THE USES OF KNOWLEDGE IN KWAIO SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

Among the Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands, as elsewhere, knowledge is a source of power. The distinctiveness of the political economy of knowledge (Keesing 1982a, 1987c) in Kwaio society lies largely in the openness of the knowledge that constitutes a means of power, religious and secular: the relative absence of esoteric knowledge and the relative flexibility of the structures through which access to culturally valued information can be gained. Kwaio women have at least potential access to knowledge of ancestors, magic and ritual which in many Melanesian societies would be closed from their view. Almost anyone, then, could have the kind of knowledge that would give them power, yet few acquire it.

These processes will be explored by examining the remarkable case of Maenaa’adi of Furisi’ina, a young man who in structural terms had an unpromising start toward acquiring power through knowledge. Too often, I think, we Melanesianists focus on prototypical cases, and we depict a tribal landscape populated with Big Men and their followers, stereotypic leaders and led. Maenaa’adi typifies, for Kwaio, the improbable but possible.

KWAIO TRADITIONALISTS

Some 2000 Kwaio speakers have defiantly resisted the christianisation and westernisation that have transformed the Solomons. Integrated through plantation labour into the world system for more than a century, forcibly pacified in the 1920s, subjected to invasive evangelistic Christianity for some 80 years and taxation for 65, and now reluctantly integrated into the postcolonial state, the Kwaio traditionalists still battle for the right and means to follow ancestral ways. The traditionalists scattered through the mountains above the east coast are separated by gulfs of politics and religion from the Christian villagers along the coast (Keesing 1968, 1989), and remain largely cut off from the medical, educational and economic services provided by government and missions.

In the 1980s Kwaiopagans have been locked in political struggle with the postcolonial government, claiming vast sums as compensation for a 1927 British punitive expedition and refusing to allow elections or legal intervention (Keesing 1990). The movement, with millenarian overtones and expectations of American assistance, represents a continuation of a century of resistance against invasion and external control and interference with custom. In earlier phases of this struggle, ships were looted and missionaries and government officers assassinated (Keesing and Corris 1980); for the past sixty years, active and passive resistance has been mobilised against external domination. From the 1940s, when the anti-colonial Maasina Rule movement (Keesing 1978b, Laracy 1983) surfaced, Kwaio resistance has incorporated an ideology of codifying “kastom”, hence forcing recognition by the state of the legitimacy of ancestral custom and indigenous law.

FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE

Contemporary Kwaio traditionalists distinguish a category of kastom, which comprises various domains of cultural knowledge and practice having in common their reference to adalo, the ghosts of dead members of the community (Keesing 1982a). Kastom includes ritual procedures, magic, and rules imposed and policed by these spirits, particularly rules regarding pollution; it also includes knowledge of the past as preserved in stories, epic chants, genealogies and histories of lands and shrines. It seems that this loosely articulated conceptual field was culturally distinguished even before the Solomons Pidgin term “custom” provided a label for it, in a context of neo-traditionalist anti-colonial politics (Keesing 1982b). Kwaio use the terms fu‘o‘la (lit. “bunch of things”) or taqii “custom” to refer to what they now class as kastom; and they use sua ‘olanga (lit. “naming things”) to refer to knowledge regarding this realm.

Of these domains of knowledge, only magic is relatively closed. Magic constitutes property over which rights are zealously guarded. One commands knowledge of a magical spell and procedure because it has been learned from someone with a right to know it (normally someone genealogically connected to the adalo who confers the magical powers); one validates this knowledge at the time the magic is performed by reciting a line of descent or kinship connecting magician to ancestor. This must be qualified in three ways: first, some adalo conveying powers of destruction (Keesing 1982a) have abandoned their own descendants in favour of more bloodthirsty congregations; second, some socially positive magic used in ritual sequences is practised openly
and publicly and is potentially usable by anyone; and third, many forms of magic can be bought and sold, with
the buyer reciting a chain of links that included, at the end, someone entitled to know and use the magic
through whom it was acquired.

All other forms of su'a'olanga are potentially open to anyone with the talent and interest and resourcefulness
to learn and use them. But here we need to begin examining the structural constraints that give some a greater
chance of acquiring these special forms of knowledge than others.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF KNOWLEDGE

A Kwaio descent group must maintain the knowledge of ritual procedure, and its genealogical charter,
required to perform sacrifices and stage first-fruit rites, mortuary rites and other collective transactions with
the ancestors. Each group has a priest, a religious officiant who 'holds the shrine'; he is assisted in his duties by
secondary officiants, one of whom kills the pigs to be eaten by women in sacred feasts (Keesing 1982a). The
priest must observe certain taboos beyond those which restrict all ritually adult men; otherwise, he acts only
sporadically as officiant on behalf of his group.

In the absence of written records, a descent group must ensure that the required knowledge of procedure
and genealogies has been passed on to and learned by a potential successor, should the priest die unexpectedly.
An old priest will have groomed a successor – an oldest son, or if there is none, a brother or nephew – over many years. But the older men of the group must provide a sort of backup reservoir of
knowledge to ensure that premature death does not erase information essential to the group's survival. In
theory, the successor to a dead priest is chosen by the ancestors themselves, and discovered through
divination; in practice, particularly should the death have been anticipated, the identity of the successor will be a
foregone conclusion, and the ancestors will make the choice expected of them.

Performing the necessary ritual procedures requires a kind of cookbook knowledge of what to do and say;
it does not demand a deep understanding or global knowledge of the symbolic structures expressed in
fragmentary form in these procedures (Keesing 1982a). To this "operating knowledge" we can contrast what I have
called "expertise", a deeper and more systematic understanding commanded in varying degrees by a
much smaller number of men, and some senior women (Keesing 1985a, 1987b). Perhaps "expert" conveys the
wrong range of connotations here: it is not the sheer extent of knowledge that distinguishes such people,
but the systematicity and analytical depth of their knowledge. (That, of course, is a matter of degree: some
"experts" are more "expert" than others, and those who command unusual knowledge organise and use it in
different ways and may have different and complementary areas of special expertise.) A descent group needs a
competent officiant; it does not need – and seldom has – such an "expert".

Yet there are individuals, mainly men, who actively seek out knowledge far beyond that they would need to
act effectively as religious officiants; indeed, they often are not the priests of their groups. The knowledge
they command, deployed in conjunction with other resources, helps them to exercise power and influence in
and beyond their local groups, and in contexts other than those of ritual and sacrifice.

'Elota (Keesing 1978a), the leading feastgiver of his generation (whose autobiography I have edited and
published ) and Lounga exemplify such expertise and its uses. Each was the oldest son of a prominent leader;
and each was in a strong position to lead a substantial descent group with strong resources and a strategic
territorial base. Each gained his prominence through his talents and ambitions; but structurally, the way lay
open for both to move into positions of leadership and achievement in the prestige economy. Neither was the
priest of his descent group, although each acted as priest for his maternal kin, whose agnates had died out. But
each used his encyclopaedic knowledge of genealogies, history, and the religious system, as viewed from
a global perspective, as a resource in achieving prominence in mortuary feasting (the main arena for prestige
exchange) and in expanding and maintaining regional political influence.

Both were men of striking mental gifts, with keen analytical intelligence and vast powers of memory.
They knew genealogies of a score of groups beyond their own, knew histories of the entire region as
preserved in stories and epic chants. Such knowledge was both a means to strategic ends and an end itself, for
men of rare intellectual ability born into a society that offers limited contexts and genres in which such talents
can be developed and expressed. In 1970, Lounga sat at my tape recorder and produced an encyclopaedic
corpus in which he brilliantly encapsulated domain after domain of Kwaio culture – an extemporaneous Kwaio
PhD thesis.

In 'Elota's autobiographical account, he tells how he sat at the feet of the neighbourhood genealogical
expert Fuita when his young age-mates were off hunting birds or fooling around:

It was Fuita who taught me genealogical knowledge. ... When he used to recite genealogies, the others
all got bored and went away. ... I was the only one of us young people who stayed and listened to him.
He told stories about the old days, and I would stay and listen. He used to recite our genealogical history.
... I listened to him and learned it all. Even today I remember it all and can recount it. He used to ask
us all, "When I recite these genealogies and stories to you, why do you just run away? . . . Even if it
sounds worthless to you now, some day you'll search to find out" (Keesing 1978a:119).

Time after time, when I was recording genealogies from the priests and other elders of descent groups from
'Elota's area, and other parts of the Kwaio mountains, some piece would be forgotten or elided; or some
matrilateral connection would be unknown. 'Elota would then proffer the missing element, or correct what
had been jumbled. I have estimated that of the total of about 8000 individuals who appear in my computerised
Kwaio genealogies, 'Elota would have been able to situate between a third and a half. (His recall of forty
years of feasting transactions and bridewealth contributions was equally amazing.)

ENTRUSTING KNOWLEDGE
An elderly priest or other repository of genealogical, ritual and magical knowledge needs to find safe
hands in which this knowledge can be entrusted, to be passed on to succeeding generations. 'Elota's elderly
neighbour Fuita, frustrated in his efforts to get frivolous young people to learn the knowledge that was theirs
for the taking, so tellingly illustrates this that, for the sake of exposition, I will refer to this as Fuita's problem.

The case of my friend Sulafanamae will serve to show how, seventy years after Fuita passed his
knowledge on to 'Elota, the problem remains problematic. Sulafanamae, priest of his descent group high in
the mountains, was also a master craftsman, one of the last traditionalists making beautiful, finely plaited fibre
combs. I ordered a substantial consignment of the combs; and when the time came to pay for them, I asked
Sulafanamae if he would prefer me to buy something for him. He asked me to buy him a cassette tape
recorder and cassettes. Intrigued by the image of an elderly bachelor pagan priest listening to rock concerts, I
asked him what he had in mind. "Well," he said, "you know my lazy nephews. I've been trying for years to
teach them my magic and the genealogies and ritual, but they are too stupid and lazy to learn them properly.
So I want to record it all on cassettes. Anyway, when I die, they are going to have to perform the mortuary
rituals, and I want to be sure they get it right!" Sulafanamae died in April 1988; no doubt the cassettes have
already been put to use.

It is this dilemma of finding someone to pass knowledge on to with safety, and with assurance that it will
be put to good use, that opens the way to the spread of such knowledge beyond the channels through which it
is ideally supposed to flow from one generation to the next.

POWER AND KNOWLEDGE
How does knowledge bring power? We need to look more closely. 'Elota's strategic uses of genealogical
knowledge, and powers of memory, provide one set of answers. In a society where kinship connection is the
dominant basis for reciprocal obligation and collective action, knowledge of genealogies and of the histories of
social relations and transactions that can be hung on them is enormously useful to a man who aspires to
prominence in prestige feasting and other exchange. Relations of alliance and rivalry, exchange and
obligation, are predicated on kinship connection, even though other motives may lie close to the surface.
Mortuary feasting provides the primary arena for expressing largesse and acquiring prestige; a big man,
Kwaio-style, becomes and remains big by giving larger feasts, more often, than his contemporaries (Keesing
1978a). Those who bury the dead do so ostensibly on the basis of kinship; they then are presented with shell
valuables by the feastgiver and his close kin. Each member of the feastgiving group receives contributions
from members of his or her kindred, again ostensibly expressions of kinship obligation. The man who, like
'Elota, invests widely among his kin, close and distant, and seeks out distant relatives as targets for his
largesse - often citing acts of kinship service in the parental generation - uses his knowledge of kinship to
widen his network of exchange and investment far beyond that maintained by men of lesser stature in the
prestige economy.

Bridewealth contributions also provide an arena for strategic investment, as 'Elota's autobiographical
account shows strikingly. By investing widely in the marriages of his kin, a leader creates far-flung
obligations, both for specific reciprocation (because in theory all such investments, whether in mortuary feasts
or bridewealth, are eventually to be reciprocated exactly and in kind) and for political support and contributions
of labour when needed.

In times of blood-feuding, a leader with such a far-flung network of obligated kin could call upon them for
support and, if need be, protection. Where non-kin were potentially enemies, the kindred of a genealogical
expert such as 'Elota was a kind of expanded circle of safety as well as support. Whereas in my 1963-64
research most adult male respondents could cite 6 to 11 descent group territories to which they had connections
through non-agnatic links, 'Elota could cite 18 (Keesing 1965).

To understand more fully how knowledge is a key to power, we need to move from this essentially secular
analytical framework to one which assumes the magico-religious view of the universe Kwaiio themselves hold.
The living can attain success in their worldly pursuits, whether of gardening, feastgiving, or blood-feuding,
only with ancestral support; at each stage in such activities, magic is performed, propitiatory pigs raised, prayers invoked. A leader asks his ancestors to provide support and protection. Outcomes we, as skeptics, would attribute to skill and human effort, or good luck, are attributed by the Kwaio to magic and ancestral support. There is a powerful circuit of positive feedback here, whereby the man who succeeds (in exchange, in battle, in love) assumes that the ancestors are supporting him; and he plunges ahead into future ventures with a confidence likely to bring further success. The man who thinks he commands strong magic and potent ancestral support has power both in the eyes of his fellows, and in his own.

WOMEN AND KNOWLEDGE OF KASTOM

Those who command expertise need not be oldest sons of prominent leaders of substantial groups. As I have shown elsewhere (Keesing 1982a, 1985a, 1987b), they may be women. Lounga's cousin Fa'afataaa, a woman of formidable mental powers and personal force, is every bit as knowledgeable as he. Although she uses her powers and expertise in arenas that overlap only partially with the wider ones accessible to a male leader, she is a prominent force in the community. So, too, was 'Elota's kinswoman Fenaori, daughter of the strongman Geleniu of Ga'enaafou (Keesing 1978a:95ff).

The circumstances that open the way for a young woman with unusual gifts to develop and express them in this way both parallel and complement the circumstances that give a young man advantages in acquiring knowledge and the power it can bring (Keesing 1982a, 1985a, 1987b). Fenaori's prestige and considerable influence, the enormous respect she commanded for her knowledge of the sacred, and her access to that knowledge, came partly because she was the oldest daughter of an important leader without male heirs. Similarly, the great respect and global knowledge commanded by Boori'au and Faifanageni reflected a confluence of outstanding personal ability and structural advantage. For a woman this advantage may come because she is the last senior member of a descent group and because she has had no senior brothers to inherit the mantle of a powerful father. Kwaio speak approvingly of a senior woman who had learned the sacred knowledge and genealogies of her descent group, who stood at the edge of the shrine and prompted her son— who had succeeded his uncle as priest without the requisite expertise—in ritual procedures and names of ancestors.

Even in a group that remains numerically strong, a senior woman takes a prominent part in the mortuary feasts of her natal group and some of the associated rituals. Typically outliving an older husband, and often the last survivor of her generation, she can acquire great respect and, in a kind of interstitial gender category, considerable sanctity. Such a senior woman, if her talents and inclinations have led her to seek out knowledge as Fa'afataaa has, will be able to use this knowledge with telling effect, as sage, curer, and ritual expert, as earlier she had used this knowledge to participate in the prestige economy and political arenas.

OTHER PATHS TO EXPERTISE: THE CASE OF MAENAA'ADI

Maenaa'adi of Furisi'ina represents a rather different kind of departure from the prototypical expert, the oldest son of a prominent leader of a strong group, parlaying knowledge into power. Even prior to the depredations of the 1927 punitive expedition after the Kwaio assassinated the District Officer and massacred his police patrol (Keesing and Corris 1980), Furisi'ina was a tiny and in itself insignificant descent group, consisting of one adult man, his teen-aged son and daughter, and four young unmarried men. When I first studied the Kwaio in 1963-64, Furisi'ina was reduced to a single family, a father in late middle age, his wife and six children. Tagii'au was a prominent man in the context of neo-traditionalist politics, and a priest sacrificing to several ancient and powerful ancestors. But the viability of Furisi'ina as a political and ritual community came largely because it was one of a cluster of neighbouring descent groups closely allied politically, and interrelated by a tangled skein of common descent from a cluster of ancient ancestors (see Keesing 1970, Figure 5, and 1982, p.78). As priest of Furisi'ina shrine, Tagii'au sacrificed not only on behalf of his family, but on behalf of neighbouring descent groups (principally Giru'i, Ngudu, and Naangari) stronger than his own; and he in turn participated in their sacrifices.

If anyone from Furisi'ina was in a structural position to achieve something like his father's prominence it was his oldest son, who when I first arrived was in his mid thirties, and had assisted his father in sacrifice for many years. The second son had also taken a serious part in ritual. A third son, in his mid twenties, was more interested in panpipe music than matters of ritual. The youngest son Batamani, last born after three daughters, was about ten.

The oldest son, however, is neither terribly bright nor terribly ambitious. He should be able to act competently as priest when his father, old and frail when I last saw him in 1979 but still alive a decade later, finally joins the ancestors. Having assisted Tagii'au for many years, and in the past decade performed most of the physical duties of sacrifice on behalf of his feeble old father, he is thoroughly experienced. The second brother, too, could do the job if ever called upon. But neither is bright enough, energetic enough, or
ambitious enough to seek out the knowledge that could help them achieve more, to distinguish themselves as feastgivers and leaders.

When I returned to Malaita in 1969, I had the means\textsuperscript{11} to intensify my ethnographic coverage of some fifty tiny settlements, scattered over fifteen square miles of jungle-clad mountains, by recruiting several local assistants to provide me with weekly reports. One of the three I chose was Tagi’au’s youngest son Batamani, by then aged about 16. He was obviously very bright, and also had shown a lively interest in my work and in the intricacies of Kwaio custom. For some nine months, Batamani reported to me weekly on events in the dozen or so little descent groups in his part of the mountains. He was my prize assistant, always providing me with at least a dozen events of the sort he knew I was looking for: pollution violations and purificatory sacrifices, pig thefts, illnesses, feasting plans, sexual affairs coming to light, claims for compensation, even domestic quarrels.

In 1977, I was again able to spend much of a year in the Kwaio mountains. By this time Batamani had acquired a new, adult name, Maenaa’adi. I was delighted, but not surprised, to see that as a young man of about 24, he had become a formidable presence in his neighbourhood. Maenaa’adi’s singular talents were dramatically enacted one night in a men’s house across the valley from Furisi’ina, where surrounded by the elders of a cluster of the most powerful descent groups of the Kwaio mountains, he chanted a series of epic chants of the bloody wars and great deeds of the ancestors, in this the Kwaio heartland. Such chants, mostly in some loose sense the “property” of groups other than his own, are pregnant with spiritual significance as well as entertainment value. I have never, before or since, in almost five years of Kwaio ethnography, seen any other man less than fifteen years Maenaa’adi’s senior sing such an epic. They last for several hours, with verse after verse recounting chains of murder and vengeance, great deeds and intricacies of intrigue worthy of the House of Atreus. The named cast of characters in a single epic often runs well over a hundred. For a man so young to know such an epic, let alone several, and to have all the presence and temerity to perform in such a setting before such an audience, suggests what a remarkable young man he was in his twenties.

Not long afterwards, I enlisted Maenaa’adi as a companion when I walked some miles to the north through an interior area I had never visited. We spent two days on the march, visiting a score of communities neither he nor I had seen, and where I was known only by distant reputation. In every settlement we visited, Maenaa’adi pulled out his genealogical calling cards:\textsuperscript{12} comparing notes, finding one or several pathways through which he was connected to our temporary hosts. With some tie established, perhaps only a link to a common ancestor through an in-marrying woman ten generations back, Maenaa’adi would settle into the business of learning about the local cast of characters, their family histories, and such other connections as he could establish. Each settlement we passed through, I sensed, marked for him a potential future connection, an ally or a friend or perhaps a feasting rival.

Our two evenings were spent talking far into the night with our hosts. I was talking about my work, recording fragmentary genealogies, and making linguistic notes about phonological shifts and minor variations in vocabulary due to local word taboos in a different area (Keessing and Fifi’i 1969). With more time to relax around the fire, Maenaa’adi soon had our temporary hosts recounting family histories, stories of old feuds and battles, as well as sorting out genealogical connections.

Along the way, I learned from Maenaa’adi that he had been taught, from various sources in his area of the interior, a substantial array of magic neither his father nor his brothers commanded. He, like ’Elota and Lounga, had sought out knowledge actively; and he had found willing benefactors, quite prepared to pass on what they knew, including magic, to a young man likely to succeed. But here was a young man likely to succeed not because he was an oldest son, not because he was heir to a powerful father, stepping into a role he had been groomed for as leader of a strong group. Here was a youngest son of the only family of a dwindling group, a lad too young to be taken seriously (in a society where many men do not marry or acquire serious purpose in life until well into their 30’s), whose older brothers had already assumed de facto ritual responsibility for the priesthood in place of their feeble old father.

I was able to see Maenaa’adi briefly in Honiara in August in 1986, and noted with pleasure but not surprise that his rise to prominence was continuing on an upward trajectory. Fortunately, I was able to work with him in Honiara for five weeks in late 1988. I was not only able to record seventeen remarkable cassettes from him;\textsuperscript{13} sharing a house with him, I also had several opportunities to see him in action as a leader. A brief updating and expansion of my account is thus possible.

MAENAA’ADI’S ADULT CAREER

At age 35, Maenaa’adi remains unmarried (by choice), but he has become a formidable political presence in “traditional” contexts. Among the cassettes I recorded were several in which he recounts his life story – so that in time, a greatly expanded (self-)account will emerge. (Ralph Bulmer’s collaboration with Saem Majnep has been a guide and an inspiration in my work with Kwaio men and women explicating their lives and culture, and I expect to find further guidance and inspiration as I pursue my collaboration with Maenaa’adi.) A
few notes will clarify the early stages of his path to unusual expertise, and his motivation in seeking
knowledge.

First, Maenaa‘adi is explicit that he was mainly socialised by women, notably his mother’s sister Maa’uri, who raised him. His father had not wanted an eighth child, and had essentially given him up to die - or be raised by someone else. He makes it clear that the senior women of his area together command great magical powers and extensive ritual knowledge, and that they were his main early teachers. He also makes it clear that his work with me as a teen-ager did have an important formative influence, and encouraged him to seek out genealogical and other knowledge.

Maenaa‘adi is deeply concerned with what he sees as loss and decline of his ancestral customs in his lifetime, and with the rising tide of conflict (especially land disputes) among Kwaiio Christians and other Solomon Islanders, which he attributes to the loss and breakdown of ancestral ways. His own kin and neighbouring descent groups were fierce warriors, and he is deeply concerned with the roots and nature - and destructive consequences - of killing and violence. My 1988 tapes, recorded at his behest (I am to be the agent of their preservation and transcription), dwell on the origins of destructive powers and forces in Kwaiio society, in relation to the forces of creativity and production (see Keesing 1985c). His quest for ultimate origins has led him to piece together genealogies for Kwaiio and neighbouring Kwara‘ae going back sixty-five or seventy generations and to learn more than forty epic chants.14

Maenaa‘adi’s knowledge and wisdom have made him a powerful force in settling conflicts and maintaining cohesion in his region. I saw him in action negotiating a settlement, through bridewealth and compensation payments, to a dispute over a seduction (although he had no direct kinship involvement). Maenaa‘adi’s oratorical eloquence, persuasive power, cool reason, and moral force were overwhelming. He is becoming a formidable feastgiver as well. In the realm of ritual, I was surprised to learn that he is now the ancestors’, and his father Tagi’au’s, choice to become a priest when the old man dies. (Indeed, a night spent in the Kwaiio interior in March 1989 allows a further updating: his father Tagi’au had just died, and Maenaa‘adi was keeping the taboos, in preparation for assuming the priestlyhood.)

THE OPENNESS OF KWAIIO KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge of magic, genealogies, history, and ritual - of the intricacies of kastom - provides a means and access to power in secular as well as religious realms. What is most striking about the Kwaiio system is the openness of access to knowledge, in contrast to more hierarchical social systems or, in Melanesia, those that use male initiation, secret cultism, and other forms of information closure to define esoteric realms of knowledge. For the Kwaiio, magic is property, and access to it is limited; virtually all other forms of knowledge, of sacred and secular matter, are potentially open to those who seek such knowledge out and have the intelligence and talent and interest to learn it.

We have to be realistic about the openness of this knowledge, however. It will not do, I think, to say - as Valerio Valeri (1987) does in a comment on a recent paper of mine (Keesing 1987c) - that among the Kwaiio “anyone could, by an act of reflection”, reach the deepest levels of cultural understanding. Individuals differ both in talents and inclinations and in structural position. There are structural filters that in practice make it most likely that the oldest son of a prominent man in a strong group will acquire the greatest store of knowledge, and the means to deploy it effectively to gain power and influence in and beyond his own group; and make such acquisition and use of knowledge less likely to the extent an individual deviates from this prototypical “successor” position.

The case of Maenaa‘adi shows an alternative and structurally improbable path to power and prestige through the pursuit of knowledge. In a social system which is ultimately fiercely egalitarian and even anarchical, respecting achievement rather than status, and one where knowledge is so open to those who seek it out and show the potential of using it well, what a person comes to know, and through it what he or she is able to do, depends ultimately on talent and ambition as well as advantageous circumstance.16

Before turning to some important comparative and theoretical issues, it is worth looking more closely at the twentieth century Kwaiio in historical perspective. It is possible that the openness of knowledge I have described is partly 17 a product of historical circumstances in which the Kwaiio traditionalists have come to constitute an embattled and numerically thinned remnant population, for whom the preservation of knowledge is a grave issue of cultural survival?

Since it is impossible to reconstruct the dynamics of knowledge and its distribution, and patterns of political and religious leadership, in precolonial Kwaiio society with any certainty, the answers must remain speculative. There is no doubt that some areas and groups have been drastically affected, in terms of ritual continuity and the preservation of knowledge, by Christianisation and by the drastic 1927 punitive expedition that followed the assassination of District Officer Bell and massacre of his police party by Kwaiio warriors (Keesing and Corris 1980; see Keesing 1987a). Particularly along the coastal slopes, many kin groups have become almost completely Christian, leaving remnant survivors and non-agnatic descendants with connections
to shrines and ancestors to maintain ritual relationships as best they can. In parts of the interior, the Kwaio heartland, the ranks of senior men and ritual specialists were drastically thinned by the events of 1927: a number of elderly priests, and several warrior leaders, died in captivity or were hanged (Keesing and Corris 1980). In these groups, responsibility to maintain ritual and secular leadership fell to men, in some cases non-agnates, who would doubtless not have been the ancestors’ first choices in other circumstances (see Keesing 1985c).

A general concern for the preservation of cultural knowledge, in the face of the pressures of Christian evangelism, the lure of plantation labour, and now the temptations of urban life, doubtless provides stronger motives for passing lore to anyone in the younger generation prepared to learn and listen. Moreover, a concern for preserving what is valuable from the past, which could only have emerged in the late colonial and postcolonial periods, clearly provides a driving motive for a young man like Maenaa‘adi.

But even taking all this into account, the evidence I have indicates strongly that the openness of knowledge is an old pattern, not a new one. There have always, it would seem, been rewards and incentives sufficient to drive those with the requisite intellectual gifts and ambitions to seek out knowledge. Prior to the events of 1927, ‘Elota was acquiring genealogical knowledge he had no need or right to know and from Fuita, himself a man of little structural significance. My reconstructions of the sociology of priesthoods on the eve of the 1927 massacre indicate considerably flexibility in that realm (see Keesing 1985c). Futhermore, Maenaa‘adi — through from the Kwaio heartland, and ringed by descent groups that suffered badly in 1927 — himself comes from a group well placed to pass knowledge to well qualified successors; and the neighbouring groups from which he was acquiring his genealogical and ritual expertise and epic chants mainly had senioragnates as priests (and these priests mainly had qualified potential successors). There is evidence, too, that Kwaio women of earlier generations with unusual talents were able to develop and express them in the ways on which I have touched here (see also Keesing 1985a and 1987b).

Indeed, ironically the structures of Kwaio society and culture (“chiefs”, “common people”, “laws”) represented in ideologies of kastom in a context of anti-colonial (and in the Kwaio case, anti-Christian) struggle are considerably more rigid and less flexible than those of what apparently has long been a strikingly anti-hierarchical, fragmented, fluid, pragmatically-oriented social world (Keesing 1968, 1987c). The openness of knowledge I have described is process and product of that world.

THE POLITICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF “KNOWLEDGE”

It is worth briefly widening our view theoretically and spatially – first to consider some problems in the conceptualisation and nature of “knowledge”, then to examine the “political economy of knowledge” (Keesing 1987c) in Melanesia, and its implications for cultural theory.

I have so far treated as unproblematic the relationship between “knowing” information as a cognitive process and “knowing” information as a social and political process. The paradox of knowing what one does not know can be introduced with two anecdotal ethnographic examples. Michael Silverstein (personal communication) recounts how, among the Aboriginal Australians he worked with in the Kimberleys, the most closely guarded male secret – which women were forbidden to know – was that when as part of their initiation, young men went off on ritual retracings of the tracks of spirit beings, they engaged in homosexual relations. Silverstein’s best informants, on what men were certain women knew nothing about were elderly women — who described with mirth both what the young men did and the fact that men believed women knew nothing about it. (There are many similar cases and debates in the literature of male religious cultism about whether women “know” about bull-roarers or sacred flutes or other hidden secrets.) The second example is Fredrik Barth’s account (personal communication) of Balinese shamanic healers who — by their own accounts — did not know how to go into trance and did not command the esoteric ritual knowledge needed to perform as healers until sudden divine intervention empowered and commanded them to do so. So commanded, they were immediately able to act as intermediaries with the spirit world. In what sense did they “know” how to be healers, cognitively, before they “knew” how to be healers socially?18 To “know” in the social sense is not only to “know” in the cognitive sense, but to have the right to know – and that is a matter of politics and negotiation as well as cultural principles.

In the Kwaio case, matters are not so complicated. Nonetheless, the transmission of religious knowledge across generations in the face of premature deaths and demographic vicissitudes depends on ritual knowledge of at least a passive and partial kind being relatively widely distributed among members of small local groups. Clearly some women know (in the cognitive sense) a great deal about what men do in ritual which it is not their business to know — although there is almost no actual secrecy involved. In more complexly hierarchical societies, and those with more extreme forms of gender polarisation or cult secrecy, strict boundaries may separate what one is publicly able to know and use and what one learns — much of it soaked up unconsciously as a participant in the social life of a community.
This leads to further comparative questions of Melanesian ethnography and cultural theory. The implications of secret knowledge in Melanesia (particularly in New Guinea men's cults) for a theory of culture as a shared system of meanings have become a recent focus of debate. If access to cult secrets is limited, and the interpretation of symbols depends on revealed secrets, can we cling to a conception of culture as a collective symbolic system, and see myths or rituals as (at least potentially) meaningful to all participants? (see, e.g., Robbins 1987). Are the meanings, as it were, in the symbols, or imputed to them, according to what particular participants know? Can we speak of a common system of cultural meanings "immanent in" but transcending the diverse and fragmentary understanding of individuals, as Valeri (1987) suggests?

I have contributed to this debate elsewhere (Keesing 1981, 1987c, 1987d), articulating my view that we need to maintain a kind of split vision that sees cultural knowledge both as differentially distributed within a social system and as comprising a relatively coherent ideational system that transcends any individual's knowledge or perspectival view of it. The first perspective allows us to analyse a "political economy of knowledge", hence analyse the ideological force of cultural systems; and to see the construction of meaning as perspectival among "native actors" as well as those who interpret them anthropologically (see Wagner 1986). The second perspective allows us to see, as in the grammar of a language, patterns, principles and premises that give an order and structure to the fragmented, partial, and perspectival understandings and interests of individuals and interest groups. The former allows us to interpret the processes of change; the latter allows us to see what remains constant and coherent in the face of change.

The Kwaio constitute a kind of limiting case in the social distribution of cultural knowledge, where access to culturally valued information is in principle remarkably open, and secret knowledge is virtually absent. But even among the Kwaio, there are filters to knowledge, both structural filters and individual differences in intellectual talent and inclination, that result in very substantial diversity in what individuals know (and consequently, I have argued, in their understandings of ritual and symbolism; see Keesing 1982a and 1987c). Among the Kwaio, Maenaa'adi himself represents a kind of limiting case, showing the ultimate permeability of the structural filters that control access to knowledge.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Greg Acciaioli for helpful editorial suggestions on the first draft of this paper, and to colleagues in Paris, Oslo, and San Diego, among them Fredrik Barth, Singne Howell, André Itéanu, Bernard Juillerat, Fitz Poole, Michelle Stephen and Donald Tuzin. The initial version was presented in a symposium on "Who's in the Know: Epistemological Foundations of Control and Secrecy" at the American Anthropological Association annual meetings, December 1985. Andrew Pawley has contributed useful editorial comments. In my collaborative research with Kwaio men and women, notably Maenaa'adi, as well as in my concern for the richness and the uses of indigenous knowledge, I draw inspiration from the work of Ralph Bulmer.

2. I use this term in preference to "pagans" because of the pejorative connotations it may carry for some people. I have previously used "pagan" in the original Roman sense, of people practising indigenous religions (in a context of imperial expansion), with implications of marginality, but not of sin or ignorance. Kwaio practising their ancestral religion refer to themselves as 'itini 'heathen' or wikiti. "Traditionalist" has the advantage of capturing the political stance of resistance within the colonial/postcolonial state continuing practice of the ancestral religion, and resistance to Christianity, entails. See Keesing 1983.

3. For lack of a better term.

4. By Kwaio standards; by the standards of New Guinea highland societies, even substantial Kwaio descent groups are tiny.

5. Lounga did briefly succeed to the priesthood of his father's descent group, but this had not been intended (Keesing 1982a:169-70).

6. 'Elota died in 1973; Lounga is still alive, but became a Christian some years ago when his siblings and children died and attempts to deal with the (ancestral) cause were unsuccessful.

7. I have quoted at length from Lounga's accounts of Kwaio ritual procedure in Keesing 1982a.

8. Fenaori's brothers became Christian many years ago.

9. In these latter two cases, as in Fenaori's, Christianisation as well as demographic attrition have been contributing factors.

10. Who in most cases will have spent all or most of her adult life in her husband's community.

11. In the form of a generous NSF grant.

12. Figuratively speaking. Even in 1989, after having had an opportunity to learn to read and write his own language, Maenaa'adi remains illiterate. He fears that learning to write might erode his awesome powers of memory -- and he may well be right.

13. With collaboration by Jonathan Fifi'i, whose autobiographical account I was translating and editing.

14. This quest has taken him to visit elders all over central Malaita, from one coast to another, learning their genealogies, traditional history, and epics. While I was in Honiara, he was summoned to a periurban Kwara'ae settler village so he could teach members of a Kwara'ae group, caught up in land litigation, their genealogy. On that occasion, Maenaa'adi commented, quite matter of factly and without a hint of arrogance, that "my mind
works like a cassette (recorder): when I hear something once, I remember it”. Fortunately, I have received grant support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation that will allow me to give Maenaa’adi adequate recompense for working with me in 1989 and 1990 to record these genealogies and epic chants.

15. This is perhaps a clumsy way to put it, since for Kwaio (as I argue in Keesing 1982a) it is impossible to demarcate “religion” as constituting a separate realm culturally or in terms of social action; and no social action is ultimately secular, since ancestral support is invoked whatever the enterprise.

16. A similar rise to prominence despite extreme structural disadvantage, albeit in a context of neo-traditionalist politics, is represented by Kwa’aruga, a young man who has become a senior leader of Kwaio Fadanga, the council locked in struggle with the provincial and national government over issues of customary legal autonomy, taxation, and compensation for the 1927 punitive expedition. Kwa’aruga has risen to prominence and considerable power on the basis of personal ability, despite the most unpromising background in terms of kinship and family connection and resources. Interestingly, Maenaa’adi made it clear during our 1988 work that he has no ambitions in this neo-traditionalist realm, which he is happy to leave to those more sophisticated in Western ways.

17. As Michelle Stephen has suggested in seminar discussion.

18. This question of course presumes a Western rather than Balinese epistemology: if Balinese gods exist in Bali, then the knowledge can be held by them, not the humans they may call on to act on their behalf.

19. See Wagner 1984 for a review of the recent literature, as well as Keesing 1987c. The theoretical implications of cult secrecy in Melanesia were usefully explored in a symposium on “Uncommon Knowledge: Beyond Consensus in Melanesian Societies” at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Chicago, November, 1987.

20. With the exception of some forms of malevolent magic.

REFERENCES


Explicit attention to language and semantics as an approach to understanding indigenous perspectives is commonplace in anthropological writing. Words/speech/language have always played a central role in anthropological research, as what our informants tell us (and each other) is our main route of access to their version of the world.

What follows is very much within this tradition of "anthropological linguistics", as I present and discuss some language material collected during ethnographic field research among the Kiai-speakers in the upper Ari valley in central Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu.

My aim is both ethnographic and analytic. I focus on the part of the Kiai lexicon that is used when referring to ownership and the flow of goods and services throughout the mountain communities. Apart from placing the relevant Kiai vocabularies on record, I analyse them as systems of constituent meaningful units in an indigenous model of distribution and exchange.

The larger significance of this model is that it informs the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers in the primarily subsistence economy of central Espiritu Santo. My interest goes beyond a pure semantic focus however, as I discuss these vocabularies in relation to some features of socio-economic organisation among the Kiai-speakers and their neighbours.

In particular, I use this examination of Kiai idioms as an occasion to revive some questions about conscious models of economic relationships as ideologies that distort, mystify or otherwise render obscure relationships of inequality or exploitation, to the point of representing them as the opposite of what they can be seen to be from an analytic point of view. My particular focus of interest here is the lexical expression of such ideologies. In the analysis below I pursue the idea that ideology in this sense resides not only in beliefs or statements about the world, but also in the very language in which these beliefs or statements are expressed.

IDEOLOGY AND MYSTIFICATION

This interest of mine in the lexical expression of ideology and mystification originated with an observation I made a number of years ago in Sweden, regarding contending terminologies for representing roles and relationships in Swedish industry.

The common Swedish words for "employer" and "employee" are arbetsgivare and arbetsstagare. They are both compound words. The first part of these compounds, arbets-, common to both, is derived from the word arbete, which means "work" or "labour". The latter parts, givare and tagare, are derived from giva and taga, cognates of English "give" and "take", and mean "donor" and "recipient" respectively. This means that the literal translation of the Swedish words for "employer" and "employee" are "work-donor" and "work-recipient".

In the left-wing press that proliferated in Sweden in the late sixties and early seventies I noticed an alternative terminology in use. "Employer" was rendered as arbetsköpare and "employee" as arbetsålpare. The first part of these alternative compounds is the same as in the standard terminology (arbets-), but givare had been replaced by köpare, "buyer", and tagare by sålpare, "vendor".

Why the alternative terminology? An answer suggests itself when we compare the connotations of the two pairs of terms. The first pair, arbetsgivare/arbetsstagare ("work-donor"/"work-recipient") implies that the employer gives work to the employee and the employee receives work from the employer. The connotation is that "work" passes from the employer to the employee, casting the employer as playing the active part in a one-sided transaction/relationship.