

## **The institution of the men's house and making of men**

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**A Kayan men's house**

### **Abstract**

Cultural up-bringing and the process of socialisation have imprints on how people behave toward one another. Much of the difference between women and men's roles are based on gender stereotyped scripts underpinned by the society's process of socialisation of the members of the community. One of the traditional institutions which was considered sacrosanct was the men's house, where boys underwent intuition rites and rituals to be transformed as men. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that though many communities no longer have institutional forms of socialisation, the animosity or rivalry that still exist between men and woman could be linked to their up-bringing as males and females.

### **Introduction**

Traditionally to be considered an adult male or female in many Papua New Guinea societies, required a process of socialisation through established rituals. For the young men, especially along the North Coast Region of Madang, the men's house was the centre of learning, character building and formation of the young male initiates. As Bem (1993), Money and Tucker, (1975) and Zilbergeld, (1992) suggest, the social construction of masculinity begins as soon as boys are born and continues for the rest of their life.

### **What does the literature say?**

There is a body of literature specifically about Papua New Guinea which connects male character and power to the men's house. The men's house is elevated as the nerve centre of character building of boys to 'manhood'. Herdt (1981) writes that the rituals associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood have been a major focus of anthropological studies of masculinity in Papua New Guinea. He also argues that, in New Guinea societies in general (and Sambia in particular), gender roles and norms are legitimised and mystified, and surrounded by notions of religiosity; ritual and tradition at every turn. According to Herdt, these 'rituals of manhood' involved the radical separation of boys from any contact with women and fostered male sociality and bonding. Other anthropological studies such as by Allen (1967), Whiting (1941), Meggit (1964), Glasse (1965, 1962) Godelier (1986), Langness (1974), Strathern (1988), Gillison (1980), and Tuzin, (1980) also speak of this concept which is prevalent among Melanesian societies. In order to be a 'man', a young boy must undergo rituals of cleansing oneself of female contaminated blood. Central to this concept of 'manhood' was the notion that getting rid of women's polluting nature through ritual means of shedding female blood was vital to male masculinity.

Drawing from the anthropological works cited, a discussion on the type of lessons and instructions delivered by the men's house as an institution of character formation and transformation is necessary. This will be discussed under the following headings:

1. Men's house and transmission of knowledge
2. Putting on the character of the men's house
3. Men's house generates sounds of male power

#### **1. Men's house and transmission of knowledge**

According to Kayan elders of the North Coast of Madang, Bogia District, in the past, a men's house was a place where young men received knowledge of how to be a 'man'. In *Tok Pisin* one elder said, '*hausman, em ples wei ol yangpela i bin kisim skul bilong kamap pikinini man*'; translated as, in the past, the men's house was a place, where young boys received lessons of how to be a 'man'. This means that a male child must not be an effeminate person. He must be transformed to become a strong man, ready to protect and defend the clan.

The men's house contained a body of knowledge that young boys needed to learn. First on the list of lessons or instructions was that, in order to become a 'man', the young initiates were taught lessons of how to protect themselves from the power of women, especially, menstrual blood. They were instructed to observe taboos, which would shield them from coming in contact with women's menstrual blood or blood from childbirth. These taboos they should also observe after initiation if they wanted to hold on to their power and masculinity. A similar observation is offered by Sillitoe, of the Wola men who fear that women may poison them with menstrual blood; the Melpa men believe that menstrual blood and anything associated with birth can pollute and

kill them. Sillitoe also continues that for this reason the Iatmul upon introducing the boys to the men's house world, were separated from females (Sillitoe 1998). The Baruya have an attitude about women's blood, that it is lethal, polluting, and dangerous and a permanent threat to men's strength. The same sentiments are shared by Sambia (ref. also Herdt 1981; 1987). For the Sambia, menstrual blood is dirty, and they rank it with those other polluting, repugnant substances, urine and faeces. Above all, though, it is a substance that weakens women whenever it flows from them, and it would destroy men's strength if ever it came into contact with their bodies (Godelier 1982, p. 58). There is a correlation that the idea of women's bodies coming in contact with men's house would disempower the power of the men's house, the source of male masculine powers.

Hogbin's (1996) study entitled *'The island of menstruating men'*, gives a good ethnographic account of the practice of penile incision among the Wokeo Islanders of the East Sepik Province. This regular blood-shedding clearly symbolises, or better, mirrors the female menstruation. This ritual took place in the men's house. Another anthropologist, Meggit wrote that 'a menstruating woman can sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, turn his blood black, corrupt his vital juices so that his skin darkens and wrinkles as his flesh wastes, permanently dull his wits, and eventually lead him to a slow decline and death' (Meggit 1964, p.207). A similar view is offered by Kuchler (2002, p.38) that the skin is thought of as a substance that is life-giving because it absorbs heat and retains water. So when the skin is not retaining water, the skin loses complexion and shrinks, leading to eventual death. These stories attest to the fact that the institution of the men's house had and still has some influence on the men's social behavior towards women in communities such as the Kayan.

Since the days of ancestors, among the Kayan, the men's houses have been socially powerful icons and considered as agents imbued with power of social control. In this capacity, the men's house is regarded as a source of male power from where instructions on masculinity germinate.

## **2. Putting on the character of the men's house**

Among the many practical aspects of socialisation provided by the men's house; there were those ceremonies and teachings concerned with initiates' economic duties and rights and responsibilities. Boys were taught to be strong providers and defenders of the clan and were to put on the character of their respective clan's men's house. As an example, a Kayan elder stated that one of Kayans' clan, the Kainmbat clan, bears the character of 'doers of good' or 'peace makers'. Other clans also had their own character such as 'murderers' (warriors) or 'thieves' (ref: Poser 2008, p.76).



### **Young men carrying logs to erect a new men's house**

In referring to the men's house, very often the expression, '*haus-boi bilong mipela*', in *Tok Pisin*, is used, translated as, our men's house, an expression never uttered by women. It is an expression or statement which demonstrates male clan members' solidarity to a men's house, and the characteristics of their respective men's house. For example, a man from one of the clans uttered that, in the former times, their men's house was renowned for carrying spears, meaning, taking the lead in fighting in defence of the community. The men's house was considered an institution of producing men of valour and strong character who can withstand pain. Poser writes that in the past as part of the ceremony of initiation, the young boy would have to walk through a wall of fire to reach the inside of the men's house, and then he would be beaten with bundles of nettle-stalks and leaves. Inside the men's house, the young boy would be beaten with a stick while lying on a slit drum/garamut. The garamut would be beaten throughout the ceremony to cover the cries of the boy (Poser 2008, p.129). These rituals of empowering male masculinity however were abandoned upon the arrival of colonial contact and are only talked about by a few male elders of the community. In these conversations they compare the social responsibilities of young men of today as lacking knowledge of being masculine, a social transformation which they themselves had received from the men's house.

More conversations with the elders also revealed that in the past, it was in the men's house that warriors gathered before going to a fight, or headhunting. There they placed the spears on top of the spirit garamut which was in the men's house in order to harness the power of the spirits. While this is no longer the practice, other forms of harnessing the power of the spirits of the men's house have emerged such as during the finals of a soccer competition, members of various teams slept in their respective clan men's houses. This can be interpreted as they wanted to harness the power of the spirits of the men's house to play football and win.

Tuzin (1980), writing about the men's houses of the Ihalita of the East Sepik people, also suggests that the *haus tambaran* or men's houses where initiation

rituals take place, are primarily concerned with creating men. Furthermore, he offers the view that the art, architecture and the ritual of the tambaran serve as a grand, unifying nature of man, his place in the social order, and cultural meanings of his acts. According to Tuzin the central beneficiaries of the tambaran rituals of the men's house are men.

### **3. Men's house generates sounds of male power**

In the past, the imposing features of the men's houses were visible representations or metaphors of male power because they were technological constructions by men. Not only that, but also the sounds coming from the men's house produced by garmut, flutes and bullroar generated an aura of mysticism rendering these places elusive with mysterious powers. These sounds were often referred to as voices of the spirits or tambaran. According to Kulick, the flutes are the voice of the tambaran, of the gods, and they manifest the power and glory of manhood in general and of the clan in particular (Kulick (1992, p.164), see also Lutkehaus (1995), Yamada (1997), Godelier (1986), and Niles (2010).

In some communities such as at Kayan, the men's house acts as the sanctuary where only men discuss important matters concerning the clan or the community. These important matters, according to one Kayan elder, are matters concerning land, hunting grounds, fishing and gardening areas and sago patches that are owned by respective clans or families.

Doubleday (2008) writes an interesting article on *Sounds of power and musical instruments and gender*, discussing relations of various groups of the world. The article reflects on the agency of musical instruments in constructing gendered meanings and power. She points out that, through their presence and through the sounds they produce, they have a special ability to transform consciousness. To possess or play a musical instrument is to wield power. Citing Doubleday, it can be said that since flutes, garmut and other sound producing instruments are kept in the men's house; it gives monopoly to men in the use of these instruments. In this way men keep women at a distance and claim possession and ownership in asserting their power. This separation can be interpreted as a consequence of radical expropriation by the men of the creative powers that had formerly belonged to women, and of which men have, legitimately it is said, dispossessed them (see Beben 1990, p.79).

### **Conclusion**

What lessons can be drawn from this discussion?

As pointed out at the beginning, in many communities in Papua New Guinea, the making of men is strongly linked to the men's house. It was in the men's house that young boys were socialised and transformed not only physically but more so in their mental capacity to think and behave as masculine persons. Though these days, young men no longer undergo initiation rituals in the men's house, the concept of the ideal male masculinity is still endorsed openly in

opposition to women. Women are talked about as mothers, home makers, and are to be submissive to men. Therefore, a general statement can be made that, the men's house inscription of 'traditional' conceptions of masculinity legitimises new forms of power in the contemporary context such as making it difficult for women's voice of representation to be in positions of leadership.

Kilavanwa (2004) also points out that gender and leadership in Melanesia are socially constructed and culturally bound. Therefore, much of the difference between women and men's leadership approaches were based on gender stereotyped scripts underpinned by the society's socialisation process. Subsequently it can be suggested that in spite of the fact that few male initiations are taking place anymore, nevertheless the inscription of the men's house being an institution of making boys into men is still lived and expressed in the behaviour and attitude of men towards women.

Finally, it can be stated that, though the men's house is no longer the influential institution of making boys into men, the concept of male power and division of gender roles is still animated by the type of behaviour and attitude displayed by men towards women.

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