How could it be that a celebration that had been part of the customary calendar across living memory was displaced by a global event—or, rather, a globally referenced celebration—that the world did not know about?

Opening Story

Omarakana is the village of the Paramount Chief of the Trobriand Islands. Each year on Kiriwina Island, the largest of the Trobriands, their annual harvest of yams is followed by a period of festivities known as Mila Mala. Yams are the staple crop on Kiriwina, but they are also items of great cultural and spiritual importance. Mila Mala celebrations occur when the harvest in a village is particularly good, and they are a means through which that community exhibits its wealth and standing to the other communities around it. The yams are collected, presented, and stored inside tall wooden yam houses painted with distinctive patterns in red, black and white; and dancing and feasting occupy the community for several days. The elaborate sexuality of the celebrations was famously documented by the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the early twentieth century, and is partially responsible for the Trobriands’ reputation as the ‘Islands of Love’. More stories have been written about the Trobriands than perhaps any other region in Papua New Guinea, and the people of Kiriwina are practiced in rehearsing foundational stories about themselves to outsiders. The story we tell here, however, is not one of theirs, but rather narrates the unfolding of two celebrations—one that did happen and one that did not (that is, at least neither in the customary sense of the festival nor in the modern sense of what had been planned). The juxtaposition of the two celebrations carries the full weight of social change in the Trobriands and the layers of the tribal, traditional and modern.

In 2006, an Organizing Committee under the auspice of the Council of Chiefs, and chaired by Kevin Kaidoga, received funding to run the Mila Mala festival. The managed event was intended to attract tourism, showcase the Trobriands, and project community. As part of this, the introduction of money fundamentally altered the celebrations and delayed it until a time-out-of-time till one day, late in September, long after harvesting. Where the organization of the celebrations previously had everything to do with social
obligation, pride, and the customary understandings of status, it now had
to do with the receipt of a wage, and access to resources like cars and travel
allowances. Fixing a date and location for the festival meant overriding the
prior cosmological situating of *Mila Mala*, in which place and time depend
on the changing inter-relationships between villages, the particularity of
the seasons, and the outcomes of the harvest. There were allegations of
corruption and power misused, and murmurings about the presence of
‘money talk’ in the Organizing Committee. The 2006 festival nearly didn’t
happen—that is, until John Kasaipwalova, chief of the Kwenama Clan, drew
upon his own money and called in reciprocal relations to hold a central
festival at Bweka, about an hour’s walk from Omarakana. The dancing was
strong, but no tourists came, and the only non-local there, apart from the six
members of our research team, was Toby Neville, a bus driver whom some
people said was there to take photos of the girls to make into postcards. The
following year *Mila Mala*—which has followed the annual yam harvest for
as long as can be recalled through the oral history of the island—did not
happen at all. Or, rather to be more precise, only one small *Mila Mala* festival
was held at Oluweta Village and it neither had the sanction of the Council of
Chiefs nor the imprimatur of the *Mila Mala* Organizing Committee. Kenneth
Kalubaku said that his village refused to be part of the formal ceremonies
because of the broken promises in 2006.

In 2007, ironically, months after the harvest season, Oluweta became the
scene of another celebration on Kiriwina, one rooted in a much more
recent history. The revelry was in honour of Catholic World Youth Day
celebrations occurring across the globe, and it involved a locally-carved
wooden cross journeying across the Milne Bay islands. As part of the global
celebrations leading up to a Holy Mass celebrated by His Holiness Pope
Benedict XVI in Sydney, Australia in July 2008, a World Youth Cross had
been travelling the world. It had visited some provinces in Papua New
Guinea, but not Milne Bay, and so the Church in the province had arranged
for a special cross to be built and carried across the region. Catholicism
has entered deeply into social life and practice in this part of Papua New
Guinea. The Catholic Church is not the only church on Kiriwina Island, but
it has strong roots, particularly in the northern part of the island around
Omarakana and Bweka, near where the mission station still operates.

The cross which the provincial leadership of the Church commissioned was
built out of local kwila—a honey-coloured hardwood—and carved with
intricate patterns by master carvers. Beginning in Alotau, on the eastern tip
of the Papua New Guinea mainland, its journey had taken it to many of the
Milne Bay islands clustered in the Solomon Sea. Now, it was on Kiriwina,
the largest of the Trobriand Islands group, and had already spent time
in the custodianship of several villages. Today it was being carried from
Guseweta village to Oluweta, with a procession of two hundred or so people
accompanying it. The weeks of preparation had included filling potholes in
the road.
When the wooden cross finally arrived at Oluweta village, the procession moved slowly, soberly, up the road. The cross itself was carried by five young men, who rested the weight of it on their shoulders and bowed their heads as they walked. Others—young women and men wearing white shirts and red scarves around their necks—carried religious icons, conch shells and banners with biblical verses. The two women walking in front of the cross-bearers held a banner which read, ‘CROSS OF JESUS: WAY * TRUTH * LIFE’. Above the entrance to the village, which the cross-bearers now approached, another banner hung between two trees. Written with white paint on black plastic, were the words, ‘St FRANCIS ASISI of Oluweta Solemnly Welcomes THE HOLY CROSS’.

The people at Oluweta had been expecting to receive the cross early in the morning, but changes to the program for the day meant that its arrival was delayed. They had waited for it patiently. Underneath the welcoming banner, a group of young singers had spent the morning seated on the ground at the side of the road, dressed in white shirts and blue pants and skirts. Opposite them, four young women stood where they had been for the past four-and-a-half hours. They wore the tribal costume of young Trobriand dancers—short grass skirts with many layers, dyed mostly red but with patterns of yellow, blue and white. Feathers and shell valuables were affixed carefully to their headdresses, earrings, and the bands around their waists and arms; and their backs and chests were sprinkled with yellow pollen. Dancing has long been part of customary celebrations and rituals in the Trobriands, and the elaborate costumes and adornments which dancers wear are important signifiers of status and social relationships. Normally, they would be worn at Mila Mala, but the celebrations had not happened last harvest. Now, the dancers had been arranged to greet the Catholic cross, and their presence gave some suggestion of the respect with which the event was endowed.

Now, finally, the kwila-wood cross was making its way along the dirt road leading in to Oluweta. The singers stood up. Past them, within the village, young children holding ferns and flowers were thrust into position along the side of the road. The procession was accompanied by a man playing a guitar, and as they walked towards the black banner welcoming the cross, their singing joined with the singing of the choir which had been awaiting their arrival.

Past the entrance, the procession continued to the village church. The young dancers walked in front, leading the way with focussed seriousness. The people who had been waiting at the entrance now followed behind, while others were gathered in the open area in front of the church. Amongst them, old women wearing black funeral clothes with black fabric on their heads knelt on the ground, singing mourning songs in local language. As the procession reached them and the cross was lowered from the shoulders of the young men, they raised their hands above their heads to receive it. The people gathered around them knelt, many of them crying. The sound was of
singing mingled with sobs and soft moaning.

Later, there would be a service for those gathered, after which the cross would be interned inside the church. Dancing would follow, and feasting: the rituals of the introduced Church manifested with and through the customary rituals which long pre-date its presence on the island.

The occurrence of the Catholic World Youth Day celebrations on Kiriwina was thus matched in its significance by another occurrence, or rather, an omission, that of the *Mila Mala* celebrations the year before. If the World Youth Cross celebrations were extraordinary in their local-global novelty, the yearly yam harvest was extraordinary for the relative absence of celebration. Both happenings have their roots in the various influences which have made their way into Trobriands society since the colonizing project began. Together, they paint a complicated picture of change and continuity on Kiriwina Island; of the dynamism of culture, and the messy back and forth between the old and the new.

**Place—Past and Present**

Located in the Solomon Sea beyond the eastern tip of the Papua New Guinea mainland, the Trobriand Islands are a collection of populated coral atolls and over a hundred unpopulated small islets which form part of the Milne Bay province. They were named for Denis de Trobriand, the first lieutenant in one of D’Entrecasteaux’s frigates when this group of populated atolls and hundreds of islets was sighted in 1793. Other groups of islands surround
them—including the D’Entrecasteaux Islands, the Amphlett Islands and the Louissiade Archipelago—and although many of these island groups are geographically quite close to the mainland, the ocean around them and the high cost of travel have meant they remain remote places. There is great variety in cultural traditions and practices across the region, but interconnections between the islands and fundamental similarities mean that they are often considered together under the heading of ‘Massim’ society. The largest of the populated islands in the Trobriands group is Kiriwina, which has around sixty villages in which over 25,000 people live. Although many young people leave the islands to find paid employment or to pursue education on the mainland, a large percentage of them eventually return to resume village life, and the population has grown considerably over recent decades. Set at the northern end of Kiriwina, and about thirty minutes drive from the district administrative centre of Losuia, is Omarakana village.

Omarakana village is home to the Paramount Chief Pulavasi Daniel, the highest customary authority in the Milne Bay area. It is a position passed down matrilineally through the leading Tabalu clan. Today, the Paramount’s Chief house is a large structure built out of modern blue-painted timber-board and fibro. It is surrounded by smaller, traditional style huts with thatched pandanus roofs. In a clearing behind the house stands the Chief’s yam house. Trobriand yam houses, tall narrow wooden structures painted with distinctive red and white patterns, are one of the more immediately recognizable instances of Trobriand art and culture, with replicas found in hotel gardens in Port Moresby, and miniature models sold in the city’s tourist shops. Used to store the staple food which is harvested annually around mid-year, the yam houses are also important cultural signifiers of wealth and status, and while each village chief has his own, it is the Paramount Chief’s which should be the tallest and best-kept. In 2008 the Chief’s yam house looked in need of major work with its thatch roof was broken. Nearby yam houses looked worse. Maybe it was a bad year, and the physical sense of the village had certainly changed across the last few years, but it also seemed less resilient than on earlier visits going back to the late 1970s.

Physically, the Trobriand Islands are elevated coral atolls and most, including Kiriwina, are flat. Tropical vegetation and rich soil allow for productive gardening, predominantly of yams. Roads connect most of the villages to each other, with their rough surface made of exposed coral. Off to the sides of these run thin dirt tracks leading to the yam gardens where women labour to produce the important crop. They are aided in this by regular, heavy rainfall, but periods of drought are not unknown and when they occur they can result in severe food shortages.

Losuia, the district headquarters, has a post office, several administrative offices, and a number of trade stores. Kiriwina High School nearby provides education for day students (expensive, at a cost of 600 Kina annually in 2008)
and boarders (900 kina) from villages further away. Also present on the island is a Catholic mission station in which three nuns—two from Italy and one from Myanmar—are currently based. An airstrip built by American soldiers during the Second World War is still functional, and planes fly from Port Moresby to Kiriwina twice a week. Also left over from the war are the wrecks of submarines and ships around the coast, and an assortment of broken weaponry and other pieces of equipment which villagers regularly dig up when making new yam gardens or working in existing ones. In one of the two lodges on the island offering accommodation to tourists—some of whom come to dive in the shipwrecks or snorkel off the coast—shell casings are used as tiny vases to hold the frangipani flowers which decorate the dining room tables.

Organization and Governance

A complex system of inter-linked clans and tribes provides the basis for social organization in Kiriwina, as it does throughout the Milne Bay region. Connecting the tribes is a strong, shared set of cultural practices, a common history with distinct but overlapping myths and stories of origin, established patterns of trade and festivities, and a shared language. The Kilivila language belongs to the Milne Bay family of Austronesian languages, and although it is spoken on a few other Massim islands, Trobrianders are the major speakers. Kilivila takes the form of a number of local dialects, which are mutually understandable, and which have also absorbed a number of English words and terms in the period since first contact. Tok Pisin is rarely used, although many locals who travel beyond the island for work and education learn both it and Motu.

Matrilineal lines underpin systems of land ownership and inheritance, and also determine social identity and relationships of responsibility and obligation. As one set of stories relate the structure, there are four main tribal grouping on the island, represented by different totems: the white pigeon, green parrot, eagle, and red-and-yellow parakeet. Cutting across these tribes are a number of clans, membership of which is passed matrilineally through family groups. The four primary clan groups are: the Tabalu, from which the Paramount Chief is drawn; the Toruwaga, who are the rival clan to the Tabalus; the Kwenama; and the Mulabwema. A tribe will include members of different clans, but within each tribe there will be a leading clan from which the chiefly line will be drawn. So, the Tabalu are the leading clan within the Malasi, or white pigeon tribe, and the Kwenama and Toruwaga clans are the two leading clans from which the chiefs of the Green Parrot tribe are drawn, while the Mulabwema are the chiefly clan of the eagle tribe (the chiefly clan of the red-and-yellow parakeet tribe is not represented within the whole-island chiefdom structure). Customarily, inter-marriage within tribes was taboo, but now instances of marriage between people from the same tribal groupings are not uncommon.

Relationships of authority and responsibility exist within the parameters of
the tribe. Tribal chiefs are drawn from the dominant clans within each tribe, and beneath them the other clans of the tribe are arranged in a hierarchy. Different clans are allocated different responsibilities in relation to the tribal chief, whether it be resourcing materials or producing the lime with which he chews his buai. Those in chiefly matrilineages, ranked among themselves, own rights to special prerogatives surrounding food prohibitions and taboos that mark spatial and physical separation as well as rights to wear particular feather and shell decorations and to decorate houses with ancestral designs and cowrie shells. The most important prerogative for chiefs is the entitlement to many wives. At least four of each wife’s relatives make huge yam gardens for her and this is the way a chief achieves great power. But if a chief is weak, he will have difficulty finding women to marry. Chiefly entitlement also comes with reciprocal responsibilities to those in their tribes, including social obligations to host feasts and redistribute wealth.

While chiefs exert authority over their tribes, it is the Paramount Chief in Omarakana village who is the unquestioned ultimate authority on the island. In the central clearing in Omarakana, the place of the yam houses, is also the site where Bwenaya, a sacred stone which is the respected goddess of the weather, is buried. Her precise location is known only to the Paramount Chief, and it from the Goddess that he draws his strength. Most, if not all, decisions affecting the island as a whole are made by him, such as those affecting feasts, festivities and harvesting. He presides over the Kiriwina Council of Chiefs, which includes chiefs from the major clans across the island. He presides as well over the Kiriwina Local Government Council, which consists of local councillors elected under the modern local level government political structure. The Paramount Chief’s role in presiding over this forum is demonstrative of the continuing strength and influence of customary-tribal systems of political organization and authority, but it is also indicative of the ways in which modern structures of power are shaped and acted upon through their incorporation into predominantly tribal social contexts.

The Catholic Church has been influential in Kiriwina society since the early days of colonial contact. As witnessed through events such as the recent World Youth Cross celebration, there are deeply-felt affective ties connecting the church and local communities, but the presence of Catholicism and other Christian churches has not shaken the customary belief systems of Trobriand Islanders. The belief in, and practice of magic is embedded in the day-to-day life-worlds of Kiriwina. While sorcery is feared above all else, magic more broadly is an accepted part of most aspects of social life—love, beauty, gardening, weather, sailing, and skills such as carving or boat building. Knowledge and practice of magic, spells, charms and incantations is determined by matrilineage, status and relationships of taboo. On a festive occasion, for example, the ceremonial washing and decoration of dancers is undertaken by women of a special class, namely those who stand to them in the relation of taboo. In other words, these women are approved and
suitable partners for passing intrigues, or for more stable liaisons or for marriage. It is their duty to prepare the men for the dance, to deck them out with ornaments, with flowers and with paint, and to perform the magic incidental to each stage of the proceeding. In this way, magic as practice becomes part of the way that social life in the community is ordered and understood.

The ritualistic dimensions of the practice of magic are indicative of the complex patterns of exchange and interaction which permeate all of Trobriand social life. Relationships of obligation and reciprocity bind people together, often over considerable distance and time. This is evident, for instance, in cultural practices surrounding death and burial. When a person dies, Trobriand Islanders believe their spirit goes to live on the distant island of Tuma where the ancestors continue their existence. The mourning and exchanges following a death are the most lengthy and costly of all ritual events. When a person dies, an all-night vigil takes place in which men sing traditional songs and the spouse and children of the deceased cry over the body. A series of food and women’s wealth distributions take place after
the burial, after which the close relatives of the spouse and father of the dead person shave their hair and/or blacken their bodies while the spouse remains secluded. About six months later, those who have been in mourning are repaid by women of the deceased’s matrilineage, who host a huge distribution of skirts and banana-leaf bundles amongst the many hundreds of mourners. Grass skirts and banana-leaf bundles are both important items of women’s wealth, and skills in making them are highly valued, passed down within families from mothers and aunts to daughters and nieces. The status of big-woman is secured for those who distribute most wealth, meaning that power and obligation remain tightly intertwined. When the deceased is an important person, an annual distribution of yams, pork, taro pudding, sugarcane, or betel nuts take place each year following their death. At the end of the annual harvest period, it is believed that the ancestors of a matrilineage return to the Trobriands from the island of Tuma to examine the well-being of their kin, and when a harvest is especially large, a village-wide distribution will be held to honour all the recently deceased from one clan.

The anthropologist Malinowski recognized the primacy of exchange rituals in Trobriand social life. Writing in 1922, he described the basis of what he called the ‘tribal economics’ of the Islands as being

…that the whole tribal life is permeated by a constant give and take; that every ceremony, every legal and customary act is done to the accompaniment of material gift and counter gift; that wealth, given and taken, is one of the main instruments of social organisation, of the power of the chief, of the bonds of kinship, and of relationship in law.\(^1\)

The intricate webs of connection created through ritual practices of exchange are perhaps most vividly illustrated in the operation of the Kula ring. Where funeral distributions and other social practices involve the exchange of women’s wealth—banana leaf bundles and grass skirts—Kula is the means of exchange of men’s wealth, shell valuables. Networks of men extend across geographical space—extending beyond Kiwirina and the Trobriand Islands and encompassing most of the Milne Bay area—creating a ‘ring’, or route, through which the shell valuables move in a complex pattern of gift and counter-gift. Shell necklace valuables, soulava, move clockwise through the ring, while arm shell valuables, mwari, move in an anti-clockwise direction. Exchanges take place between individuals and their partners, and the numbers of partners a Kula participant has will vary according to their power and status. Partner relationships may be life-long in their duration, and entail obligations to provide hospitality, protection and assistance. They can at times be fraught with conflict, but the time delay between the exchange of gift and counter-gift means that they also rely on trust and the strength of social obligation. In this sense, a crucial dimension of the Kula gift economy is its distinction from the bartering and trade of items of use value.
Within the Kula ring, giving is always weighted more highly than receiving: as with women’s wealth, objects hold significance in themselves, but it is the redistribution of those objects which secures the social status of the giver. The value of the objects themselves is ceremonial, and lies in their being signifiers of status and connection. While a particular valuable is in the possession of a Kula participant, he will display it—often on the body of his wife, daughters or nieces—and the necklace or armband brings status to his family through signifying the Kula relationships which have enabled him to acquire it. Slowness in passing on an object that one has received, however, is likely to tarnish the reputation of a participant, and so valuables are assured an ongoing movement through the ring.

While Malinowski praised the ceremonial gift exchange of the Kula ring, he also predicted that it would eventually fall into demise. This has not happened, but as with all dimensions of cultural and social life, the practices of Kula have changed over the years since the first colonial contact with the Milne Bay islands, and the ring is under pressure. In some instances, the contemporary Kula ring has expanded across geographical space, with some items now held by individuals in Port Moresby, and possibly even as far as Australia, cut off from the partner relationships which were maintained through sea-going travel between the islands. The introduction of a cash economy has impacted on the Kula tradition as well, with some participants suggesting that valuables are now being purchased for cash by individuals who keep them as their property, failing to pass them on and honour the customary obligations. When this happens, or when the time lapse between gift and counter-gift is collapsed into a momentary cash transaction, the relationships created by the Kula exchange are lost. Politics have always been part of the ritual practices around Kula, but politics in the Trobriands are changing now; and gift economies such as the Kula ring are being transformed through contact with new economies, ideologies and forms of social being.

Livelihood and Provision

Subsistence agriculture is the mainstay of the Kiriwina community. The staple crop is, of course, yams, which carry a social and cultural significance far beyond their dietary function. The growing of yams—which includes planting, staking up the vines of the plants and tending to them as they grow—is generally men’s work, although it is not unheard of for a woman to make her own yam garden. Men also work in building garden fences, and are generally responsible for the yearly yam harvest which precedes the *Mila Mala* period of festivities. When a woman is married, her father and eventually her brothers must make yam gardens and produce a yearly yam harvest for her husband. This work is done in her name, as recognition of the matrilineal ownership of the land on which the yams are grown.

While yam growing is predominantly men’s work, both men and women will work together to clear new garden land, and women take responsibility
for producing other garden foods. Taro, sweet potatoes, bananas, sugarcane, leafy greens, beans, tapioca, squashes, coconuts, and areca palms are all grown, and unlike yams their function is purely as a source of daily sustenance. The daily diet which these foodstuffs provide is supplemented with fish for those in coastal communities, and those who trade with them. Pork is eaten occasionally, at times of special feasting. Like yams, pigs carry a social and cultural importance in Kiriwina society and, as with the yam farming, the butchering of pigs and preparation of pork for feasts is done by men. Daily cooking, though, is women’s work.

The importance of subsistence agriculture for Kiriwina livelihoods is reflected in the results of the Community Sustainability questionnaire. Of those surveyed, 95 per cent indicated that fishing and work done on their own land was their primary source of food. Their responses also spoke to the demanding and time-consuming labour which is required for this work: 60 per cent of respondents said that they worked for 60 or more hours a week, in contrast to an overall figure of just 24 per cent across all the research sites. Another 13 per cent of Kiriwinans surveyed said they worked for between forty and sixty hours a week. It is difficult to corroborate these figures without extensive surveys of individuals over periods of time, but it is significant that the estimations of their own labour time which people provided were much greater than those provided by respondents in many other communities, particularly less remote ones.

In more recent times, fishing has provided coastal men with limited access to a cash income, and a fishing co-operative has been successful on nearby Vakuta Island. In the last few years, a local market run by women has been established on Kiriwina, but there are little other sources of income-generation. Isolated as the community is, relatively few outsiders come to the island, although the grounds around the tiny airstrip are filled with young men selling crabs and fish when the flight from Port Moresby comes in twice a week. There has been little success with cash-cropping enterprises, and, since colonization, government attempts at establishing such schemes have failed, save for a period of copra production.

The only other source of income comes from the few tourists who visit the island. In the 1970s, weekend tourist charters resulted in increasing sales of the distinctive Trobriands wooden carvings, but over the past decade tourism has declined dramatically. The numbers of men trying to sell their intricate carved walking sticks and other pieces far outnumber the tourists on hand to purchase them. The ebony wood which is used to create them is now also greatly depleted and must be imported from other islands. A few Kiriwinans own successful trade stores, and these is one guest lodge run by a local man and his family. An additional guest lodge and two other trade stores are owned and run by expatriates. Today, remittances from children working elsewhere in the country provide villagers with their main source of cash.
What little cash income is produced on the island, or gotten through remittances from places like Alotau and Port Moresby on the mainland, goes towards purchasing rice, tobacco, kerosene and cloth, and towards the payment of school fees. Women’s bundles of dried banana leaves act as a limited currency. Villagers with access to cash will sometimes buy trade-store goods, which they on-sell to other villagers for payment in bundles, allowing those without cash to purchase Western merchandise.

Trade is another important means of acquiring goods which are not produced by Kiriwina villagers themselves, and has a long history in the Milne Bay region. Massim men are skilled sailors, and canoes are still used to connect the Trobriand Islands to each other, and to the island groups which surround them. Stone axes blades, another important item of men’s wealth, were traded in from Muyua Island and polished in the Trobriands in the last century, and many still circulate today. Large cooking pots, also used in local exchanges, come from the Amphlett Islands, while canoes from Normanby and Goodenough islands arrive periodically with sacks of betel nuts that are sold at the Kiriwina wharf. Regular Kula voyaging also facilitates regular trade and bartering, in addition to the ceremonial exchange of shell valuables.

**Learning and Education**

Levels of both literacy and formal education in Kiriwina are generally low compared to other remote islands in the province, and other communities
across the country. Of those surveyed through the Community Sustainability Questionnaire, 21 per cent indicated that they had no formal schooling, much higher than the overall figure of 9 per cent across all eleven communities where the questionnaire was conducted. Thirty-four per cent had completed primary education, and 36 per cent had completed some or all of their secondary education. Nine per cent of respondents had some form of trade training, down again from the overall figure of 13 percent, and none of those surveyed had been to university. The low levels of formal education partly reflect the limited access to schools for children on the island. There is inadequate basic education provision, and just one high school on the island, at the administrative centre of Losuia. Some students from more distant parts of the island board at this school, while other children travel to the mainland, returning for holidays. Boarding, however, is expensive, and the limited access to cash makes affording school fees a challenge.

The lack of formal education also reflects the low priority given to primary and secondary education in comparison to the importance placed on agriculture and customary practices. This does not mean that learning and education are not valued, rather that learning activities are more strongly weighted towards the passing on of customary knowledge. Included amongst these are the skills associated with agriculture, farming and fishing, as well as dancing, canoe making, carving, weaving and the use of magic. The gendered division of labour and customary practice is reflected in the processes through which knowledge is passed from generation to generation, with parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents all participating in handing down the skills and information which enable both boys and girls to partake in social life.

The importance accorded to traditional aspects of Kiriwinan life is reflected in the results gathered through the surveying of villagers. Training in both family life and traditional ways of doing things were strongly desired, with 56 and 51 per cent of respondents respectively indicating that these things would be useful. However there is also a strong desire for forms of training and education more specifically geared towards participation in modern social and economic realms. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said that they would benefit from agricultural skills training, twenty-four percent wanted training in management skills, and 31 per cent considered training in income-generation desirable.

The tenacity of customary skills and cultural practice, as well as the knowledge underpinning livelihood activities, is one of the community’s greatest strengths. There is, however, an evident gap in the provision of basic education and formal skills training opportunities. What is clear in Kiriwina is that people are being called upon to negotiate both tribal and modern forms of social, economic and cultural life. The sustainable development of the community demands the capacity to move in and
between these ways of being, and education and learning should be oriented towards this end. In practice, this means that more avenues for accessing formal schooling, training and modern forms of knowledge need to be created. Such forms of learning cannot, in and of themselves, engender the resilience and adaptability which sustainable community development demands, but they form an essential dimension of a community education strategy that begins with celebrating and strengthening the strong traditions through which customary knowledge and skills are maintained.

**Endnotes**