



Engendering Objects

Dynamics of Barkcloth and Gender among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea

Anna-Karina Hermkens



Engendering objects explores social and cultural dynamics among Maisin people in Collingwood Bay (Papua New Guinea) through the lens of material culture. Focusing upon the visually stimulating decorated barkcloths that are used as male and female garments, gifts, and commodities, it explores the relationships between these cloths and Maisin people. The main question is how barkcloth, as an object made by women, engenders people's identities, such as gender, personhood, clan and tribe, through its manufacturing and use.

This book describes in detail how barkcloth (tapa) not only visualizes and expresses, but also materializes and defines, people's multiple identities. By 'following the object' and how it is made and used in the performance of life-cycle rituals, in exchanges and in church festivities, this interaction between people and things, and how they are mutually

constituted, becomes visible. How are women's bodies and minds linked with the production of barkcloth? How do cloths produced by women both establish and contest clan identity? In what ways is the commodification of barkcloth related to gender dynamics? Barkcloth and its associated designs show how gender ideologies and the socio-material constructions of identity are performed and, as such, developed, established and contested.

In contributing to the current debates on the anthropology of 'art', this study offers an alternative way of understanding the significance of an object, like decorated barkcloth, in shaping and defining people's identities within a local colonial and postcolonial setting of Papua New Guinea.

"Engendering Objects is among the most comprehensive and innovative new works emerging from Melanesia [...] the book is a theoretically provocative, accessible and

compelling portrait of changing life in a Papua New Guinean village society." – John Barker (Univ. of British Columbia)

"This book makes a most welcome contribution to the study of the materiality by showing how gender is performed in the sensuous terms of clothing, food, and the exchange of objects. Anna-Karina Hermkens accomplishes this with enviable care and intellectual resources, and a prose and ethnography that make the book a pleasure to read." – David Morgan (Duke University)

Anna-Karina Hermkens:
Engendering objects. Dynamics of Barkcloth and Gender among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea

- ISBN: 978-90-8890-145-4
- Language: English
- 386 pages (37 in colour)
- Price: € 39,95 (Incl. VAT, excl. Shipping)
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