the same way, the misogynic Hog-Nine has spread through Kwaio with the rise of women’s violations. In both societies, moreover, these new forces—the men’s cult and the quotidian violations—have been central to a shift in the character of relations between men and women from relatively benign to more antagonistic, and in both places this shift has generated deep moral contradictions. Finally, Hog-Nine and his myth, by laying bare what are normally veiled injustices within the Kwaio taboo system, resemble the Ilahita myth in containing a scenario, a formula, through which women can turn the tables and openly challenge men.

The Ilahita myth appears to have retained its essential form over time, but people’s perceptions of its primary meanings have changed tremendously with the shifting circumstances of their lives (Tuzin 1997:98–99). Similarly, in Kwaio the myths of Lastgasp and Hog-Nine have now taken on new, urgent meanings, although these are moving to the fore through a process less conscious and less willful than those Tuzin describes in Ilahita. In Kwaio, furthermore, this is occurring through quite different mechanisms. The Ilahita mythical characters are located primarily in a distant past, but the Kwaio stories, like most Kwaio myths, are about ancestors who continue to interact with living people on a daily basis in the here and now. In Kwaio today, it is not the myths that have moved to center stage but their main characters. Perhaps this is one reason Kwaio are not given to pondering or discussing the meaning of stories about the mortal pasts of Hog-Nine or Lastgasp, or the messages the stories may carry for Kwaio now. To do so would be in one sense pointless because people’s ongoing connections with the myths’ characters are so immediate and direct. They need only *ask* Hog-Nine and Lastgasp themselves what the two are thinking, and they can observe the spirits’ actions as

they extend from the myths into contemporary life. Kwaio seem, at least on a conscious level, to submerge the mythical bonds joining Lastgasp and Hog-Nine, and the ethereal ties of distant myth become secondary when the two spirits come together and assert themselves as active, purposeful beings in the present, opposed as elegantly as in any mythical structure.

Beti’s case part 2: A revelation put to the test

Now, desperate to save her marriage, remain with her children, and regain her sanity, Beti turned to an old friend, Babala, a woman of about fifty who has been married to one of Beti’s relatives for some twenty-five years. She is exceptionally bright and widely respected. Most important here is that Babala has for the past decade been a medium for ancestress Lastgasp. She is what Kwaio call a taboo woman (*noni e abu*), meaning that one or more ancestral spirits have selected her to be specially sacred for them (in Babala’s case there are four spirits, including Hog-Nine). This means the woman must follow extra taboos, raise pigs for the spirits, and in some cases tend shrines of sacred plants for them in the upper margins of family clearings. When an ancestor today taps a woman to become taboo she is likely to resist, sometimes for years, only to relent after suffering successive illnesses divined to the spirit pressuring her. A few women have even been killed by ancestors for their protracted refusal. Women resist because the status generally grants them no special powers and yet imposes on them new onerous behavioral restrictions, including some that can stifle their socializing with other women. A taboo woman cannot enter menstrual huts of other women or eat from their menstrual gardens, nor can other menstruating women enter her hut.

It was not always so. Two generations ago many taboo women had considerable powers, especially those who were taboo for Lastgasp. Babala’s three “grandmothers” were particularly renowned for wielding Lastgasp’s power on behalf of their descent group, and many men feared them for their knowledge of her and Lone-Taro’s fighting magics and sorceries. One of these grandmothers had her own sacred house, much like a men’s house, at the upper end of the family clearing. When the nephew of another was insulted over a pig theft, that grandmother struck down the offending man with Lastgasp’s power, and he soon sickened and died.¹⁰ But when these women passed away, so did their extraordinary powers, and in recent years most of Lastgasp’s women have differed little from women tabooed by other spirits.

In the 1980s, the spirits of Babala’s grandmothers convinced her to begin tending a plot of sacred plants for the ancestress, plants that bestow on a hamlet stability and protection from wild spirits and sorcery (see Akin 1996). Babala’s grandmothers, in their day, drew on these same plants to strengthen their group for warfare. “We women,

these are like our shrines," Babala explained to me. "Men sacrifice pigs in the shrines; well, tending these sacred plants, this is *our* thing." As spirits sometimes will with a favorite descendant, Lastgasp began pressuring Babala to become even more taboo, to take on more powers (and with them more dangers) as had her grandmothers. Babala was afraid and for years she refused, but in the early 1990s, she fell into a paralyzing depression, unable to socialize or work properly. When I left Kwaio in 1992, I feared I would not see her alive again. However, after two years of intensive family support, some seventy pigs sacrificed, and numerous suicide watches, divinations finally discovered all of the many causes of her illness, including that she was under spiritual attack by Lastgasp's four insane sisters. Babala now agreed to comply with Lastgasp's wishes and become taboo for her, though she steadfastly refused to take on the spirit's most dangerous powers, especially the fighting magics.

Babala emerged from her long illness with a new role, revived from her grandmothers, as Lastgasp's most direct medium of communication with the world of the living—questions are put to her, upon which she slips into trance and speaks Lastgasp's answers (via her grandmothers' spirits as intermediaries). Soon people began to visit Babala from elsewhere to pose questions to the ancestress, and by the mid-1990s she was gaining influence. She discovered men's ritual errors, exposed several women concealing taboo violations, and more than once, she influenced the timing of rituals and feasts, normally a prerogative of the most senior men. Now and then, especially if someone is ill, Babala will blurt out hidden information from the ancestress—unprompted by any questions—more than once creating uncomfortable situations: "When my teenagers go to visit someone who is sick, they'll say to me, 'Oh, mom, if you don't come along that will be all right—you might get possessed.' " Despite her overall success as a medium, some men and even more women question whether Babala is really being possessed by Lastgasp or perhaps, instead, by some foreign spirit impersonating the ancestress (a *buru*, see Akin 1996). But, no one questions Babala's sincerity.

Beti now looked for answers from Babala, who recalled her plea:

She said to me, "I've come to you because you say things [in trance] and they turn out to be true, and I want you to find out what has been happening to me. I'm afraid even to be in the house, because all I can think about is that I might urinate, or something might make me menstruate. When I sleep in the menstrual hut, nothing happens to me, and I'm not afraid, but when I come back to the family house to sleep there I'm afraid again. I think: Might something happen to me? Maybe an ancestor is causing this. I want you to find out." And so I went into trance, and I told out what it was, "Oh my, that ancestor's pig! They just ate it there at your husband's place. It was long ago. . . ."

What Babala revealed in her trance stunned the community: The spirit said that Beti's many violations had been caused by one of her ancestors, who was angry. Indeed, it was Lastgasp's own nephew, Hog-Nine. Hog-Nine was upset because, before Beti married, a relative and coresident of her future husband had stolen one of Hog-Nine's sacred fo'ota pigs and had treated it like any old pig, butchering and eating it in the family clearing. Now Hog-Nine wanted to know—what did his descendant Beti think she was doing living with these thieves who had desecrated his sacred pig? In his anger, Hog-Nine had not only caused her incessant violations, but he had also possessed her and made her *forget* committing them. Beti was thus blameless for failing to report them.

The implications of Babala's revelation were dramatic. If it was to be believed, culpability had fallen suddenly away from Beti—by now, the quintessential bad woman—and settled squarely on her husband's family, the very people who had so vilified her. This spirited defense turned the situation on its head so that now Beti was said to have been victimized by *their* errors, by their careless theft and handling of a sacred pig. Instigating this situation was of course firmly in character for Hog-Nine, who, while mortal, had punished innocent women for his own misdeeds, and, as a spirit, has continued causing guiltless women to violate taboos, often due to his anger at actions of men. But for him to act to the degree he had and for as long as he did in this case was unprecedented.

Beti, ecstatic at this sudden exoneration, hurried back to her hamlet, confident, as she now tells it, that residents would initiate an investigation so the situation could be repaired and put behind them. After all, a pig theft, particularly one that took place so long ago, would be easy enough to put right. But Beti's husband's family saw things differently, and, in retrospect, it was perhaps naive of Beti to expect that they would embrace her moral coup and place themselves in her debt for having caused her so much grief. Moreover, the hamlet's previous "bad woman," Beti's sister-in-law, had also been a descendant of Hog-Nine, and Babala's revelation might easily be extended to explain her tragic case as well. In any case, a meeting was held to talk through the matter. The men of Beti's husband's group would not admit to having stolen any pig of Hog-Nine's, and in truth they may well not have known if a pig stolen so long before had belonged to the ancestor. But people were nonetheless intrigued with the idea that such a theft might explain Beti's bizarre behavior. Most upset by the turn of events were the group's women, and one of them broke up the meeting by angrily pronouncing a deadly curse against anyone attempting to divine the truth of the alleged pig theft, thereby blocking the most obvious path to resolution.¹¹ This brought the investigation to a screeching halt, and everyone reluctantly agreed that Beti now must return to her family, that the marriage was now finished.

But this conclusion was premature. As Beti prepared to return home, Dimirii, our diviner and taboo consultant, came forward with an ingenious alternate solution to settle the issue and perhaps save the marriage. His plan was that Beti would live away from her husband's hamlet for six months, or perhaps a year. If during that time away her violation problems did not recur, then people in the hamlet would know that Babala's revelation was true, that the problems had been not with Beti but were, rather, a symptom of Hog-Nine's anger at Beti living with her husband's people. Beti's husband agreed to the plan, which people quickly labeled Beti's "trial" or "court." Initially, Dimirii proposed that she return to her own family for the test, but strain had been growing between Beti and her kin as she persisted in ignoring their requests that she leave the marriage. Now her older brother, weary of the bad treatment she had received, and also of losing so many pigs to repair her violations, told Beti that if she came back home he would forbid her ever returning to her husband. This she rejected, and so it was decided that she would spend the experimental period living with Dimirii and his wife. This test was in essence a novel, alternative form of divining whether or not Babala's pig theft explanation was true, a test impossible for anyone to block with a curse. As many saw it, this would also be a test of Babala's still uncertain status as a medium.

Dimirii and his wife optimistically welcomed Beti to their hamlet with the gift of a young pig to raise. In the months that followed, though Beti did break a few taboos, she was now conscious of the errors and reported them all, and she committed no more errors than normal for a woman. After six months, Dimirii visited Beti's husband and asked if she could now return to him. The husband declined, saying he had still not found the cause of his continuing illness and he wanted that settled first. A year passed, and Dimirii confronted him again with his wife's continued propriety: "Maybe you don't want her any more. Maybe you just want to let her go back to her family." Beti's husband insisted he still wanted her but that he was still seeking the reason for his bad health. Meanwhile, as time passed and Beti had no further problems, more and more people began to accept that Hog-Nine was behind it all.

Over the next year, however, Beti's husband's health worsened, and he was taken to a hospital in the capital of Honiara. When he returned to Kwaio he stayed—barely able to walk—near a coastal Adventist mission hospital to await recovery. Beti, who had remained in limbo, joined him there, at first intermittently, and then full-time. Both had high hopes that their marriage would come together again. Beti and most of the community believed she had now been vindicated, and her husband too now acknowledged the truth of Babala's revelation, that they must indeed have spoiled one of Hog-Nine's pigs:

That's who made her lose her sense. That's who made her break all of those taboos. If I was up and about, if I could walk, I would try to fix it up. I would take pigs and shell money, a taro plant and a coconut up there to give to [the priest who sacrifices to Hog-Nine for Beti's people] to perform a sacrifice to that ancestor. But I can't walk right now.

When I left Kwaio, things were finally looking up for Beti. The last time I saw her, she told me triumphantly, "I took them all to court, and I won."

Cooling down the spirits

Beti's case brings forward several themes that rarely enter into studies of menstrual taboos. Here I highlight two: the degree to which Kwaio women's taboos cannot be understood in terms of straightforward gender divisions or antagonisms, and how this and recognition of the creative and dynamic nature of the taboo system can help us understand the direction in which that system is now moving.

Apparent throughout the case is the ambivalence that both men and women feel concerning women's taboo violations. And little wonder, given the deleterious effects such violations have on their lives. Earlier I described how violations are seen to leave women indebted to men because of the toll they take on men's wealth, labor, and health. This is true both in individual cases and for women generally, but the indebtedness and social disruption generated by taboo violations defy any easy understanding based simply on divisions between men and women. First of all, a woman's violations can leave her indebted not just to men but also to other women: those who have invested labor in raising the men's pigs that have to be sacrificed and who may contribute pigs from their own herd toward repairing the violations; those who lose and must help replace polluted gardens and (to a lesser extent) polluted houses; and those who suffer emotionally from these losses and when men of their hamlet become ill (women seldom sicken due to other women's errors). Second, men's taboo violations—either accidental errors in performing rituals, or, as we saw in our case, intentional acts such as thefts or curses that go awry and anger ancestors—can also cause serious community problems. These, especially negative repercussions from intentional acts, can leave men indebted to other men and, indeed, indebted to women who suffer the consequences. The larger point here is that taboo violations, and the troubles and tensions they bring, are not simply "a problem of women" but a ubiquitous "problem of people" (Strathern 1981:170).

And, yet, as taboo violations began to escalate in the 1940s, the burdens of this problem began shifting more heavily onto women, and over time a qualitative change occurred in the nature of the indebtedness, individual culpability, and inequality that communities had to come to

terms with. The frequency of women's errors, and the level and breadth of antisociality implied by widespread charges of concealment, were unprecedented, as was the social debt left in their wake.

In Kwaio today few men appear to consciously apply taboos as a regular weapon of domination. Nonetheless, one can usefully take a Foucauldian perspective here and assess the modern system of women's taboos—particularly the indebtedness that violations impose on women—as a means of disciplinary control that has replaced the violence that men once monopolized. As such, it is potentially more efficient, effective, and inclusive than violence ever was. That is, in the past those men inclined to employ violence against a woman had to assert that she was deserving of it in some way, and against many women this was difficult or impossible to argue. So, for example, if a man assaulted his wife without reason, her kin would quickly come to her aid, likely demanding that compensation be paid. By contrast, today nearly every woman—from the most marginal to the most senior and respected—voluntarily reports taboo violations on a fairly regular basis. Women's indebtedness has become ubiquitous.

Approaching the system of women's taboos as a mechanism of power and dominance (and hopefully it is clear by now that much more is at work here) provides insights into the system's workings. To fully understand such mechanisms, however, one must comprehend not only how they succeed but also how they come to fail. Once set in motion, they can develop a dynamic and momentum of their own that generate unforeseen consequences that in the end transcend and seriously undermine the interests of those who initiated them. And this can occur independently of any concerted resistance by the subjugated persons. In the Kwaio case, as we have seen, the costs of taboo violations today can quickly escalate to where they swallow up any conspicuous benefits of control that might accrue to men or to senior women. When wives, daughters, or sisters are found to violate taboos frequently, both the men and women involved pay a heavy price. And the costs are, of course, not only economic—reckoned in terms of pigs, shell money, houses, gardens, and labor—but also social: the declining quality of people's lives, the pall of suspicion that can hang over troubled hamlets, broken marriages and families. On a larger scale, the Kwaio mountain community as a whole is undermined. The greatest threat to that community today, as most people see it, is the steady loss of members to coastal Christian communities. When I first visited Kwaio in 1979 there was near parity between Christians and non-Christians, but today the latter are greatly outnumbered. Many who have descended to the coast and the churches have done so in a desperate flight from incessant taboo violations and angry ancestors.

It is important to stress here that most women find life in the mountains rewarding, and, all else being equal, would

not opt to leave their homes to move to large Christian villages. They well know that upon their arrival they will encounter multiple schemes of inequality in the villages that are more encompassing and, many find, more oppressive than any found in the mountains. Within these various hierarchies they will occupy bottom tiers as women, cash-poor, newcomers, and heathens-of-late. Moreover, I must reiterate that for most mountain women today, regular taboo violations and their repair are fairly routinized, a far cry from the dreadful situation in which Beti was trapped. Most do not want to leave. Nonetheless, a significant number of women, burdened by unremitting violations and accusations, have seen little choice but to flee, and—I think this is instructive—most often their husbands have gone with them. In some areas the taboo system as it currently stands has grown untenable, and it threatens to self-destruct.

Most Kwaio are baffled as to how things arrived at this state of affairs, the troubles being unintended consequences wrought through mostly unrecognized mechanisms. Asking why so many women violate taboos sometimes elicits half-hearted pronouncements (from both men and women) about how decadent women are today, or vague indictments of malignant foreign forces or resentful ancestors; one fellow even dryly suggested that today's women drink too much water. These explanations scarcely seem adequate to the scale of the problem, even to those who proffer them.

But Kwaio are hardly people to sit on their hands and fret, and by now it should not surprise readers to learn they have been working away at the problem through religious experimentation, with some success. In Beti's case we saw two innovative solutions to religious predicaments: Babala's tranced revelation and Dimirii's subsequent novel plan for a controlled test of that revelation. These two creative acts have reached beyond Beti's case: When Beti passed Dimirii's test and her errors were reclassified from *causative* to *symptomatic* of community problems, other women took notice. And, when I last left Kwaio two other women who had been suffering chronic violations had just relocated to test whether their problems, like Beti's, were due to the acts of the men they lived with. Both were descendants of Hog-Nine, and in both cases a hidden theft of one of his fo'ota pigs was suspected. Unlike Beti, however, these women were unmarried, and it was their brothers who were suspected of having been the thieves (thereby unknowingly desecrating their own ancestor). As had Beti's husband, the brothers encouraged the experiment. These cases illustrate the eagerness of both women and men to find ways out of crippling cycles of accusation and confession that demoralize and damage their communities.

A more widespread and important innovation has been diffusing through Kwaio at a gradual but accelerating rate since at least the 1970s: a category of new magics known generically as *gwari*. *Gwari* literally means "cold," expressing what these magics do: They "cool down" ancestral spirits

so those users can violate their taboos with lesser or no repercussions. The magics make the spirits temporarily complacent in ways that bring drugging to mind. Not all gwari are new, and each important ancestor has his or her own personal gwari that has long been used by descendants in rituals to mitigate errors and more generally to keep volatile spirits under control. The gwari varieties spreading now, however, are not part of local ancestral traditions but are being purchased and otherwise acquired specifically to dampen modern ancestral worries about women's taboo violations.¹² When I first arrived in Kwaio in 1979, and as I observed into the 1980s, many people in central-eastern Kwaio where I lived were wary of overusing these magics. As a friend explained:

If you just use gwari once to mollify your ancestors, and that is the only time, then it is all right. Though you are hiding from them they really know what you are doing. And yet they will still protect you. But suppose you do it all the time . . . eventually your ancestors will get angry and say, "Hey you! What are you doing playing with me with that stuff all the time? You can get your gwari to protect you, because I'm leaving you!"

In the early 1980s, only people in southern Kwaio heavily used the newer gwari varieties, and my neighbors pointed a disparaging finger south at this decadent and shabby treatment of ancestors. The same man continued: "I want my ancestors to be powerful. Why would I want to cool them down? That's what we say. I want my ancestors to be strong so they can protect me, so why should I perform gwari to make them weak and senile? That's not for me." Kwaio believe generally that obtaining true power requires personal sacrifice, and facile gwari use to avoid having to rigorously observe taboos can weaken not only one's ancestors but also oneself (see Akin 1996).

But many Kwaio have been changing their minds. The pressures of persistent women's violations and their great costs have led to increased importation and experimentation with gwari, with different types varying in what they will allow one to get away with (to date, few allow all women's violations to be fully ignored). New varieties are emerging that people claim will mute *only* ancestral anger at women's violations and, otherwise, will not affect the spirits. Many who once condemned gwari use now possess their own, some secretly, some openly and enthusiastically. Today, it is no longer only antisocial "bad women" who are concealing women's taboo violations from the spirits; now it is entire communities.

Although in some areas, the problem of women's violations is being greatly diminished through gwari use, many families still steadfastly refuse to employ the magics, with women among the most ardent opponents. Some groups have tried different varieties only to be called up short by one particular ancestor: Hog-Nine. He forbids many of his

central and northern Kwaio descendants to use any of the new magics and, in the late 1980s, he went so far as to kill one of his own senior priests for daring to try. Nevertheless, although many men and women continue to disparage the use of the magics, each time I return to Kwaio I am startled by how many more people have embraced them. It is quite possible that by next time I visit, the Pandora's box of chronic women's taboo violations, opened nearly sixty years ago, will have been firmly closed.

Notes

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1. Monographs about Melanesian taboos surrounding bodily substances include Hogbin 1996 and Meigs 1984 (see also Strathern 1972:ch. 7). Several excellent studies have emerged from Huli, where Glasse once reported that "the wife's failure to observe menstrual taboos is the commonest source of marital discord" (1968:73). Clark 1993 and Clark and Hughes 1995 examine Huli extensions of pollution concepts to gold mining and sexually transmitted diseases. Wardlow 2000:ch. 5 explores changing Huli ideas about female pollution and provides illuminating case studies. Frankel 1986:ch. 7 looks at female pollution as an explanation of illnesses in both older and recent Huli contexts, with case summaries. Elsewhere, Goodale (1995:153–154, and personal communication 2000) has described menstrual ritual introduced to Kaulong in the 1960s, and Stewart and Strathern 2002 notes the historical arrival of a female spirit cult in Pangia that includes ritualization of menstruation and menstrual huts.

2. This is one reason early missionaries and other Europeans, focused as they were on taboos themselves, sometimes saw Malaitan religions as wholly amoral. Another class of social rules prohibit behaviors all Kwaio *do* denounce as inherently wrong, such as certain sexual improprieties or stealing from kin. Interestingly, ancestral spirits are uninterested in these rules per se, except when violations spark conflicts among their descendants.

3. Many women have special menstrual machetes, cooking pots, and, increasingly, and to men's dismay, clothing carried up from the coast on jungle trails that skirt hamlets and gardens. Interestingly, secular shell money may be kept in menstrual huts (where thieves dare not go).

4. Pollution involving men's bodily wastes, a concern in some New Guinea societies (e.g., Hogbin 1996; Meigs 1978), is a bit of a red herring in Kwaio. The relevant taboos apply to very limited contexts and are of little concern. They are easy to follow, and violations are quite rare.

5. Accurate statistics are unobtainable because a great many violations, especially reported ones, are private hamlet matters (though few are actively concealed). Thus, true violation rates exceed the high frequency that is apparent. As discussed later, some areas no longer suffer high rates.

6. In this way the violation scenario can express the tragic Kwaio "importation scenario" that I have examined elsewhere, in which foreign entities—here in-married women—bring about the ruin of importers and their kin. The parallel extends further: Women's violations, like the importation scenario itself, are favorite topics of *kastom* political meetings (Akin 1996, n.d.). Changes in marriage are also important—I cannot elaborate here, but discovered violations by married women both express and generate affinal tensions, and their increase is intertwined with a multifaceted weakening of institutions that once integrated intermarrying groups. Wives now find it more difficult to gain an "insider" status in their husbands' families.

7. Knowledge of this case comes from extensive interviews with principals and others, and participant-observation since 1979. Basic facts of the case are public knowledge locally, but I have omitted some sensitive aspects. None of the omitted material weakens the argument made here.

8. Parallels between such "recovered memories" of guilt and those of persons falsely confessing satanic child abuse in Western societies are striking and include people being charged with abusing family members and convinced by interrogators that their victims can recover only if they confess; accusers and interrogators who are family or friends; and confessions being subsequently elaborated to divulge still more heinous antisocial acts. In both Western and Kwaio cultures some people appear more vulnerable to this trap (see, e.g., Wright 1994).

9. Hog-Nine's brief marriage to the woman ended when he had sex with her and killed her, having putted a piece of sharp flint to the end of his penis. Her family explained his error to him and gave him the dead woman's sister to marry. With her he had eight sons, four of whom died acting as only crazy men would, mirroring Lastgasp and her seven sisters—four of whom were crazy.

10. Note that such women are not "more male" in the sense of being exempt from observing women's taboos or taking part in men's shrine or men's-house rituals (cf. Poole 1981). Other women's female substances, however, become more dangerous to them, and like Lastgasp in her day, they wield kinds of agency—including fighting magics and divinations—normally controlled by men. Also like Lastgasp, these women are remembered for episodes of flouting men's authority.

11. To my knowledge, whether Beti's sister-in-law might have been similarly victimized was not discussed until later. It is now widely believed that it was *her* husband who actually stole the pig; the woman who cursed against further divination was his sister. Pig stealing is great sport in Kwaio and men in Beti's hamlet had certainly taken their share over the years. Rules govern theft of fo'ota pigs: Ideally, a purloined pig is stashed in the jungle alive and the thief awaits news of its status, especially whether it is a fo'ota belonging to one of his own ancestors. If so, the beast is either turned loose or delivered to a priest of the spirit to be sacrificed and eaten in a suitable manner. Even if thieves mishandle a fo'ota, ancestors normally do not punish its owners if they raise a replacement. But spirits generally dislike their descendants socializing closely with people who have wronged them, and Hog-Nine is notoriously easy to offend.

12. Another wave of gwari magics diffused through Kwaio beginning in the early 1930s and they are now well established. They allowed an easing of childbirth taboos, particularly by shortening the duration of maternal seclusion. See Akin 1996 for a discussion of *parana* magics Kwaio use to mitigate taboos while living abroad. Much innovation in taboos occurs through a process that is not explored here: the piecemeal expansion and contraction of categories of things and actions to which specific taboos do or do not apply (see Akin 1993:ch. 7).

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