Kwara'ae Costume Ornaments

A Solomon Islands Art Form

BEN BURT

One of the things that impressed early European visitors to Solomon Islands was the way the people dressed themselves in beautiful costume ornaments. This is how one group appeared to Douglas Rannie, government agent on a ship recruiting Solomon Islands laborers for the sugar plantations of Queensland in 1886:

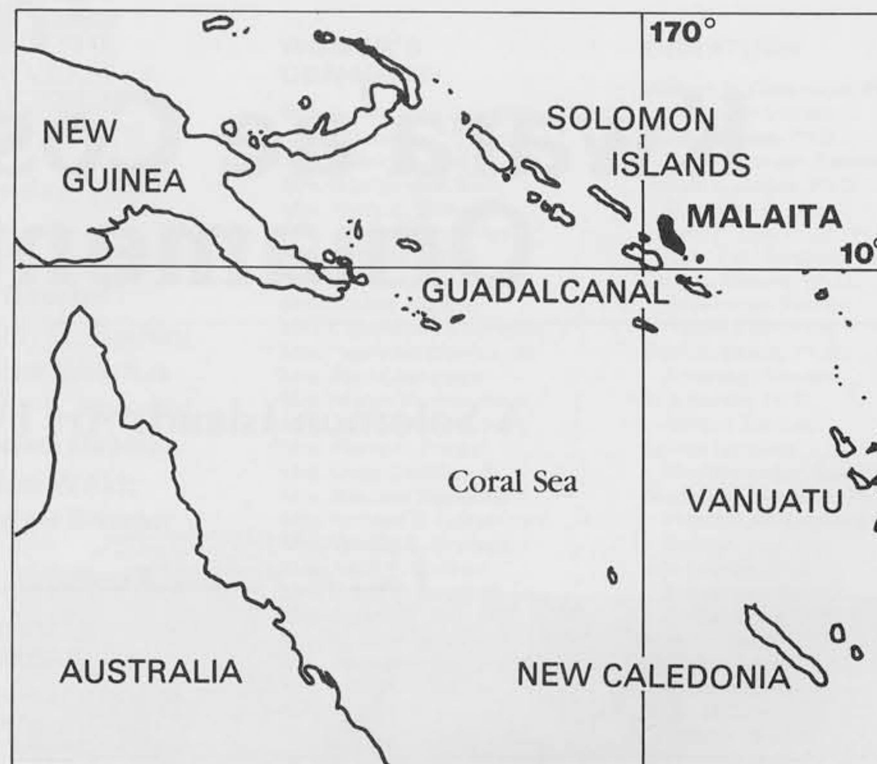
> ...we went with the boats as arranged to the Quakwaroo [Kwakwaru] River, and were met by a large crowd of natives—men, women and children—and received a friendly welcome. None of them boasted of any clothing, but their hair was carefully combed and groomed

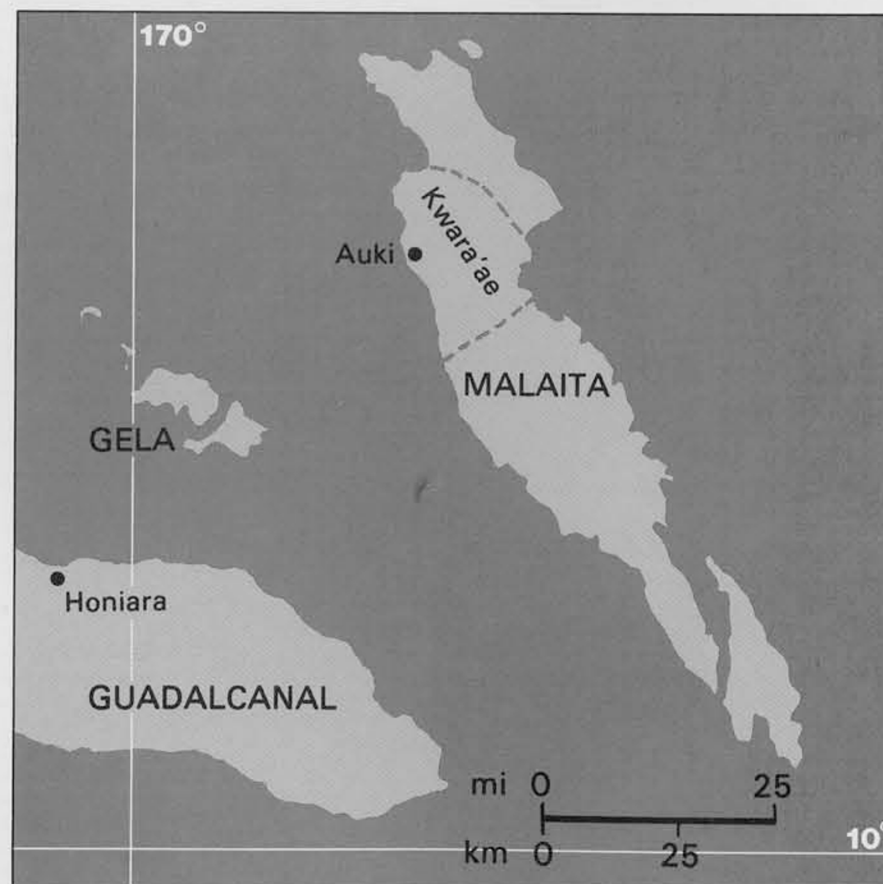
1
Among the best early records of Solomon Islands costume are the photographs taken by J.W. Beattie on a tour with the Melanesian Mission in 1906. Although he bypassed Kwai District, this man from Fiu in the west illustrates Kwara'ae costume of the time. He wears a shell nosepin, turtleshell earrings and plaited earsticks, a woven comb with feather, a choker of glass trade beads, and clamshell armrings. On his back is a fringed fiber bag and pig's tusk pendant.
Courtesy of Melanesian Mission archive; photo slightly cropped

in most cases, and adorned with handsome combs from which depended bright red tassels of dyed grasses. Many of them also wore gay plumes formed from the many-coloured feathers of various birds; while others wore the long feathers of eagles and the large fish hawks. Besides shell bangles on their arms the men wore strings of small white cowrie shells bound round their foreheads. (1912: 180)

This is the earliest description of the costume arts of the Kwara'ae-speaking people in what is now Kwai District on the east coast of Malaita island. A visitor to Kwai today is more likely to arrive by road, possibly sharing the back of a truck with descendants of the people Rannie met there more than 100 years ago. But they would be hard to recognize from his description, the men in their shirts and shorts or trousers, the women in dresses or blouses and skirts. No trace can be seen of the striking costume of former times, and many of the younger people may never have seen or heard of some of the ornaments their ancestors used to wear.

It is much the same throughout the Solomons. In general it is easier to find the traditional art of Solomon Islands in the museums of industrialized countries than among the people who once made it. To see how costume ornaments were worn we can consult hundred of photographs of Solomon Islanders dating back to the early years of this century (Fig. 1) in libraries and archives around the world. But the artifacts and images usually tell us very little about the people and their artistic traditions and often it is not even clear exactly where they came from. For this information we have to go back to the local people in places like Kwai. Here only a few old-fashioned people still dress in the traditional way, but some others keep traditional ornaments as memories of the past, and many old people can recall the fashions of their youth, when the costume arts still flourished. It is they who have provided most of the information for this article, which is written in the hope that even those who no longer wish to make or wear their traditional ornaments may yet be interested to see the pieces recorded in print.





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Solomon Islands and the island of Malaita, showing the Kwara'ae area of which Kwai District forms the eastern side.

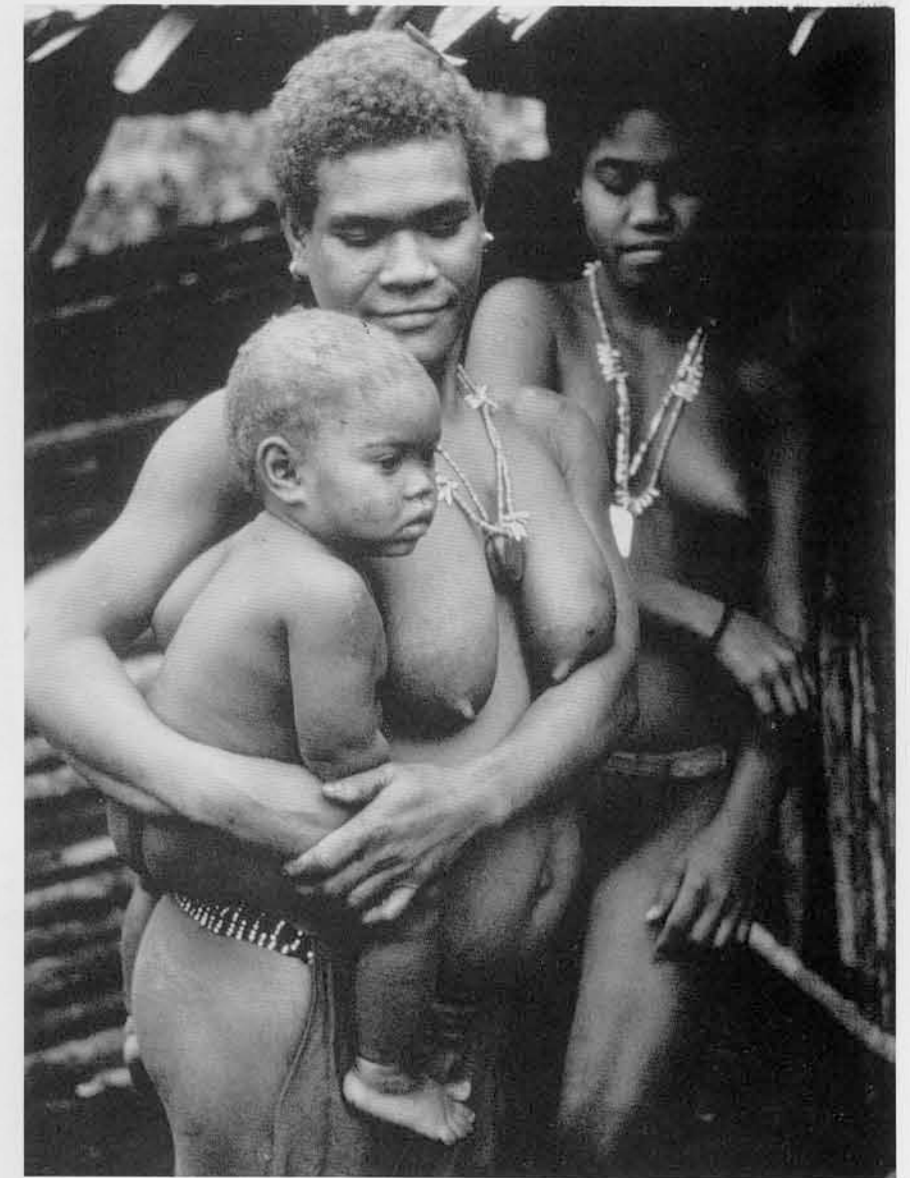
The Kwara'ae

Kwai is only one small part of Solomon Islands (Fig. 2), a country of many different cultural traditions, whose peoples only began to recognize a common identity after they were united under British colonial rule. The Kwara'ae, who now number about 19,000, constitute the largest language group in the Solomons, but Kwara'ae is only one of about twelve languages and dialects spoken on the island of Malaita. Each of these represents a local variant of a common Malaitan culture, which is different again from that of neighboring islands. Few if any ornaments were exclusive to one language group, although many were made in distinctive local styles. But neither were the fashions of one group identical to those of the next, and an understanding of Solomon Islands arts has to be built upon a whole series of local studies.

Even within Kwai District there are important differences between the Kwara'ae 'bush' people, who farm the forested hills of the Malaita mainland, and their 'saltwater' neighbors, speakers of a different dialect who mostly live on a few small offshore islands and rely on fishing for a living. Here as elsewhere on Malaita, bush and saltwater people take part in a regular trade of garden and forest products for fish and sea products, a trade in which costume ornaments and the materials from which they were made once played a part. This article describes the ornaments, which are mostly from East Kwara'ae, worn by the Kwara'ae bush people, but also makes some comparisons with the rather different styles of the saltwater people on the east coast. For some other examples of Malaitan art the reader can consult a number of published sources on other districts (e.g., Akin 1981; Ivens 1927, 1930; de Coppet 1977; Ross 1981). Some day perhaps a comparative study will be made of Malaita as a whole, but this is far beyond the scope of the present article, which seeks only to record something of the Kwara'ae tradition.

Traditional Attire

The first thing to note about Kwara'ae costume is that, as Rannie remarked, people wore very little besides their ornaments and not even many of these most of the time. In the old days men normally went naked, except perhaps for some saltwater men who might wear a barkcloth G-string (*kabilato*). For everyday dress unmarried girls wore a belt of cane or bark. Married women wore a fiber and bead belt that held up a small apron of barkcloth (Fig. 3), or maybe just leaves for junior women. Both men and women would probably also wear turtleshell earrings and maybe cane or fiber armbands and bead necklaces, as well as bags of plaited bark fiber slung from the neck or shoulder to



3
Women's traditional costume in the East Kwara'ae bush: the girl wears only a cane belt (aba obi)*, while her married sister wears a fiber and bead belt* (gwa'i susuru) *and cloth apron.*

carry their personal possessions. Most of the ornaments to be described here were added to these basic costumes only when people dressed up or 'decorated' themselves (*laungi*) for special occasions.

Many ornaments were made of forest products, of which the Kwara'ae bush people have a detailed knowledge. One basic craft material was lawyer cane, split and shaved into flat strips (*aba kalitau*). This could be plaited into bands (*fa'i obi*) that men and women wore on the upper arm and sometimes on the wrists and ankles. Girls' belts (*aba obi*) could be made of lawyer cane, dyed red. The standard type of man's belt (*fo'osae*; Figs. 10, 18) was made of four strips of cane bound edge to edge, opening at the front (unlike those in some parts of Malaita that were made as a continuous coil). Finer and more flexible fibers included a light-colored vine (*adi'o*) and a dark brown fiber (*ongaonga*), which were used for instance for the twined binding on men's belts. *Ongaonga* was also used to plait a more flexible type of armband (*gwaro'a adiadi*). Coconut frond bark (*taketake*) dyed red was also used for plaited armbands (*sangesange*) and, as a broad strip, for the girls' belts, among other things. The red dye used on these materials was made from Indian mulberry root (*dilo*).

But the finest fiber work was done in patterns of bright yellow and red, plaited, woven, or embroidered (all techniques referred to as *gwaro'a*). Such work was used as decoration for a whole range of objects including weapons, as well as for ornaments. The red fiber is the dyed coconut frond bark and the yellow is the natural color of an orchid vine (*adi*). These materials were embroidered onto finely plaited armbands of dark *ongaonga* fiber and woven around the cane strips of men's belts and over small bamboo sticks worn in the ears (*fa'i rade* or *fa'i 'au gwaro'a*; Fig. 10). There is little of this work to be seen in Kwara'ae today and few people can still do it, but Kwara'ae styles were apparently very similar to those of Kwaio, the next language group to the south, where there has been an important revival of traditional crafts in the last ten years (Akin 1981).

4
Decorative combs (kafa gwaro'a) *like those once made in Kwara'ae; the small one was recently made in Kwaio, the large curved one is much older, its exact origin unknown. (L. of large comb 20 cm)*
Large comb in author's collection

Perhaps the finest examples of this weaving were on combs (*kafa gwaro'a*; Fig. 4) worn by men to decorate their hair, as observed by Rannie. These combs have teeth of black tree-fern wood carefully shaved and bound with red and yellow weaving to form a tapering handle. On the larger ones, now only a memory in Kwara'ae but common in museum collections, each tooth is chamfered so that the whole comb curves to fit the shape of the head, and the decoration is only on the convex outer side. Smaller combs, still made in Kwaio, are flat, decorated on both sides, and altogether simpler in construction, but still masterpieces of craftsmanship. The only woven combs that the Kwara'ae still make are plainer and more utilitarian, the teeth bound by twining with brown and black fibers or colored plastic or nylon line, forming bands of contrasting colors (see Fig. 14). Combs are also carved from solid wood, often skillfully shaped and engraved on the handle with geometric patterns that are inlaid with adhesive paste from the 'puttynut' fruit (*saea*). Men still sometimes wear combs in their hair, including store-bought plastic ones. They may stick a few cockerel feathers upright in them, but the fancy plumes and the tassels of red fiber that Rannie described are no longer to be seen.

Shell Ornaments

Some of the most important materials from which ornaments were made originated in the sea and were generally collected and often worked not by Kwara'ae themselves but by the saltwater people. Certain types of shell are not only beautiful and durable but are also quite scarce. Things made from these shells often required a good deal of labor in chipping, drilling, and grinding, especially before metal tools were introduced by the Europeans. Certain shell objects were therefore very valuable, in particular shell beads that Malaitans used not only for ornaments but first and foremost as a kind of 'money.'

Before cash was readily available, 'shell money' was exchanged for all kinds of goods and services and was also made into ornaments. Red beads are the most valuable, particularly those made from a naturally pinkish-red clamshell (*romu*), rather than from a more common shell (*ke*) which has to be heated to turn it from grey to brownish-red. White beads are made from a common cockle shell, black from an oyster and from a type of tree seed, and small greyish-white beads are made from the tips of a type of coneshell.

The Kwara'ae exchange strings of shell money beads among themselves as part of the traditional prestige economy in which most people are more or less involved. On certain occasions people may wear 'money,' draping themselves in large denominations such as *tafuli'ae* or long strings of porpoise teeth (see box). But both shell beads and teeth can also be specially made up into ornaments (Fig. 9). In their simplest forms, as necklaces or simple bandoliers, these ornaments are actually little different from standard denominations and may be valued and exchanged accordingly. Kwara'ae men also wear strings of large polished white beads as garters (*kete la'o*). Necklaces of small low-quality beads made in Langalanga or beads and porpoise teeth from south Malaita are popular with many Solomon Islanders today, and with tourists.

On certain occasions people may wear 'money,' draping themselves in large denominations...or large strings of porpoise teeth

Shell beads were also woven into bands or straps for more elaborate ornaments. The beads were threaded on both the warp and the weft threads of the band so that they lay at 45 degrees to the edge, forming the diagonals of geometric patterns in white, red, and black. Most common were armbands (*aba gwaro*; Fig. 5) worn by men around the upper arms. In Kwara'ae these usually had a characteristic 'arrows' pattern quite different from designs used in other parts of Malaita (cf. Ross 1981:3). Both bush and saltwater people also used the same technique to make the belts (*fo'oaba, galua'afe*) sometimes worn by men and unmarried girls. Married women wore a distinctive kind of belt (*gwa'i susuru*; Fig. 6) made by a different technique. White beads were strung on the warp threads, which were held together by sections of twined black fiber to form simple patterns.

One ornament more usual among the saltwater people but also worn by men and women in the bush was a woven bead headband fringed with porpoise teeth (*fo'odara*). Kwara'ae also wore woven bands of porpoise teeth (*alualu*; Fig. 7), probably made by saltwater people from as far away as

Shell Money

Strings of shell beads are valued according to their length and quality, the best being small and polished. Sets of strings with certain combinations of beads form standard units or denominations that have approximate cash equivalents. These denominations differ among the various peoples of Malaita. In the northern districts the standard large unit is *tafuli'ae*: ten strings, a fathom long, of relatively large beads, red interspersed with white and black. South of Kwara'ae the equivalent value is *bani'au*: six strings, each six armlengths long, of the greyish-white coneshell beads, with smaller red and some black beads. Kwara'ae themselves use both northern and southern types of money, as well as porpoise teeth, which are used for exchange throughout Malaita. The teeth are also drilled and threaded on strings, but they are valued by counting them individually.

Shell and tooth 'money' is an important source of income, particularly for the saltwater peoples of Langalanga on the west coast of Kwara'ae, who produce much of the shell money used in other districts, and of Lau in northeast Malaita, who supply many of the porpoise teeth. Kwara'ae seldom make shell money themselves but give garden crops, pigs, or cash for it.

Lau. These are constructed rather like the women's belts in that the teeth are strung only on the warp threads of the band, each one separated and fixed in position by several pairs of twined wefts. This forms a bristling band that was worn around the head or neck.

Since the 19th century such ornaments have also been made from glass seed beads traded from Europeans. The fact that these were so much cheaper than handmade shell beads probably explains the exaggerated size of some of the ornaments made from them. Broad belts of glass beads patterned on the British Union flag are still remembered in Kwara'ae but can now be seen only in museum collections and old photographs (Fig. 8). These were woven in a similar way to the bands of porpoise teeth, strung on the warp threads and held together by single pairs of twined wefts.

Rings of white shell (*kome*) were also commonly used for ornaments, smaller ones usually made from the ends of coneshells and larger ones cut from the shell of the giant clam. Small rings or large shell beads (*soela*) were threaded on turtleshell earrings (see below). At one time Kwara'ae men, like other Malaitans, probably wore garters (*kete kome*) of coneshell rings graduated in size. Today they use strings of white shell beads (*kete l'ao*) instead. Larger rings were worn on necklaces or cut so that they could be inserted through a hole in the upper part of the ear (*kome giria*).

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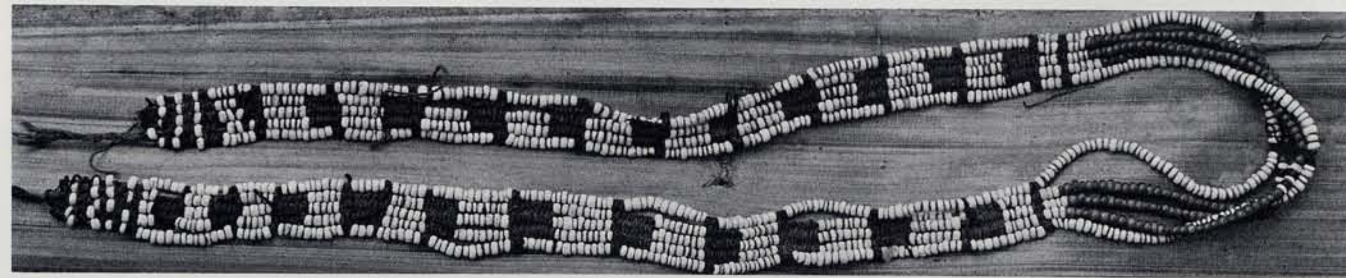
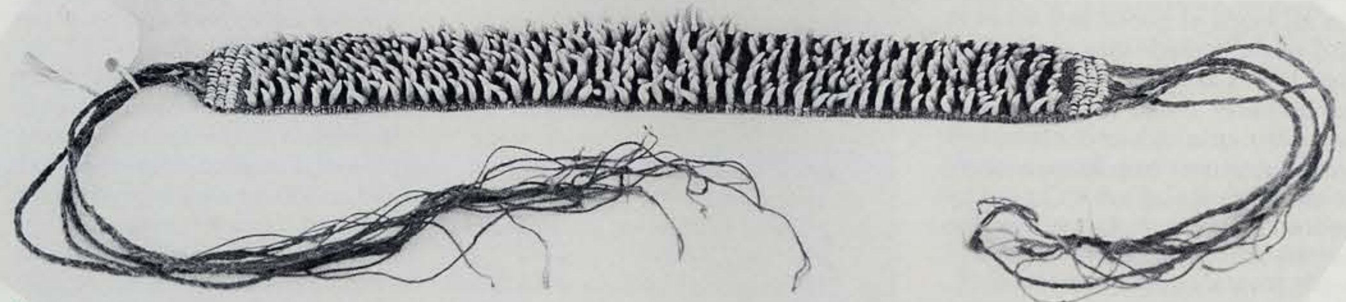
*A shell bead armband (*aba gwaro*) with the characteristic Kwara'ae 'arrows' design (East Kwara'ae. L. 20 cm excluding tie strings).*



6
*A woman's belt (*gwa'i susuru*) of black fiber and white and blue glass beads (East Kwara'ae).*



7
*A porpoise teeth band (*alualu*) made about five generations ago and containing 500 teeth (East Kwara'ae. L. 37 cm excluding tie strings).*
Solomon Islands National Museum no. 78-276.

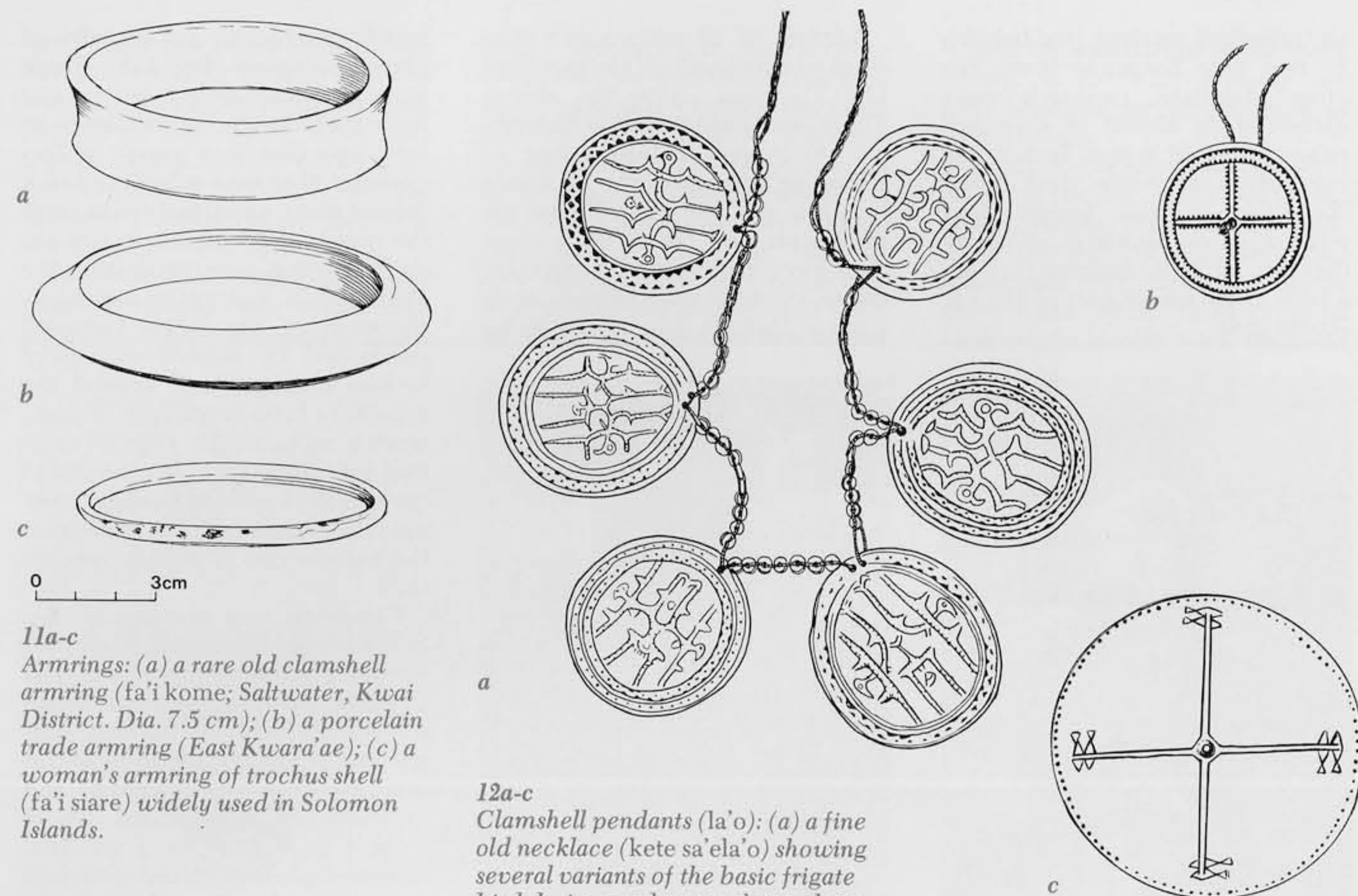
Largest of all were men's armrings of clamshell (*fa'i kome*; Figs. 11a, 1), worn above the elbow. These were once common throughout Solomon Islands but in Kwara'ae they are now so scarce that it is difficult to tell what the local style was like. Today some men have armrings of a standard shape, narrow and triangular in section, that are usually said to be locally made but are actually of glazed porcelain (Fig. 11b). These were probably made in Britain and were traded to Solomon Islands so long ago that their origin is forgotten. Other men substitute black rubber rings, apparently seals from the spouts of oil drums. But an old shell armring, recovered from the grave of a saltwater ancestor, shows what the "shell bangles" mentioned by Rannie may have looked like, grooved around the outside to form two edges. Women wore a more fragile type of armring (*fa'i siare*; Fig. 11c), several at once on the upper arm. These were not white *kome* but pearlshell from the narrow rim of a large trochus shell.

Clamshell was also made into thin disks (*la'o*, meaning 'shell') for pendants and head ornaments. The pendants are engraved and inlaid with black puttynut in two contrasting designs. One type (*sa'ela'o*), pierced at the top edge and usually worn by men, has two or more frigate birds in a standard design which is rendered in various styles (Fig. 12a). The other, usually regarded as a women's ornament (*sa'ela'o kini*; Fig. 12b), has a hole at the center and a simple cross design. Several small *sa'ela'o* might be strung together on a necklace (*kete sa'ela'o*). Larger ones of either design were worn by men on the chest as single pendants or, in the case of the cross design disk, on the head. The most elaborate *l'ao* ornament is a head ornament (*fulifunu*; Figs. 13, 20) decorated not with engraving but with an overlaid pattern cut from turtleshell fixed through a hole in the center. These ornaments, often known to Europeans as *kapkap*, were made throughout the Solomons and beyond, but Kwara'ae examples show

8
*A Malaitan plantation laborer photographed in Fiji in the 19th century. His belt (*fo'oaba*), armbands (*aba gwaro*), and bandoliers are all made of glass beads, bought no doubt with his wages, and he also wears turtleshell earrings (*ta'ota'o*) and a headband of cowries (*buli*).*
Photograph possibly by Henry King of Sydney; courtesy Museum of Mankind Library, London

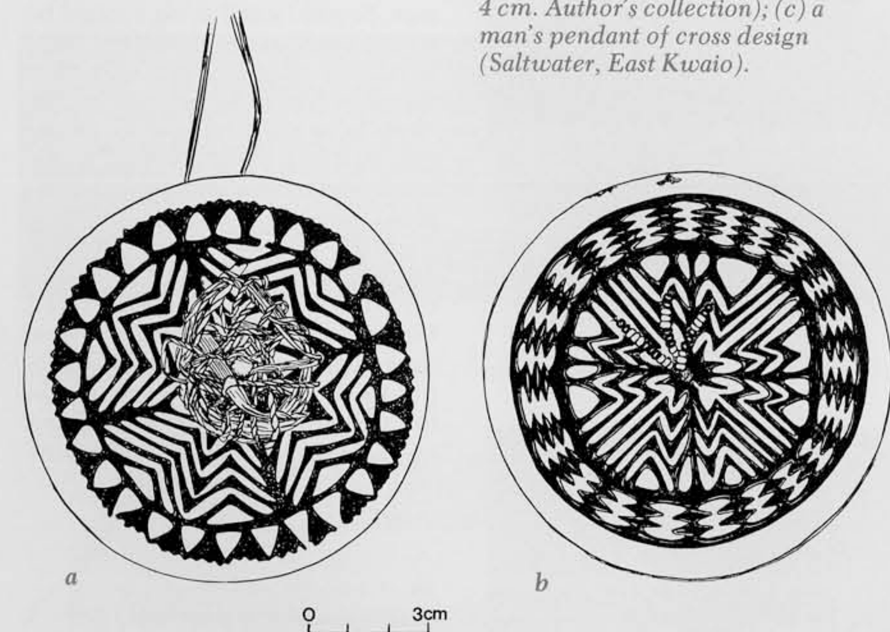
9
*A girl from a saltwater island dressed as if for her wedding in shell money (*tafuli'ae*) with a headband (*fo'odara*) and ear ornaments (*bala*) of porpoise teeth and glass beads.*

10
*Some examples of decorative fiberwork (*gwaro'a*) recently made in Kwaio but similar to those once made in Kwara'ae: earsticks (*fa'i rade*, L. 20.5 cm), armbands (*gwaro'a adiadi*), and part of a cane belt (*fo'osae*).*
Earsticks in author's collection



11a-c
*Armrings: (a) a rare old clamshell armring (*fa'i kome*; Saltwater, Kwai District. Dia. 7.5 cm); (b) a porcelain trade armring (East Kwara'ae); (c) a woman's armring of trochus shell (*fa'i siare*) widely used in Solomon Islands.*

12a-c
*Clamshell pendants (*la'o*): (a) a fine old necklace (*kete sa'ela'o*) showing several variants of the basic frigate bird design used on men's pendants (East Kwara'ae); (b) a woman's pendant (*sa'ela'o kini*; similar to Kwara'ae style but from Kwaio. Dia. 4 cm. Author's collection); (c) a man's pendant of cross design (Saltwater, East Kwaio).*

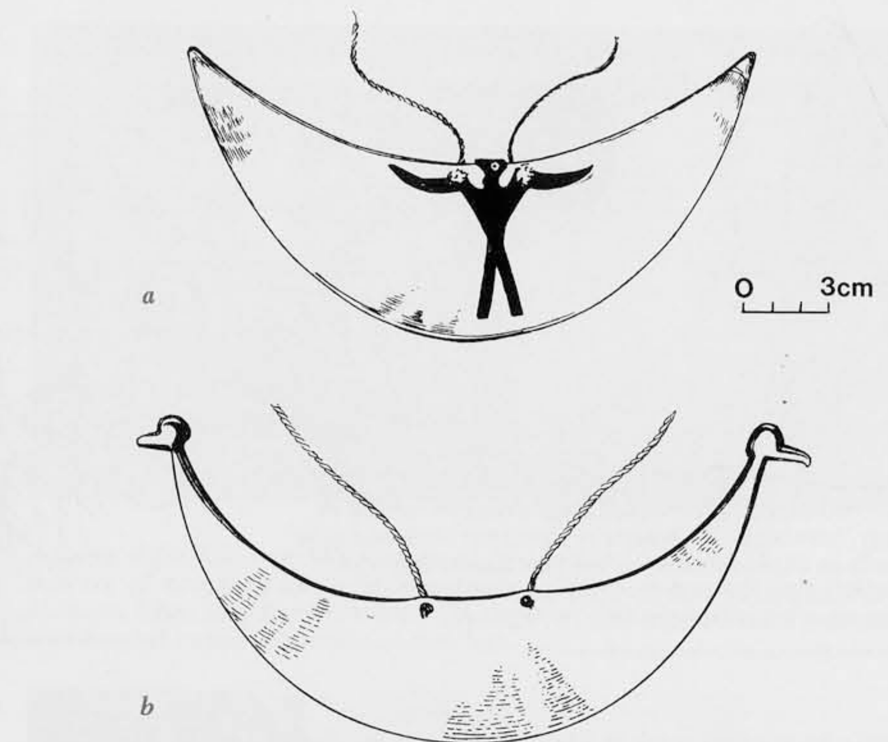


13a,b
*Shell head ornaments with turtleshell overlay (*fulifunu*): (a) of relatively crude workmanship and with the broken center of the turtleshell repaired with string; an heirloom about eight generations old worn by the priests of the lineage (East Kwara'ae); (b) better made in a similar style (Kwara'ae; Dia. 10 cm. Solomon Islands National Museum no. 68.170).*

what is probably a distinctive local style.

The other common type of man's pendant was the crescent of pearlshell (*dafe*; Fig. 15). Some are of blacklip shell, but the finest examples are of goldlip, sometimes with finely carved frigate bird heads on the tips of the crescent (Fig. 15b) or a frigate bird in turtleshell mounted at the center (Figs. 15a, 18). Less commonly, men wore a whole goldlip shell (*kwaro, barafa*), the convex outer side polished smooth and edged with a black border of puttynut. Other shell ornaments included clamshell nose pins (*usuusu*; Figs. 1, 14) decorated at each end with bands of black string or hair, which were worn through the septum of the nose by both men and women. Some men also wore a clamshell stud like a button (*du'udu'u*) in a hole in the tip of the nose. Men also tied white cowries (*buli*) into their hair, or wore a whole row of them on a band around the forehead, as Rannie described (see Fig. 8).

14
*The late Samuel Alasa'a of Tolinga, dressed to show the style of his youth, with shell nosepin (*usuusu*), plaited earsticks (*fa'i rade*), pearlshell pendant (*dafe*), and a plastic-bound comb in his hair.*



15a,b
*Pendants of 'goldlip' pearl shell (*dafe*): (a) with a frigate bird motif in turtleshell (West Kwara'ae; Max. W. 20 cm); (b) a particularly fine example carved with frigate bird heads (East Kwara'ae).*
a: Solomon Islands National Museum no. 76.138

Ear Ornaments

This by no means completes the list of ornaments that were worn in the past. Ear ornaments in particular were many and varied. A basic form was the earring of turtleshell (*tege*), which was clipped to the ear so that it gradually worked its way through and formed the hole in which other ornaments were worn. Clusters of about six of these earrings with shell beads or rings strung on them (*baru tege*; Fig. 16a) were worn in the earlobes by both men and women. In addition, sticks covered in colored weaving (*fa'i rade, fa'i 'au gwaro'a*; Fig. 10) could be inserted through the earlobe and shell rings (*kome giria*) might be fixed through a hole in the top of the ear. Then there was a kind of ear stud (*'ai'au*; Fig. 16b) with a rosette of porpoise or flying fox teeth and a stem of colored plaiting.

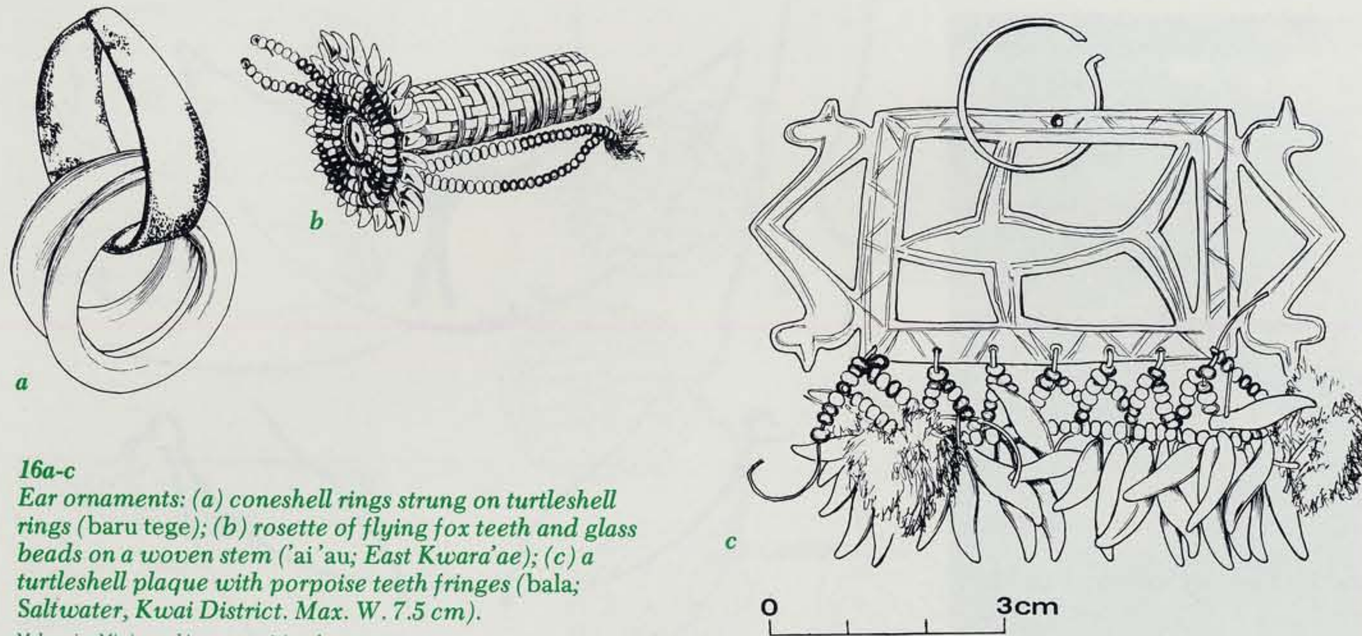
Another kind of ear pendant worn only by men was a large roll of turtleshell (*ta'ota'o*; Figs. 8, 20) with pointed ends which clipped through the earlobe. The saltwater people had other fashions again, wearing ear pendants of turtleshell plaques with pierced and engraved designs of birds and fish and fringes of porpoise teeth (*bala*; Figs. 9, 16c). Old people can recall yet other forms of ear ornaments, now often difficult to identify in the absence of surviving examples.

Significance of Ornaments in Kwara'ae Society

A list of every ornament still remembered in Kwara'ae is beyond the scope of this article. Nor is there space to detail the variety of leaves and flowers that people also wore when dressing up. But having covered the best known types of ornament we can go on to consider their place in Kwara'ae culture.

First it may be useful to put this art into some kind of historical perspective. Many Malaitan ornaments are remarkably standardized and conservative in form so that objects made in the 1980s may appear virtually identical with 19th century examples in museums. Some of the most obvious changes resulted from the use of industrial materials, which have been available since Malaitans first went to work on the plantations of Fiji and Queensland in the 1870s. Steel tools probably increased the output of shell money and shell ornaments, and new materials such as glass beads and cloth were introduced. As some traditional crafts fell into disuse and ornaments were lost, sold, or destroyed, substitutes may have been made of materials easier to work, of wood in place of shell for instance. Such imitations probably have a long history. Nowadays it is not unusual to see men performing traditional dances wearing disks and crescent pendants of cardboard painted in bold interpretations of traditional designs, rather than real shell ornaments. Perhaps this has the makings of a new style of Malaitan costume art.

But the greatest changes have come with the gradual adoption of Western conventions of dress. The



16a-c
*Ear ornaments: (a) coneshell rings strung on turtleshell rings (*baru tege*); (b) rosette of flying fox teeth and glass beads on a woven stem (*'ai 'au*; East Kwara'ae); (c) a turtleshell plaque with porpoise teeth fringes (*bala*; Saltwater, Kwai District. Max. W. 7.5 cm).*
Melanesian Mission archive, exact origin unknown

men who went to work in Fiji and Queensland not only learned of European fashions but also earned the money to buy and bring home cloth and clothing. The first laborers to return wearing shirts, trousers, and boots made a big impression that is still recalled today. Cloth and clothing have been in demand ever since, although even today few people can afford to dress as well as they would like in European style.

In earlier times most people probably kept their cloth for best and adapted it to their own styles. Men began to wear a strip of cloth tied around the waist or hanging over a belt as a narrow apron, as a few old-fashioned men still do, and then as a short kilt or *lavalava* in the widespread Pacific style. Women replaced their barkcloth aprons with calico aprons or with skirts. The more concealing styles of dress became a symbol of the new religious movement of Christianity, which returning laborers brought back from the plantations in the early 20th century.

Today, after 80 years of Christian evangelism and economic development have made clothing both more desirable and more available, few Christian women go bare-breasted in public and most men only wear the *lavalava* for informal dress at home. Only a handful of Kwara'ae people still have enough faith in the spirits of their dead ancestors to sacrifice pigs to them as required by their traditional religion. It is only among these people that women wear the traditional costume, largely for the religious reason that women's clothing can transmit the qualities of their bodies that defile their menfolk and anger the ancestors. It is among these people too that men and women are likely to dress up for special occasions by 'decorating' themselves in costume ornaments rather than in their smartest Western clothes. But in looking at the way these ornaments are worn, now and in the past, we need to remember that traditional and Western costume styles have co-existed in Kwara'ae for longer than anyone today can remember.

Not only were most ornaments not for ordinary wear, but some were not for ordinary people either. But today, when ornaments are so little worn, the conventions governing their use are not always clear. In general it seems that, although people dressed according to their sex, age, and social standing, only a few types of ornaments were actually restricted to certain people. Some things were worn only by women, particularly their belts and aprons for everyday dress, and rather more were worn only by men, especially their cane belts but also combs and certain shell ornaments, including the larger pendants. But many ornaments could be worn by either men or women even if in practice it was the men who wore most of them.

When it came to dressing up it was the unmarried young people who took the most trouble with their appearance. Young men in particular spent much of their time visiting from place to place, hoping to attract the girls with their fancy ornaments, as they do today in their most stylish Western clothes. But then as now the responsibilities of marriage and the hard work of supporting a family soon put an end to frivolous display. Mature adults would dress up only for social gatherings, such as feasts and festivals, or going to market or important meetings. The most spectacular displays of ornaments were probably by the dancers, always men, who performed at festivals (Fig. 17).

Exactly how people would dress is not always easy to tell. A full set of man's ornaments could perhaps include a comb and shell head ornament or headband, several ear ornaments, a nose pin and maybe a nose stud, a shell neck pendant, armbands, shell armrings, belt, and garters. For full effect, as at feasts or festivals, a man might also wear leaves tucked under his belt in front

and in his armbands and hair (Fig. 18). But even the oldest photographs from Malaita seldom show men wearing all this finery at once, and according to one authority on the subject, those few that do had probably been overdressed by the photographer (David Akin, pers. com., 1985).

But even when ornaments were at their most popular, many people could probably not afford to dress very lavishly. Like other types of craftwork, ornaments could be exchanged for shell money and some were extremely valuable, requiring special skills, a good deal of time, and often scarce raw materials to make. Old people can estimate the shell money values of all kinds of ornaments, and the most valuable, such as the larger shell pendants, shell bead armbands, and bands of porpoise teeth, are usually reckoned to be equivalent to the largest shell money unit, *tafuli'ae* or *bani'au*. A general idea of the value involved can be gained from the fact that, early this century, men were prepared to work for up to ten months to earn the cash value of a *tafuli'ae*, then about £5 (although by the 1980s a *tafuli'ae* could be bought for about five or six weeks average wages).

For this reason such high value ornaments are often said to have been worn by the leaders of Kwara'ae society (Fig. 19). To gain respect and political influence, a man had to build up wealth with which to help his relatives and neighbors so that he would receive their support in return. Shell money is essential for this purpose, particularly for helping men with bride-price gifts which create new relationships through marriage, and with restitution payments which restore relationships when they are threatened by quarrels. In these ways, traditional wealth tied communities together in peace and cooperation.

Hence symbols of wealth such as valuable ornaments and large denominations of shell money were appropriate costume for traditional leaders. But in a society where community life and leadership itself depended on constant giving, lending, and sharing of goods and

17
A dance of the kind originally performed for sacrificial festivals. These dancers, all men, wear only a few ornaments with their improvised decorations of leaves. Some play the dance music on bamboo panpipes while others dance with hornbill batons and rattles on their legs.

18
*Sale of 'Aimomoko dressed to show traditional festive costume. He wears an heirloom pearlshell crescent (*dafe*) with a frigate bird motif of turtleshell, a cane belt (*fo'osae*), a comb and feather in his hair, and various decorative leaves and flowers.*

19
Kwara'ae 'chiefs' at a major gathering to promote 'custom' at 'Aimela in West Kwara'ae in 1976. Four of them wear tafuli'ae *shell money units; their other ornaments include cane belts* (fo'osae), *a porpoise teeth band* (alualu), *and shell bead armbands* (aba gwaro).
Courtesy of Solomon Islands National Museum

possessions, such ornaments were not necessarily for one person's exclusive use. As people borrow one another's clothes and possessions today, in the past they borrowed costume ornaments or gave them away to help others or to return past favors. If young people with few resources of their own dressed up in fine ornaments, the wealth they displayed probably belonged to their senior relatives rather than themselves. Such was the case for a girl at her wedding, when she was presented to her husband's family draped in shell money provided by her father (Fig. 9).

But perhaps because generosity is so essential to Kwara'ae community life, there is also prestige to be gained by showing that you have enough influence to resist some of the demands made by other people. This helps to explain why certain ornaments were kept exclusively by the most important senior men, particularly the priests who mediated with the all-powerful ancestor spirits (Fig. 20). Such ornaments were treated as tabu (*abu*) in the sense that they were sacrosanct and could not be worn by lesser men and certainly not by women, who would defile them in the eyes of the ancestors. Often the ornaments themselves would have belonged to the ancestors, becoming heirlooms that were passed down from generation to generation and were kept by a priest as the senior member of the family congregation. Sometimes the ornaments were dedicated to ancestors to gain their protection for the wearer. Again, the ornaments said to be characteristic of priests are the most valuable shell pendants, the shell disk with turtleshell overlay (*fulifunu*), and also turtleshell cylinder ear ornaments (*ta'ota'o*). At important social gatherings such valuable ornaments would distinguish a priest from his more plainly dressed junior relatives.

Certain ornaments were also associated with warfare, from the days before about 1920 when Kwara'ae communities were constantly fighting one another. The man's cane belt (*fo'osae*), although worn for decoration, was also used for fighting, and a man would gird it on to give him strength and endurance. Some men even made their belts tabu by dedicating them to the warlike ancestor spirit who supported and protected them. Men also wore clamshell armrings (*fa'i kome*) for fighting, using them to break an enemy's ribs while grasping him around the body. One of the few ornaments that seems to have had a clear symbolic meaning was the button-like nose stud (*du'udu'u*), worn by a man to show that he had killed someone. All such ornaments were appropriate costume for a 'warrior' (*ramo*), the man who led his relatives in fighting, defending them and killing wrongdoers and enemies. Warriors are said to have dressed in fine ornaments, and indeed the rewards they collected for killing people could make them wealthy and prominent members of society. But in contrast to priests and community leaders, warriors represented the violent and destructive side of the male personality.

In south Malaita, one writer has suggested, different ornaments symbolized the contrasting roles of peace and war leaders (de Coppet 1977), but in Kwara'ae it seems unlikely that particular ornaments belonged to warriors any more than they did to priests. Nor are old people aware of any special symbolism in the forms of ornaments, such as the recurring frigate bird motif. Some items of costume did have deeper meanings. In particular some of the leaves men wore on their belts, armbands, and hair and to decorate their bags had special properties, for instance to ward off sorcery or biting insects, to entice women, or simply to give a pleasant scent. There were also signs of male bravado, such as tusks from stolen pigs worn as pendants (Fig. 1) or fernleaves worn in the hair after a man had killed someone. But the usual explanation for wearing crafted ornaments is simply that they 'looked good' and beyond this if people had other reasons for wearing them it was probably because they were what Europeans would understand as status symbols.

Traditional Arts Under Christianity

In recent times, however, costume ornaments have gained a new significance as symbols of 'custom' (*falafala*), the cultural and political identity for which Kwara'ae have struggled with their European colonizers and with each other since the early years of this century. Costume ornaments have not gone out of fashion simply because Western clothes are signs of sophistication and prestige and required by Christian standards of decency, but also because of much deeper conflicts between 'custom' and Christianity.

Most Kwara'ae belong to fundamentalist churches, of which the largest is the indigenous South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC), built mainly by the efforts of local people since the early years of this century. But in the Christian struggle to transform their society, Malaitans were strongly influenced by European missionary advisers and supporters whose prejudice against non-Western culture, including arts, was as strong as any in the British Empire. Since ornaments were worn by traditional leaders and priests, inherited from the ancestors, and displayed especially at religious festivals, they have become associated with the 'heathen' religion as symbols of the 'devils,' as Kwara'ae ancestral spirits are now known. As such they are obstructions to the acceptance both of Jesus Christ and of the authority of the church leaders. This attitude is self-fulfilling, to the extent that fundamentalist Christians may find that ornaments actually invoke ancestral spirits and threaten their relationship with God and their church. Hence, since early in this century, new converts have been encouraged to destroy or dispose of ornaments along with the ritual paraphernalia of ancestor worship. Those that are kept, deconsecrated by prayer, become little more than mementos; they are worn by those who are prepared to accept the consequences of not being regarded as strict Christians.

But many Kwara'ae, including strict fundamentalist Christians, are also worried by the destruction of 'custom,' and since the Second World War the revival of traditional values has been an important theme of political movements for local autonomy and self-determination. The challenge has been to create a 'Christian custom' that reconciles the best of the past and the present. As far as costume arts are concerned a possible way forward is shown by the minority of Kwara'ae Anglicans and Catholics, who have always used traditional arts to celebrate Christian services and festivals. Perhaps in the future more people will come to regard the costume ornaments worn by their ancestors as positive symbols, compatible with Christianity, of the distinctive local culture which they are in danger of losing. If that time is too long delayed these arts may one day be preserved only in museums and in publications such as this.

20
The late Timi Ko'oliu, senior priest among the few Kwara'ae still following their traditional religion in the 1980s. His ornaments are heirlooms and tabu: a shell head ornament with turtleshell overlay (fulifunu, *shown in Fig. 13a*), *a turtleshell ear pendant* (ta'ota'o) *and pearlshell pendant* (dafe).

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