

MATERIAL WITNESS:

ART AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The Maisin women of Collingwood Bay in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, are skilled artisans famous for making *tapa*, also known as barkcloth. *Tapa*, made from the bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), is used to create various traditional garments. Through weeks of diligent work and creativity, Maisin women craft, design and paint *tapa* into ceremonial dresses, accessories, clothing wraps and decor. In addition, *tapa* is used to barter for canoes and clay pots from neighbouring tribes, or as a commodity that is sold to other Papua New Guinean people, expats and tourists. In recent years, *tapa* has become a significant income generator. As a result, many families depend on its sale to gain a bit of money to pay school-fees, and to buy batteries, clothes, medicines, rice, sugar, and to be able to travel. *Tapa* is so crucial to the Maisin way of life that it is part of their identity, with Maisin people even going so far as to say that “Maisin is *tapa*”.

Both the production of *tapa* and Maisin livelihoods are under threat due to the impacts of climate change. Maisin people grow the paper mulberry trees necessary to make *tapa* in their gardens up in the mountains and in small gardens near their houses in the coastal villages. However, the frequent flooding of gardens due to rivers flowing latterly, and increasing salinisation of the coastal gardens are detrimental for the saplings. Moreover, the specific bark and vines needed to make the red pigment are equally being threatened by flooding. As such, climate change is greatly disrupting Maisin people's ability to make, use and sell *tapa*. Many Maisin people now need to resort to buying *tapa* from neighbouring tribes who are still able to grow *tapa*. In addition, many depend upon store-bought red paint instead of making it from the traditional ingredients. However these options to buy *tapa* and paint are only available to Maisin families who have access to funds. And considering the widespread food shortages, most Maisin people will use their money to buy rice and garden produce from those who still have access to their gardens. As a result, women and families who are still able to grow *tapa* are significantly better off, as with the revenues of selling *tapa* they are able to buy food and pay for all the other things and services they need.

In addition to suffering from food insecurity and losing their main art form and source of income, Maisin people are also losing their homes to the rising sea. Located alongside the beaches of Collingwood Bay, the Maisin villages have been subjected to catastrophic floods, rising sea levels, and cyclones that are destroying homes and schools. While the Maisin people have historically been able to adapt to unpredictable weather events, the recent changes in weather patterns and the surge in sea level rise are unprecedented. The current situation means that almost all villages must be relocated as they will be

taken over by the sea in the next few months and years. Due to their connections to land and the ancestors, especially Maisin elders are reluctant to move, wanting to spend their last days in their ancestral lands. Meanwhile, many of the younger generation have already moved inland and uphill. This leaves Maisin elders vulnerable and without the opportunity to pass down their traditional knowledge, such as *tapa* making, to the next generation. In fact, climate change has affected the Maisin people so drastically that some have stated: “We are no longer Maisin.”

The predicament of the Maisin people highlights the injustice of climate change. Like many other indigenous communities, Maisin people barely contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, yet they are disproportionately affected by disastrous, traumatic and relentless natural disasters. In addition, they are under-resourced, while receiving little to no support from their government or NGOs. This exhibit aims to bring awareness to the predicament of the Maisin people, their culture and their art. In doing so, we hope to create more awareness and advocate for social change to combat climate change injustice.

This text is based upon the following sources:

Hermkens, A.-K., J. Leon, and L. Seri (2025). 'Report On Climate Change Affected Communities In Southern Collingwood Bay, Oro Province'. Report prepared for the PNG Provincial and National Government.

Hermkens, A.-K., J. Leon, J. Barker, and L. Seri. (2025). 'Rising seas-drowning cultures: The environmental and cultural complexity of climate change.' *npj Climate Action* 4, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44168-025-00248-z>.

Hermkens, A.-K. (2023). "Maisin is *tapa*": Engendering barkcloth among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea. *Pacific Arts* 23, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.5070/pc223162490>.

Hermkens, A.-K. (2013). *Engendering Objects: Dynamics of Barkcloth and Gender among the Maisin of Papua New Guinea*. Leiden: Sidestone Press.

Hermkens, A. (2009). *The Gendered Performance of Cloth, Ritual and Belief*. In *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*. Edited by David Morgan. London/ New York: Routledge, pp. 231-246.

TAPA AND GENDER

EMBOBI AND KOEFI

Tapa is made into traditional garments for women and men. The female garment is called *embobi*, and the male garment is called *koefi*. Both garments are made from paper mulberry trees, which are referred to as *wuwusi* by the Maisin people. An *embobi* requires a tree with a wide circumference, while a *koefi* is made from the bark of a thinner and longer tree. *Embobi* are worn tightly wrapped around women's hips, secured with a woven girdle. *Koefi* are worn between men's legs, one end tucking out over the loin and another end over the buttocks. Traditionally, one panel design is repeated four times on *embobi* and six times on *koefi*.

