

Museums' role in reviving and promoting Papua New Guinea-Highlands *hausman* (men's house) *hausmeri* (women's house)

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Abstract

This paper examines how museums can play a leading role in reviving, preserving and conserving Papua New Guinea-Highlands *hausman* (men's house) and *hausmeri* (women's house). Papua New Guinea-Highlands *hausman* and *hausmeri* are where social, political, economic cultural values and norms were taught by elders to sustain the Papua New Guinea-Highlands people over decades and centuries. This paper discusses museums' role in promoting these priceless Papua New Guinea-Highlands (*hausman* and *hausmeri*) traditions. The paper emphasizes that *hausman* and *hausmeri* are bases of governance, politics, culture, law and order, education, and address political, social and cultural issues of the society. Papua New Guinea-Highlands *hausman* and *hausmeri* generated essential human attributes such as love, care, respect, obedience, protection, and most of all passing of the knowledge from generation to generation. Governance of Papua New Guinea-Highlands societies was decided in *hausman* chaired by chiefs and headmen who maintained social order, and law and order sustaining the people's needs. Decisions passed in the *hausmen/meri* was respected and implemented for good governance.

This paper further discusses social challenges faced by people in the Highlands societies as a direct result of Western cultural influences. The absences of *hausmen/meri* in the Highlands societies have contributed to the social problems of the society. The paper will discuss how museums can revive, conserve and promote *hausman* and *hausmeri* to prevent spread of HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea-Highlands societies. There are serious social and health problems in these societies which are a reflection of the absence of governance and functions of one of the most important Papua New Guinea-Highlands institutions, *hausman* and *hausmeri*. This case study will be most applicable to other parts of Papua New Guinea and Melanesian societies.

Significance of *hausman* and *hausmeri* in Highlands of PNG

In the Highlands of Papua New Guinea *hausman* and *hausmeri* are very important institutions where cultural values and norms were taught by elders to sustain the Melanesian people over the decades and centuries. The Highlands of Papua New Guinea political institutions – *hausman* and *hausmeri* – were bases of governance, politics, planning of cultural ceremonies, law and order, education, and where social and cultural issues of the society were discussed and resolutions were passed for members of the community to execute. The *hausmen* and *hausmeri* addressed political, cultural and social issues to guide people from generation to generation. These institutions accommodated essential human values such as love, care, respect, obedience, protection, and were responsible for passing knowledge from generation to generation. Governance in Highlands societies of Papua New Guinea was decided in *hausman* and *hausmari* chaired by chieftains and headmen who maintained the law and order in the society and commanded respect and authority.

In the contemporary Highlands of Papua New Guinea the *hausman/meri* has diminished. Therefore, the cultural values and norms have been challenged by introduced cultures and religions. The moral values and ethics of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea have been marginalised. The end result is that social and moral diseases have eaten away the social fabrics of the society. For example, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are serious social and health problems in Papua New Guinea and the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. This in itself reflects the missing functions of *hausman* and *hausmari*, which today

contributes to some of the social, economic problems, and breakdown of law and order experienced in the Highlands of PNG.

What are *hausman* and *hausmari*?

The *hausman* and *hausmari* are physical institutions or houses mainly for males/females in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. They are a physical building kept away from female population found in the main village. They are very significant to every village, clan and tribe, as informants observed and learned about them while they were growing up in them. Most of the informants then were teenagers who learned all cultural values of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. For example, a study by Kevin Poke (2009) of the Kafe society in E.H.P revealed that the *hausman* was a house for making decisions and planning for fighting.

What is *hausmeri*?

Hausmeri is where women dwelled with young girls. Women spent their time educating young girls, particularly teenagers, about essential skills and the character and attitude of being women. Apart from normal *hausmeri*, women had a separate house/hut, a special round house that was where they slept during menstruation. During this time they were restricted to the common house. They did not go to the garden and cook food for families. Perhaps after three days when she was dry, a woman came back to the house but did not cook her husband's food for a further week. Young girls were educated with essential social and economic skills, knowledge to mold their character and attitude for their family, as future brides, and for their tribe and community. Therefore, the role of the *hausmari* was significant in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Cultural value of *hausman* and *hausmari*

The *hausman* institution in the Highlands of PNG guided, mentored and directed the people's attitude and character and social and economic behaviour. People listened to the "bigman" and to expertise in different fields, which allowed endless time to groom the young generation. Unlike before when only the elder talked and all others listened to him, the *hausman* was a people's meeting house for discussion of social and economic issues affecting the community and directing the future.

A study of Kafe society by Poke (2009) significantly concluded that word was secretly passed around to the most respected men to meet to discuss confidential issues. Men with ulterior motives did not attend and only men with good speech, who told the truth, and spoke without fear or favour attended. For example, men who planned and put into action events like fighting or pig killing were given an opportunity to attend and participate.

The *hausman* was a meetinghouse where men spoke with authority, passion and vision for their tribe and community. A *hausman/meri* was referred to as a house of power, governance and authority. The *hausman* was where the youth gathered, slept, and received advice covering all aspect of life and manhood. For example, young boys were advised against eating food given by women during her period or food offered by couples or girls under uncertain terms.

What was the role of *hausman*?

Planning

The *hausman* was where males, both adult and youth, gathered while not working in their gardens or attending social and economic ceremonies such as pig killings and sing-sing celebrations. The men either gathered to pass knowledge, or discuss issues affecting individual members of the group, the group and other groups. The leading men of the village concerned themselves with the most serious and important issues, usually in the evenings or early in the morning and at most times during the day when the place was quiet and most of the men were out. Poke's study revealed that the *hausman* was regarded as the village council in the traditional times. Resolutions

from the village council were conveyed to the men before they dispersed from the house to attend to their daily chores or in the evenings when nearly all men were present in the *hausman*.

Power

The *hausman* was where power was invested and translated. This was where the most important decisions for the general welfare of the group were passed. The decisions were then conveyed to the people through the men of the *hausman*. Important issues were debated, planned and implemented. For example, men planned for war, peace, feasts and work in this house. The *hausman* kept and maintained the order of the group in all facets of its existence. Decisions made and passed in the *hausman* were final or law, and no one went against them as only men with authority and power spoke in the *hausman*. These decisions were made after much consultation among the leading men of the different lineages or clans in the village. Any decision reached and communicated from the *hausman* was considered final and accepted as being good for the common interest and welfare of the village.

Residence

The *hausman* was the communal residence for men and youth to keep men away from women and their contaminating influence. By sleeping in the *hausman* youth and men were prevented from breaking food taboos and rules of the village. Residence in the *hausman* restrained the adolescents from going on courting trips to girls' houses before they were physically developed and had passed initiation ceremonies. It was believed that their physical development would stop and make them of small stature. It was feared that people of small stature would not match the physical force and power of physically superior enemies and this would become detrimental to the protection of the territory and survival of the group.

Young boys went to live permanently in the *hausman* after they were initiated. In the *hausman* the young boys and other youth were told many things to discourage them from going back to their mothers. For instance, older men told the youth that if they farted in front of the women they would be laughed at, lower their manhood status and consequently be weaker than other men. Hence shame was a potent tool for deterring people from doing things and for facing challenges in life. Upon moving into the *hausman*, the young boys were told to defecate in secret. These young boys were told many other things to warn them and to keep them in the *hausman*. This practice was observed and reported by the early expatriates such as colonial patrol officers and missionaries even after twenty years of European contact in many Highlands areas.

Who noted and observed youth and men having common residence?

The youth were separated from their mothers and sisters to prevent them taking any more food from them and to prevent them from observing women and girls during their menses and couples soon after sex. It was said that the physical development and stature of youth and men were more solidly built and bigger when these taboos were observed. The prohibition of taking food from the women, girls, or other men was the first strict rule that boys had to adhere to with diligence. This was first of many other rules to be passed to them. It was said that taking food from these people would stunt their growth and make them of small stature and weaken them against the enemy.

Education and counseling

The *hausman* was an institution in which youth were trained and counseled on their duties and responsibilities for the general good of their group and society. The older men advised youth and reminded other men of their responsibilities to guide them against people with ulterior motives or people who would want to destabilize or destroy the unity of the group. Threats to cause instability and to break up *hausman* unity came from both within and outside of the village. This message was repeatedly conveyed to the youth and other men to always bear in their minds that they were united and no one should dare break that unity.

The elders led in giving the nightly homily and in educating and training the youth. They were the most senior men of the village that sat at these fireplaces. They were the anchors and keepers of the *hausman*. These men exercised wisdom to educate the young about spirituality, social issues, governance, economic activities, war, history, etc. Every night featured various forms of homily or pieces of advice to the youth and other men. All issues, news from enemies and happenings were reported to the elders. These elders started the nightly homilies and proceeded with other training and events in the *hausman*.

During the nightly counseling and homilies, youth and other men were lectured on a variety of issues. They were lectured on moral and ethnical values, such as respect for elders and other people of the village, how to make gardens, family planning, care for the family, not to steal from another person and, above all, protection and purity of the *hausman*, which stood for their group's future. They were advised to be weary of creating gaps for enemies to infiltrate and to destroy their *hausman*. The destruction of the *hausman* meant destruction of unity and the good order in the village. It threatened to displace the group from their territory or biological extinction of the group. These messages were told many times over and over again and from generation to generation.

Men and youth were taught that real men did not allow their brothers to be assaulted by another person. It was thought immoral to watch a brother assaulted and insulted without rendering any support. If a brother was attacked, one should promptly come in aid of the brother. It was said that such behaviour promoted unity and passed on messages to the enemy who dared to attack the village. It passed on the message to others about the unity that existed in the village. Enemies attacked villages based on their observations and perceptions of the group cohesion and the unity of an enemy from such minor happenings. Not assisting a brother in need of food or in danger of being attacked was considered a serious act of negligence of an important duty to one's group, clan, tribe and community.

The most important advice and education received in the *hausman* were on group territorial protection and war tactics and skill, on unity but aggression in name of protecting the community and society. Youth and men were told never to open themselves to enemy attacks by being friendly to the enemies. It was said that becoming too friendly put one's life at risk. But it was said that to avenge a homicide debt, one was to become friendly with the enemy and when the time was considered right, they were to kill the enemy – this was for the good of the group and was morally accepted. The other members of the group were to come to the aid of the men or youth who had carried out the killing and to mobilize to repel any reprisal from the offending party.

Men were told never to confide in people if one wanted to kill another person over debts of homicide. It was said that talkers were as good as dead because they were the ones that were killed. The talker only boasted about one's imagination but lost one's life. The talker was considered a liar.

Advice

Youth and men were advised not to eat food given at funerary feasts or food gifts given for assisting in killing another person. These foods were considered dangerous and contaminated because they had human blood on them and they would make the warrior weak and lead them to the enemy to be killed. It was better to forego the food than to die. Men were told to adhere to this advice to live longer.

Youth and warriors were told never to boast about their raids on enemies. They reported their actions to the elders who relayed the news as if they had performed the raids. This was to hide the identity of the youth and warriors who had performed these acts. No one in the *hausman* was to be trusted because there was a lot of leaking of information to and between hostile groups as people had dubious dealings with the enemies.

Nightly homilies in the *hausman* were steeped in training, education and correcting deviant behaviours of the men and initiated youth by other men and elders. Moral development of the youth was very important. Moral education consisted of education in respect: care and protection for elders, respect for the spirit of ancestors and the environment, for parents and relatives and the properties of other members of the group. It was regarded that education in these areas promoted good order and unity in the village. These messages began at initiation and were repeated time and time again in the *hausman* to drive them into the youth so that the youth committed them to memory. Repeated homilies and education took place so that the youth did not deviate from their moral responsibilities.

The study by Poke (2009) in the Kaipe community in Eastern Highlands Province stated that elders when delivering important messages or training constantly referred to fire. Fire in these instances represented the seriousness and power of the messages and training. Fire to the people was the concrete evidence of the abstract teachings and training. Much serious education and training in the *hausman* took place while big fires were lit in the fireplaces and the youth were seated around it. Besides the use of the fire in educating the youth and other adult males, beatings and shaming were two other effective techniques that were employed in the *hausman*. Beatings were used on youth especially during the first night after initiation for acts these youth had done while they were with their mothers or because the youth had not adhered to taboos and restrictions. Shaming was employed when counseling, sanctioning or correcting erratic behaviours of the adult male members. Major problems for which they were shamed were laziness, spending too much time with the wife, selfishness, lack of display of aggression, inability to restrain one's sexual urges and other things that were viewed as detrimental and fatal to the good reputation and unity of the *hausman*.

The elders repeatedly told and educated youth at initiation and other men during the nightly homilies that a divided *hausman* would be exterminated. They would not be spared and weak *hausman* suffered great losses. Youth and men in the first instance at initiation and regularly thereafter were reminded of the consequences of creating division within the *hausman*. If they were not careful, there were bound to be fatal results, hence displacement or extermination.

Protection of the unity of the *hausman* was a powerful piece of advice that was continually given to the youth and the other men. Enemies attacked a group on the existence of perceived instability and a break in unity. Unity of the *hausman* prevented likely assailants, and peace would be enjoyed as long as the unity was intact. Youth and men were told to be vigilant in protecting their fellow clansmen. They were not to give food to any men or come near them if they had been to visit their wives. It was said that dirt from the sexual encounter contaminated the food which in turn when consumed would lodge in the person's stomach and make the person sick. This would render the person weak and unfit to defend the group. This would create gaps in the line of defense.

However, there was a time and the only time that women were allowed into the *hausman*. This was during the first night the youth had undergone the first stage of the initiation, comprising the cleansing rituals. The women came to show their appreciation and joy that their boys had become men. As they sang and danced in the *hausman* they would commend the boys and implore them with the task of protecting their territory, and look forward to a time when they would take refuge and find solace in their caring and protecting guidance. Youth have always been counseled and reminded to be wary of threats to unity of the *hausman* from both within and without.

Finally, the *hausman* was a men-only institution. It rigidly demarcated the gender roles of the society. This was evident in the way that the group settlements were organized, the situating of the women's residence, the strict taboos that should be observed in preparing and giving food and how the men of the group had to be vigilant at all times when dealing with women.

Youth were advised not to embrace their women. It was considered that women were visitors because they had their origin in and harboured allegiances to their natal villages. It was

always said that at death of their husbands, the women would go off to marry other men. They were to fear and protect themselves against contamination from women. They were not to spend a lot of time with their wives. It was considered that men spending a lot of time with their wives put other men's life at risk. The men would become effeminate as well.

The women's houses were placed well away from the *hausman*. The women were not allowed to go into, near or around the *hausman*. Women were considered powerful beings in terms of their perceived impotency and men took great precautions against them. It was considered that the presence of women made the *hausman* cold and of no effect. The presence of women in the *hausman* or near and around the *hausman* was thought to render ineffective the sorcery performed and the contents of the potions and magical items cold and ineffective.

In *hausman/meri* all aspects of social units were taught, conserved and preserved throughout centuries. These social units are: nuclear and extend family values, a respect and disciplinary system, the importance of family, the headman/chieftain system, and community values and activities and their purpose.

Hausman/meri taught youth the importance of forming social and war alliances systems. Emphases were placed on a values formation alliance system with neighboring tribes, and skills or factors that influence alliances.

In the *hausmeri* elders taught young and future mothers the importance of marriage and rituals. Emphases were placed on the value of proper marriage and the significance of respected weddings: for example, the exchange of bride price, the roles of parents in choosing partners, and courtship skills.

In the *hausmeri* elder women taught and advised on the economic value of women in the society and tribe. Roles and the responsibility and importance of girls/women in a Highlands society of Papua New Guinea were taught by mothers and elderly women. Teaching covered how and when young girls and women contributed in society during formal and informal ceremonies. In the *hausmeri* mothers emphasized their teaching and advised that young girls and women were the economic base of family.

In the contemporary Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the *hausmen/meri* are disintegrating. In the absence of above institutions in the Highlands of PNG, societies are experiencing social disorder and crises. Museums can play a leading role in preserving and conserving *hausman/meri* to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. A member for Goroka is leading the way to revive the houseman in his electorate, which is a significant investment.

Roles of museums in preserving *hausman/meri* in preventing of HIV/AIDS and caring for PLWA

The museum can play a leading role in reviving and conserving *hausman/meri* to restore the traditional function to educate teenagers or youth about freely socializing which contributes to spread of HIV/AIDS. Youth can learn from elders from an early age about *tambus* or laws of sex before marriage and unprotected sex, in order to prevent contagion from transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

The spread of HIV/AIDS in the contemporary Highlands region of Papua New Guinea can be prevented by reviving and conserving values of the *hausman*. Museums can play a leading role by supporting Highlands *hausman/meri* institutions to prevent spread of HIV/AIDS and to care for people living with AIDS (PLWA).

As the Director of the Center for Melanesian Studies at the University of Goroka, I would like to provide a leadership in reviving and conserving *hausman/meri* in collaboration with the National Museum and Arts Gallery of Papua New Guinea. This can only be realized with significant funding from governments, international organizations and the Commonwealth of Museums.

Questions for discussion in the conference

1. Explore ways to find out if *hausman/meri* institutions and their rituals still exist in their community.
2. How can the museum collective revive and promote *hausman/meri* and their traditional institutions, values, system and practices?
3. What are practical ways of reviving and conserving *hausman/meri*?
4. How can these institutions meaningfully contribute to preventing spread of HIV/AIDS and to the care of PLWA in the Highlands of PNG.

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