

## THE DEATH OF A KEY SYMBOL

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In 1990, Susana Lodu Qoele died on Simbo, Western Solomon Islands.<sup>1</sup> She was the last surviving witness to the Methodist Mission's arrival in 1903. In the months surrounding her death she became a focus of widespread concerns about Simbo Christianity (*Lotu*) and *kastom*.<sup>2</sup> Many expressed the view that *kastom* was lost, others debated the veracity of claims that particular practices were *kastom*. Such concerns overlapped disagreements about proper Christianity, with various people claiming that morality had paradoxically declined during Christianity, others that Simbo Christianity remained threatened by persistent darkness. In this context of long-standing struggle, Lodu came to symbolise the proper marriage of Christianity and *kastom*, a moral society and an idealised movement from darkness to light.

A particular convergence of factors brought Lodu to such prominence. All old people were well known, but she was the oldest person on Simbo. The understanding that she was probably approaching her centenary (she did not know precisely when she was born) made her remarkable. It became increasingly obvious that she would soon die: although she was not ill, she no longer left the house and she began to speak of dying. At around the same time, the local branch of the United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (UC), the then-successor church to the Methodist Mission, began discussions about their 2003 centenary celebrations. In this context, Lodu's memories became highly valued as potential centrepieces of a commemorative publication. Finally, my research for an ethnographic history of Simbo religion was significant because people were very interested in its potential utility in establishing particular truths about the past. There was no consensus about what a truthful ethnography should be however. Indeed Lodu's death highlighted the contentiousness of the past.

These three matters: (i) the approaching death of Lodu, a remnant of a radically different time and a centenarian or near centenarian; (ii) the reflection prompted by the approaching centenary in a society defining itself in terms of movement from heathen darkness to Christian light, and (iii) the questions and reflections, possibilities and uncertainty raised by my research, all influenced Lodu's status as a key symbol. During this period, different groups used the symbolic Lodu to conjure their visions of Simbo sociality and dispute others' interpretations. Yet her prominence was short lived and within a few months she faded from the on-going contestation.

In this article I consider Lodu as a transient key symbol, to highlight the significance of temporality to “key symbols”. Anthropology is replete with rich accounts of persistent important symbols, even as their content and significance may be shifting. However, as Moore (1994) notes, most analyses assume the relative stability of symbols. Against this, I am interested in their life cycle, focusing on a short-lived but arguably key symbol. Certainly, although she encapsulated and embodied them, Lodu as symbol cannot be seen as *fundamentally* important to Simbo cultural understandings. However, for a time, she was a key symbolic expression of and model for addressing prevailing social concerns and uncertainties. A means of expressing cultural models of social life, she was also a pivot for the articulation of concerns about social decay and cultural loss. My account of Simbo suggests social uncertainty, an experiential sense of constant change and decline. In such contexts, a key symbol might be key without being intrinsic to social and cultural being. Indeed, in situations in which people seek means to articulate their visions of society, it is perhaps unsurprising that key symbols may arise without occupying the stable place implied by an understanding of key symbols as systematically interwoven into the wider symbolic system.

After a brief background description, I first summarise Sherry Ortner’s 1973 account of “key symbols”. I then outline Lodu’s life, death and symbolic significance in the weeks and months surrounding her death. This is followed by an analysis of Lodu as a key symbol. Finally, I address her declining symbolic potency as her death receded in time and she came to be remembered as a good old kinswoman, rather than taken to symbolise impossible ideals. In contrast to prevailing assumptions about the longevity and structural fixity of key symbols, I highlight the historical moment of symbolic prominence and suggest the contingency of some key symbols’ existence.

#### A KEY SYMBOL IN PLACE

Simbo is a small island in the New Georgia Group of the Western Solomon Islands. Tinoni Simbo (Person/s of Simbo) speak an Austronesian language, also known as Simbo, and in the 1990s, when my fieldwork was undertaken, most were fluent in Solomon Islands Pijin. Some 2000 people identified themselves as Tinoni Simbo, although many of them lived in the national or provincial capitals, Honiara and Gizo, with kin or affines elsewhere, or in wage-labour areas. Most people were subsistence horticulturalists and commodity traders of surplus produce (kumara, watermelon, bonito, megapode eggs, etc.), manufactured items like pandanus mats and, occasionally, livestock such as pigs. Increasingly, young people left to seek waged work. Many remained in town for various periods, but others returned, homesick or disappointed at the costs of living elsewhere. Some came home

after saving enough to establish a small enterprise, opening a small store in their homes or buying a canoe and engine for bonito fishing or passenger services, for example.

The island has an unusually high population density in a region characterised by small populations in rich land and marine environments. This provoked acute awareness of Simbo's relatively limited resources and perhaps contributed to the intensity of a widespread sense that society was increasingly selfish and unequal, and thus 'not straight' (*sake tozomo*, evoking wrongness, moral decline, waywardness, immorality). These concerns, expressed mainly by those living on the island—often in response to their urban-resident kin's seeming indifference to their needs—coalesced around matters of money, sharing and willingness to help others. A seemingly decadent present was juxtaposed to an idealised pre-Christian time of social encompassment, generosity and mutuality. Such sentiments articulated key cultural-moral ideas of compassionate love (*taru*: love, compassion, pity) and generosity and projected it into a past of heathen ancestors, described to me by some as "good sinners of the time before".

Everyone on the island was Christian, although there were marked differences of intensity to Christian belief, practice and discourse. Conversion, conceptualised as a movement from darkness to light, occurred in the early 20th century, with rapid acceptance of Methodism. Subsequently, small congregations of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission (SDA), Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) and South Seas Evangelical Church were established on the island. Urban dwellers also subscribed to a number of other denominations. Denominational differences were points of considerable tension, as most prominently reflected in rhetorical histories of breakaways and the domestic violence in many of those mixed-denominational marriages in which women declined to adopt their husbands' denominations. Despite this variety the United Church, which is my focus in this article, was the church of a large majority.

#### SUMMARISING KEY SYMBOLS

Despite enormous changes in anthropologists' approaches to culture since the publication of Sherry Ortner's "On Key Symbols" in 1973 (e.g., Faubion 2001, Keesing 1987, Ortner 1999), the concept remains widely cited in anthropological and other analyses of symbolic phenomena.<sup>3</sup> This diverse usage suggests something of its enduring value, her distinction between summarising and elaborating symbols highlighting their place in ideological, emotional and practice domains. There has been little development of the concept since Ortner formulated it and it often serves definitional rather than analytical purposes. The paper is cited largely uncritically, the same passages

on summarising and elaborating symbols cited, paraphrased and quoted, and their significance for the particular analysis often briefly noted before authors proceed with their argument. It is unnecessary to rehearse Ortner's account in great detail. The article is extremely well known directly or indirectly through its many scholarly applications. Here, I briefly outline the main elements of her concept, elaborating them as necessary later.

As Ortner (1973: 1338) observes, the "primary question... is what do we mean by 'key'?", since there seems no limit to what can be treated as a symbol or even an important symbol. Writing at a time when cultural and social systems were perceived as more coherent and systematic than we now understand them to be, Ortner eventually answers herself by reference to "the internal organization of the system of cultural meaning as that system functions for actors leading their lives in the culture": key symbols are key because they are "'key' to the system" (1973: 1343). The key metaphor comes across strongly here. The implication is of the analyst unlocking or revealing a deep cultural logic that links apparently disparate elements. Likewise, the concern with system suggests a degree of symbolic stability despite historical changes (see also Ortner 1990).

Ortner divides key symbols into summarising and elaborating symbols, the latter also divided into root metaphors and key scenarios. Summarising and elaborating symbols are heuristically, rather than absolutely, distinguished. The central distinction between the two is essentially one of emotion and intellect.<sup>4</sup> Summarising symbols encapsulate or stimulate sentiments. They stand for things held to be sacred. Ortner uses the example of the flag. By contrast, elaborating symbols provide means for people to work through issues, serving as instruments of reflection on their society or situation and means towards formulating responses to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Elaborating symbols are themselves divided into root metaphors and key scenarios. Root metaphors are very basic cultural metaphors, which suffuse worldview and cultural life. As such, they structure people's thinking by providing basic means of conceiving the nature of the world and their place in it. Key scenarios are cultural scripts for behaviour in mundane or extraordinary circumstances. I interpret Ortner as meaning that these may be unreflectively followed but also available for explicit reflection. A given key scenario does not apply to a single situation, but is a model transferable to diverse social circumstances. The Horatio Alger "rags to riches" myth, for example, provides a template for social reflection and action in a wide array of situations in the capitalist USA.

Ortner develops and modifies her approach in later work (for example, 1990), where she particularly develops her model of key schemas (which she

comes to prefer over scenarios). My over-riding concern, though, is with the particular issue of historical contingency. Further, scholars overwhelmingly continue to draw upon her original formulation. For these reasons, I focus on her original published piece throughout this article. I largely employ Ortner's framework as laid out here. In particular, I describe Lodu as both summarising and elaborating symbol in different contexts. My argument, then, is not with the concept of key symbol so much as suggesting that time may be a significant element of key symbols themselves.

#### LODU

I had been on Simbo only a few weeks when I first heard about Lodu Qoele. My Pijin was fluent, my vernacular speech still poor, when I was introduced to Moni, a church "big man". He told me about her and insisted that I take my tape-recorder down to her home in Nusa Simbo in order to record her account of the "descent of *Lotu*" as the foundation for my true Simbo history. When I visited Nusa Simbo shortly thereafter for this purpose, Moni told me more of what he expected of my Simbo ethnography—no "lying stories" (i.e., myths, celebrations of pre-Christian society, accounts of ancestral prowess), an account of Simbo Christianity (UC, not SDA or CFC), a history of those Tinoni Simbo who had been missionaries, and confirmation of the strength of Simbo Christianity. Against this, I had visions of the anthropological possibility implied by one who had lived in a world unsullied by missionaries. So, differently motivated, we set off to see her.

Lodu was born in Tapurai village at the NW end of the island, where the missionaries first landed. She lived there for years before moving to Nusa Simbo. Her life took a particular trajectory when, as a young married woman, she decided, against her husband's wishes, to "make Jesus true", i.e., to believe in Him. According to our discussion after she told her story, she had developed breasts but was not yet married when the missionaries arrived, placing her in her late 90s or early century when she died. By the 1990s, then, Lodu was one of the very few remaining Tinoni Simbo who had once practised ancestor veneration. She was both unique as a witness to that encounter and important as one who could describe it, precisely at a point at which it was taking on particular social salience.

Moni and I entered the house where she lived with her son Zoni and his wife Taru. Lodu was sitting inside wearing a light cotton dress, toothless and blind; her voice quavered. Unusually, neither of us addressed each other, Moni translating back and forth. I recorded her brief account (reproduced in Dureau 2001) and asked a few clarifying questions which she answered briefly and, to my mind, disappointingly. Lodu was vague, her short-term memory was poor and she clearly wished we would go away and let her rest. We did so.

Naïvely assuming that I could return when my language and understanding of Christian affairs were better developed, I focused on other matters.

There was no further news of Lodu for several months until the UC Quarterly Meeting requested a copy of her account. They were also disappointed at its content, so I mentioned my intentions to speak to her again but suggested that, for their purposes, it might be better if a Simbo person conducted the interview. The Chairman told me, “You can’t do that. Lodu is lying down, waiting for death.”

Indeed, the Narovo branch of the United Church Women’s Fellowship (UCWF) soon called all members to go and visit Lodu. UCWF members always visited dying people and *post partum* women and I participated in a number of those visits, none with delegations as large as that to Lodu. Some 30 of us trooped to Nusa Simbo, each carrying a small gift to the family—a bar or two of laundry soap, a kilo of rice, half a dozen large kumara or something of similar value and utility. These were left discretely on the front verandah, the visits being marks of respect and compassion rather than of ostentatious giving. As many as possible of us then moved inside, others clustering on the verandah. I was made to enter, although it meant that someone else had to remain outside.

Lodu lay semi-conscious or drowsing on a mattress in the corner. The other women sang a mournful hymn that I did not know. Then the President addressed her and Taru, speaking of Tamasa’s love, Lodu’s lengthy life and our knowledge that she was at peace. There were more prayers, before Taru thanked us, saying that Tamasa would bless us for our visit. Lodu, she said, had asked her to care for her because they had lived together for many years and Lodu loved her as her ‘true child’ (*tuqu sosoto*).<sup>5</sup> Recently, Lodu had told her that her life is now finished: “I lie down and wait for my death. Tamasa keeps us all, do not be concerned.” She had subsequently declined all nourishment other than occasional sips of juice or water because she did not want Taru to be burdened with cleaning a soiled body and bed.

Several days after our UCWF visit, my friend Lidia asked me to accompany her to see Lodu because she had been unable to join us. She and Lodu were close kin through Lidia’s mother and had a longstanding affectionate relationship. Carrying rice and oranges we set out on Sunday afternoon. Arriving and shaking hands with Taru and Lodu’s sons, we entered. I remained quietly in the corner, as Lidia approached the bed.

Lidia: Qoele, [it’s] me, Lidia.

Lodu: [faintly] Lidia, you were almost late, my daughter.<sup>6</sup> I thank Tamasa you come a last time. Now I can be peaceful, my child. *Evaḡana zola*. [*Evaḡana* means good, OK, correct, there-there, alright. *Evaḡana zola* very good, excellent, thank you, greetings, goodbye, so be it.]

Lidia [crying]: I praise Tamasa for keeping you strong for so long. I bring the immense love of my family. *Evaņana zola*, Qoele. On the Last Day we will see each other. *Evaņana zola*. Be at peace, my mother. *Evaņana zola*.

Lodu: Tamasa keeps us all, my daughter. Don't be concerned.

Lodu relapsed into silence and Lidia sat beside her for some time, weeping silently, before standing and motioning that we would leave. We shook hands with everyone again and sat for a few minutes before returning to our own villages.

To everyone's amazement, Lodu lived for some time. As she lingered, she became something more than the woman who remembered seeing the missionaries come, a literal embodiment of a more impressive time. Her prolonged dying was said to be due to rituals performed in her childhood to bless her with longevity and health, an idea that replicated a widespread theme of physical decline paralleling the island's marginalisation since pacification and conversion. Several people told me or I heard them say, "She's truly strong, that *qoele*. Truly a person of the time before". Other UCWF groups and men's fellowships visited. Her surviving sons and daughters living elsewhere returned home, as did those grandchildren, great- and great-great-grandchildren able to do so. Meanwhile, Lodu lay quietly, answering minimally when spoken to, Taru or other kinswomen nearby.

During this time, I had to visit another island to attend a wedding intended to shore up a Simbo's family's legal claims to land holdings there. When we returned, we learned that Lodu had died and we had missed both her funeral and subsequent events. What follows, then, is a composite of various accounts and comments.

Lodu continued to lie on her mattress, growing no weaker or stronger. She wanted to die, her spirit [*tomate*] was anxious to leave her body, but she was too strong because she was a person of the Time One Day. The Minister prayed and her family prayed, begging Tamasa to release her, all to no avail because "it was not a thing of *Lotu*". "She was already baptised long ago. Her soul was a *Lotu* soul, but the people of One Day worked charms on her to make her strong. Before *Lotu* descended, they did that—they made her body strong so she couldn't die."

Finally, her relatives told her that they were going to call in a man who knew *kastom* medicine to release her. "*Evaņana zola*", she replied. "Then a man who knew the words from the Time One Day came and pronounced the words to release her", telling her breath to go to the places traditionally traversed by the soul on their way to the pre-Christian home of the dead, Sondo (Shortland Islands). "Finally, he said, 'Leave this *qoele* so she can be [at] peace. You go!' Hearing these words, Lodu stopped breathing; she died."

Her funeral was very large, with people coming from across the island and various parts of the Solomons. The Minister preached a “good” sermon celebrating her as the archetypal heathen who saw the Light, converted and thereafter lived an ideal Christian life. On the day of her funeral, more areca nut [*A. catechu*] and food, including a pig, was distributed than at any other funeral people could remember. On her *vamade*, another pig was distributed, along with chicken and fresh and tinned fish and ample rice and kumara.

A number of themes and references in this summary need explication. First, *vamade* (lit. ‘make four’), the second occasion on which food was distributed is, in traditional cosmology, the day on which a person’s shade, mournfully lingering near those it loved, must begin its journey to Sondo. On that day, the family of the dead person ate a meal in their remembrance. Traditionally, this was a conceptualised as eaten in communion with the dead person, the smoke of cooking fires nourishing their spirit. *Vamade* usually involved substantially fewer people than the funeral.<sup>7</sup> Killing a pig for Lodu’s *vamade* was thus an even more notable undertaking than doing so for her funeral.

Linking Lodu to the “Time One Day” is also significant. Simbo used two key phrases to refer to the pre-Christian past. *Totoso rodomo* was the archetypal ‘time of darkness’, sin and violence. *Totoso kame rane* ‘time one day’ or just *kame rane* ‘one day’ is more complex, signifying mythical time, antiquity, or the positive or neutral aspects of pre-Christian times. Using the term in the way it is used of Lodu evokes *kastom*, those aspects of the past seen as both compatible with Christianity and defining features of Simbo being. It also implies the pervasive local sense of diminution, a loss of potency that sits ambiguously against discourses of Christianity as good.

In the 1990s, there were widely held ideas that people of the past were bigger and stronger than those of the present and that they controlled forces now beyond the domain of Tinoni Simbo. This was a radical contrast to the actual situation during Lodu’s childhood. In fact, at that time, the Western Solomons was subjected to decimating epidemics, endemic diseases like yaws and malaria kept life expectancy low, and reproduction rates were such that Tinoni Simbo were expected to become extinct (Bayliss-Smith 2006, Rivers 1922). Arguments about physical prowess and longevity in the past are nostalgic evocations of a lost time that serve as critical commentaries on the present (Dureau 2005). Lodu here serves as a rare empirical example to support such claims, paradoxically right at the point of losing her and thus reinforcing the sense of an impoverished present and lost utopia.

The kind and amount of food distributed at her funeral and widely repeated comments about it, spoke to both the present and to that imagined past. Simbo once practiced prolonged feasting cycles, and mortuary ceremonies were among the most significant occasions for this (Hocart 1922). By the



1990s funerals were much more modest affairs in which close kin, sometimes only immediate kin, often struggled to provide sufficient food and areca for those who attended. Typically, arriving mourners were offered a small bunch of areca from which they took one or two nuts. At some point, the hosts provided a meal of rice mixed with tinned fish, the concentration of which varied according to ability to pay, and departing mourners were given a small parcel of food to carry home.<sup>8</sup> These small quantities sit in poignant contrast to the great periodic feasts that marked mortuary rites in the past (e.g., Hocart 1922).

Pork was highly valued and rarely consumed. The wild pigs that people once hunted have disappeared. Many people raised one or two domestic pigs, usually to sell for weddings or to butchers in Gizo. Pork was not distributed at any other funerals during my fieldwork there. The killing of pigs, then, suggests a willingness to conspicuously expend resources, given that the amount spent would have purchased remarkably more mundane food.

Given how many people mentioned it to me, the food distributions at Lodu's funeral and *vamade* had considerable effect. Some people simply described this without judgement. Others described them as appropriate markers of her moral worth and historical significance. Still others found them objectionable.<sup>9</sup> Much of the food was provided by a pair of natal brothers descended from one of Lodu's sisters. Their critics interpreted them as playing the politics of generosity by openly sponsoring her obsequies and thereby upstaging her other descendants. For such critics, this supply of food was intended to mark the donors' generosity and relative affluence.

Funerals were not characterised by competition. Providing adequate food was often a somewhat onerous obligation that was rendered even more difficult if it arose unexpectedly. Ordinarily, this was the responsibility of the nuclear family of the deceased—parents, siblings, natal or adopted children—who may be discretely helped by other members of their kindred (*tavitina*). Given Lodu's significance, her funeral could be expected to be very big, and her family to struggle to meet their obligations to provide for mourners and visitors. Under these circumstances, most people would expect members of their kindred to help as they were able. What was resented was the public manner in which the two brothers did so. Significantly, the brothers both had good incomes derived from urban careers and thought to have political ambitions and claimed to be “straightening *kastom*”.

This situation suggests a hall of temporal and moral mirrors. Lodu represented the ideal union of past and present in a context in which the past throws up, or is made to contain, numerous negative, positive and ambiguous models of and for the present. It is denigrated as the time of heathen darkness and violence, avowed to be the proper site for judging ‘true *kastom*’ (*kastom*

*sosoto*) and nostalgically lamented for all that is lost. This last contextualises a key trope of contemporary moral decay as marked by selfishness: living in a time of Light, granted salvation by Jesus—the ultimate embodiment of compassionate love and generosity—moral critics saw people as selfish and ignoring both Christian and ancestral models of love (Dureau 2005). Yet here were brothers obviously helping their kin who could not comfortably have met their obligations. Claiming to be respecting the past from which *Lodu* had come and of which she had sustained the best elements, they sought to facilitate a prominent funeral feast for her.

Their language of helping and marking the end of a prominent life, though, was disparaged by some, on the grounds that they had turned the funeral and *vamade* into a stage for their own wealth, humiliating others who could not provide equivalently. It was because they had parliamentary aspirations, said the cynics. It was not *kastom* to grandstand at funerals.

As Tomasi, one of their most vehement critics, told me:

OK, it's like this. Suppose you want to help your [natal or classificatory] sibling—they need school fees, their mother-in-law has died, like that—you go to them. "Here's some money". Like that. You don't make it big, you stay quiet. You don't shame your sibling, yes Christina? They will remember who helped. It's fine.

Suppose you want to make yourself big, you don't give money to your sibling. You send a message to someone who has a lot of bonito or a pig. You buy it from them, you yourself. Then people are eating a pig and everyone knows you bought a pig for your sibling. ... You are making yourself big in a hurry. You don't wait for your sibling to say, "Oh, my brother, he's a good man. He helped." It's like that. That's not our way.

And yet, the brothers' generosity could, in fact, be interpreted as a revival of historic forms of feasting. Close relationships between political power and conspicuous largess, particularly in mortuary contexts, pertained in the past (Hocart 1922). In pre-Christian times, the most powerful *banjara* 'semi-hereditary leaders' (in Pijin *cif*) fed large numbers over sustained series of mortuary rituals for significant social actors. In addition to the ritual meals I describe for the 1990s, in the past, other feasts were held at set intervals on the spirit's journey, their size, prominence and prolongation varying with the dead person's prominence. These serial feasts rendered participants clients of their hosts, whose generosity created obligation and loyalty. That is, in pre-Christian times, death was the site of political generosity not entirely unlike that for which the brothers were criticised for not following *kastom*.

The point I want to make about this is that the heightened emotion surrounding the issue of who paid, effectively creating a contest over the deployment of Lodu as symbol, reflects her key symbol status. The dispute reinforced her symbolic significance because she was worth engaging in this display. It simultaneously threatened to subvert it by exposing the past for which she stood as chimerical since both accounts of disinterested giving drew on only some aspects of that past while claiming to represent it truly.

The past as politico-cultural resource has been a central issue in cultural, political and scholarly debates about *kastom*, tradition and ethnicity (e.g., Akin 2004, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Jolly 1992, Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Lindstrom 2008, Wallace 1956, White 1991). Lodu's death condenses many of the issues in these debates as they are lived out in local communities, including Simbo. Concerns about who may make authoritative statements about the past or claim traditional justification for their attitudes and position, about how to sort desirable and undesirable past practices for retention, of what a particular practice actually consisted or of what a given story actually said were prevalent. These concerns played out in many areas, as when a man blocked a female member of his lineage from nominating in a national election in which he intended to stand, when women and men argued opposed views of conjugal authority, or when disgruntled descendants of a *banjara* surreptitiously disputed the means by which his successor had been appointed.

Lodu's death can be seen as a disputed key symbol within the local politics of *kastom*. In turn, like the politics of tradition more generally, she illustrates wider issues in symbolic and interpretive anthropology. In a later work, Ortner (1990: 61) observes that her original piece is "stamped with the preoccupations of [its] intellectual era". In the interim, scholars have repeatedly observed that cultures are only ever partially collective phenomena (e.g., Faubion 2001, Keesing 1987, Ortner 1990, 1999). Crucial questions follow (for example, Cohen 1993: 32, Danforth 1993: 4, Harrison 1995, Ventura 2011). For whom is a key symbol key? How are a culture's most important symbols entwined in ideological struggles and hegemonic relationships? Who may use key symbols or define their meanings? In what ways might a particular symbol be a site of struggle?

The contention over Lodu reflects such issues. I have no idea whether or not the brothers actually intended the self-aggrandisement of which they were accused. Whatever their purpose, though, their gifts of food intensified Lodu's symbolic prominence that had been building up in the previous few months. To many she had come to represent particular stances on Christianity, morality and *kastom*. At the same time, she held different symbolic meanings to different groups. And she became part of an ideological struggle between

more or less powerful groups and between political contenders. Some wanted to use Lodu to fix sanctioned accounts of Christianity. The institutional UC, as represented in the Quarterly Meeting, aspired to establish an origin story of the rightful church. Moni, largely in accord with them, also sought a legitimating historical moment in which Simbo was incorporated in the Methodist world. My account was to reinforce his and some conservatives' view of the nature of true Christianity in context of ongoing widespread disagreement about diverse issues, such as Biblical literalism and church authority, collective and private prayer, interdenominational relationships, Christian and *kastom* gender relations and the proper economic relationships within particular degrees of kinship.

Against these efforts of official bodies and powerful individuals to construct her as primarily authenticating a particular foundation myth, Lodu as symbol was taken up by numerous critics of contemporary society. If hegemonic accounts presented Simbo as having moved into the Light, albeit stained with persisting dark behaviours that needed to be abandoned, others stressed the ironic loss of what was most akin to Christian morality in the past—compassionate love. For them, Lodu was mnemonic of a time when love permeated social relationships, her death bitterly marked that loss and Lodu herself symbolised the Christian society that might have been, but had eroded as the more affluent became more selfish.

#### LODU AS KEY SYMBOL

Lodu's death was just one occasion in which such issues arose. People constantly made adamant statements like, "It's not *kastom*" or "It's our way from long ago to the present". Likewise, they discussed proper Christian relations between spouses, opposite-sex siblings, the generations and other social groups at length. And they made innumerable passing and sustained references to how things ought to be and had been. Lodu as symbol thus fitted readily into a system of symbols (Ortner 1973, Turner 1967), many of which emerged as dominant symbols over the previous century. Headhunting, chieftainship, *Lotu* and *kastom* itself, for example, were all used in attempts to define Simbo identity or work out social norms. Simultaneously, former key symbols, such as ancestral shrines, had been relegated to narrower significance in particular situations such as land cases.

So, what is it that makes Lodu a *key* symbol? She was employed repeatedly in the prevailing system of Christian and *kastom* key symbols and my account of Lodu reveals much of wider social and cultural understanding. Still, it would probably unduly stretch the concept to describe her as " 'key' to the system" of Simbo cultural symbols, given Ortner's characterisation of key symbols as deeply embedded in a symbolic system.

Yet Lodu seems archetypal according to Ortner's (1973: 1339) outline of how to recognise key symbols: (i) people noting their importance, (ii) being symbolically provocative, (iii) their multi-contextual ubiquity, (iv) elaboration of their nature, and (v) cultural constraint in regard to them.

Significant persons and institutions did highlight Lodu's significance. Others used her to articulate their concerns about the state of society. As the talk about her mortuary meals suggests, she provoked intense reactions. She arose in numerous contexts, from centenary planning to political aspirations to moral critiques to the display of church norms in the many UCWF visits. There was prominent cultural elaboration of her—her nature, her witnessing the missionaries' arrival, for example. And she was a point of restrictions: it was impossible to speak negatively about her and it became difficult to hear anything outside the increasingly formulaic accounts of her life.

Drawing on symbolic analyses of election symbols, Guy (2008: 77) notes the heightened significance of key symbols in liminal situations. Lodu's dying and death, a period of heightened liminality for her and her family, also suggested a problematic sustained social liminality. People's critical talk about social and moral decline, *kastom* and Christianity implies prolonged liminality, a sense of society distressingly stuck betwixt and between an irretrievable ancestral past and a still inadequately Christian present despite the pervasive metaphor of having moved into the Light. Lodu's death thus accentuated and focused the nagging questions about what it is to be a Christian society.

If key symbols are of different kinds, what kind of key symbol was Lodu? Like other key or dominant symbols she spoke to a variety of constituencies, potentially uniting them despite their profound differences (Abufarha 2008, Turner 1967), but also provoking awareness of those differences (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990). In the emotionally intense criticism of the brothers, she might be seen as a summarising symbol, "summing up, expressing, representing ... in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way, what the system means to" particular social groups (Ortner 1973: 1339). As Moore (1994: 87) notes, in contexts of felt marginalisation and loss and growing tensions between unequally situated groups, a temporary key symbol can provide "an emotionally powerful way to fight back".

While the symbolic Lodu served as a summarising symbol, in most instances she acted like an elaborating symbol—"a vehicle] for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others" (Ortner 1973: 1340). Certainly, talk about Lodu was sometimes emotional, but this was more a matter of provoking the feeling use of other summarising symbols. Thus, for example, when people characterised her as a person of love like the people of the past and

spoke about the loss of loving community relationships in the present, Lodu as symbol was provocative, stimulating awareness and reiteration of the key summarising symbolic value of love. If the intense feeling reflected in criticisms of those who sought to affiliate with her and the Time One Day evokes the emotionality of summarising symbols, her utility to people's explanations, their prolonged dissections of what was wrong with the brothers' putative efforts to buy status and the many discursive accounts of her life and death suggest the analytical and ordering aspects of elaborating symbols (Ortner 1973: 1340). For a time, she stood as personified elaborating symbol for what Simbo society should be and how *kastom* and Christianity should be compatible. In particular, the repeated accounts of her life constituted a key scenario with its "clear-cut modes of action appropriate to correct... living in the culture" (Ortner 1973: 1341).

What Lodu witnessed when the first missionaries arrived was the precursor of a radical transformation of Simbo practices, relationships and, to some extent, worldviews. At the very end of her life, she came to incarnate the changes she had seen and lived, becoming a key symbol of a century anchored in a distant past, the embodied transcendence of the great spiritual and temporal division of times of light and dark, One Day and the present. To many Tinoni Simbo she was iconic of the better of two ages and represented a type of person who never would be again. This was not just because of her dual historical placement and experience, but because of the quality of her character, a doubling of the nostalgia for lost times of good people in times of sin. At the same time, she was a kind of person who should be the norm. Lodu, the only prominent person against whom I heard no slander, reconciled ancestral and Christian powers and spoke to a past that was simultaneously unattainable and buried deep in the common being of Tinoni Simbo. Her inability to die a Christian death until released by *kastom* invocations marked her grounding in that time, variously suggesting the threat of resurgent darkness, the compatibility of the Christian present and ancestral past, the lingering potential of ancestral power or a final performance of it. Her talk of Tamasa and Christian memorial placed her in the Light. Lodu evoked the old in the new: her reputed character, her extreme longevity, her very connexion to pre-Christian sociality rendered her the last of the metaphorical ancestral "giants", one who literally transcended eras.

She symbolised above all, Simbo's movement from darkness to light, she herself marking the present as a Christian time that need not violate those things of the past that ought to be retained or restored. Within this dark to light transformation, she represented a number of important mythic themes. She alone of those living had watched the birth of a new UC key symbol of Simbo as a Christian society based in Methodism when the charismatic, authoritative

chair of the Methodist Mission, the Rev. John F. Goldie, disembarked to pray on the beach and entrust his Polynesian missionaries to the care of a *banjara*. She had been one of those who converted when ancestor veneration provided a non-Christian alternative. She truly understood the nature of ancestor veneration at the ancestral shrines that were now relegated to more limited sacred status. She had lived on the edge of Simbo greatness and been there as it faded in face of British arms and Methodist proselytisation. She was born in the ambiguous time of darkness—of violent domination, military triumph or compassionate generosity from different perspectives. She both rejected and sustained that time as a woman of numerous valued kin connections, known kindness and moral rectitude, living the apparently impossible reconciliation of *kastom* and Christianity. (See also Mortimer's 2002: 28 account of Léopold Senghor, Senegal's poet-president in the 1970s, as the "living symbol" of the "possible synthesis of what appears irreconcilable", European and African cultures).

It is not uncommon for a particular person to assume key symbol status. Martin Luther King, for example, is a key symbol of the civil rights movement (Sharman 1999). In becoming a symbol, the person is reconstituted in memory. Describing the case of Emil Grunzweig, a slain Israeli peace activist, Michael Feige (1999) raises the question of what happens to the memory of the person reconstituted as political symbol. As he notes, "[m]ythic stories depersonalize the individual, reducing the richness of his or her life story to a schematic sketch" (1999: 145). Indeed this happened with Lotu as she and her life were transformed into a schematic, stripped of all but the relevant details. An individual who acquired symbolic significance very late in a long life, she was simultaneously a person who lived with all of life's complications, contradictions and imperfections, and a person-symbol shaped as an array of overlapping, but not necessarily consistent, ideals and ideas. For example, her conversion in face of her husband's opposition provides a key scenario. It evokes the courage to favour God (Tamasa) over family relationships and suggests the efficacy of the Word, since, obedient wife, she nonetheless rejected her husband's religion and led him to *Lotu*. By contrast, what it might have cost a young woman to do so, how she experienced the call to Light, whether in fact she was convinced of the superior truth of Christianity become irrelevant, inadmissible elements of her biography as subordinated to the template of movement from darkness to light.<sup>10</sup>

As such, she was what Gaines and Farmer (1986: 298) describe as a "social cynosure", a "figure that members of the culture... [have] selected as a focus of attention" and that reveals cultural values and themes. As "central, key or core symbols [*sic*]... they may be seen as symbols of and for social actions, as vehicles of central conceptions, as vessels of meaning... and as exemplary

figures”. Gaines and Farmer focus on “visible saints” in the Mediterranean, individuals who, as paragons of suffering, serve as embodied key scenarios. A paragon of love and the unification of opposites, as I have noted, Lodu’s character represented the perfect mediation of old and new. Not just a model of how to live, her life history echoes Protestant scenarios, articulated as the movement from darkness to light, sin to salvation and rebirth through Christ, as a model for the whole society, a means of reflecting on the present and articulating claims for a different future.

#### DEATH OF A KEY SYMBOL

Given the robustness of Ortner’s key symbol concept, there is little reason to add one more example to the catalogue of case studies. Nor is another instance needed in the historical study of symbolic life. Since Wolf’s (1958) germinal historicisation of the Virgin of Guadalupe, there have been innumerable such accounts. So, why provide another account of a key symbol in historical context? My purpose in describing Lodu as key symbol is to highlight the element of symbolic temporality. My point is that key symbols can emerge and fade, perhaps rapidly. Yet, almost by definition, key symbols have been taken to be long-lasting, in keeping with Ortner’s stress on their centrality in a system of meaning. This is in keeping with most anthropological treatments of significant symbols (see also Moore 1994). For example, Turner’s (1967) assumption—and the assumption of readers of his Ndembu ethnography—is that dominant symbols like *mudyi* and whiteness are entrenched. To a significant extent this remains the case, even in historical anthropology. In a later argument, for example, Ortner (1990) addresses the intersections between agency and symbolic structure in an historical account of Sherpa key schemas. Her emphasis, though, is on the historical persistence of schemas and their structuring effects on actors’ agency. Indeed, Moore’s account of a temporary key symbol is a rarity in the innumerable uses of Ortner that I have found.

I agree with such *longue durée* arguments about persistent cultural logics and themes. My point is simply that our awareness of such continuities can obscure the fact that key symbols have historical origins and that they may arise and fade in rapid sequence. Lodu tells us something of how key symbols may emerge, and suggests their possible contingency. An ordinary person all her life until the fact of her longevity at a particular historical moment made her special; she assumed symbolic potency that far surpassed her significance as a social actor.

Not only did Lodu emerge as a key symbol, it is likely that she was only temporarily so. Talk about her declined rapidly after her death, although the themes that clustered so densely around her name persisted. Plans for the centenary celebration proceeded with little or no mention of



her—the intention, rather, was to re-enact the descent of *Lotu*, replicating the widespread Melanesian drama of painted men brandishing weapons at other men wearing collared white shirts and ties as they waded ashore carrying Bibles (Errington and Gewertz 1995). *Lodu* seemed to disappear.

There was to be one more encounter with her, though. Over a year after her death, working with my research assistant on transcribing and translating tapes, we started work on *Lodu*'s account. *Lupa*, about 24 and the granddaughter of a venerable old man who remembered making ancestral sacrifices, began to reminisce about *Lodu*:

*Lupa*: *Lodu* was the last of the people of One Day. She was born in the darkness.

*Dureau*: Tell me more: what do you think about *Lodu Qoele*?

*Lupa*: A strong person, a good person. All the *qoele* and *barogoso* [old men] say that the people One Day were good people, people who helped each other, people of love. They were big people and they lived a long time, the people One Day. She had a good life and a good death, the *qoele*, *Lodu*. Now we're small and weak and we die young. People today aren't good people like the people One Day. They're greedy, they don't help. We came into the Light, we came into the love of *Tamasa*, but our ways are rotten. It's like that.

We returned to work, *Lupa* turning the tape on and off as she transcribed. Two girls—of about 14 years or so—wandered in and watched us until one interrupted: “Whose is the voice of that *qoele*?”

*Lupa*: *Lodu Qoele*

Girl: I'm frightened! Is it her spirit? Aren't you afraid *Lupa*?

*Lupa*: I'm not afraid. *Lodu* was a real *qoele*. Her life was finished, so what should I be afraid of?

Girl: No, I'm afraid.

*Lupa*: Nothing! [dismissive] *Lodu* is peacefully dead. She is at peace. Your fear is aimless.

*Dureau*: Well, what about *Lodu*'s spirit, *Lupa*? Is she a ghost or an ancestor now, or what?

*Lupa*: No, nothing. She's not a spirit. She's not an ancestor. She's dead. Finish. Nothing further.

We finished our work for the day and *Lupa* went home. When she returned the next week, neither of us mentioned *Lodu*. As *Lupa*'s calm reminiscence and the girls' reactions to hearing *Lodu*'s voice suggest, she remained a point of awareness several months after her death, and *Lupa* was still using her as an elaborating symbol to explain her widely shared sense of the problematic

relationship between past and present. But this was the first reference to Lodu that I had heard in some time and Lupa's comments in response to the recording reflected her very close relationship to her grandfather, and her personal interest in his accounts and in my work.

This is not to say that Lodu disappeared from people's consciousness or that she was henceforth irrelevant to the past-present contrasts that remained so prominent a part of island concerns. It is, however, to suggest that it was the particular historical and circumstantial contexts of her death that rendered her so intensely and widely a key symbol of and for Simbo. Lodu's transitoriness is prominent: a symbolic apex reached, she quickly declined to occasionally raised symbolic status. Yet despite the brevity of her symbolic status, she was, indeed, key for a time. She may remain a muted key symbol, re-arising in the longer term (see also Abufarha 2008) by virtue of my writing, the commemoration of the centenary and the remarkable fit between her schematic life and Simbo images of the ideal Christian transformation. She may become consolidated as a more entrenched key symbol of how a society came to be Christian.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps, as Lupa said that last time, "She's dead. Finish. Nothing further."

#### NOTES

1. *Qoele* (old or elderly woman): an honorific and respectful term of address. In Lodu's case, it evoked not only her age but the universal sense of her historical significance and great moral worth. While one would address her as "Qoele", she was spoken about as either Lodu or Lodu Qoele or, occasionally, *na qoele pa Simbo* (the old woman at [Nusa] Simbo), implicitly referencing her as the pre-eminent old person of the place. I never heard her addressed or referred to as "Susana", the name she adopted as a young Christian convert. My usual practice in writing about Simbo is to disguise informants—as is the case with all others in this paper—but Lodu Qoele is a prominent historical figure who could not be disguised. My few encounters with her did not involve seeing or hearing anything that was not widely known to others.
2. *Lotu*: Christianity, denomination, Christian prayer, to pray (Christian), church service. *Kastom*: in Pijin and Simbo: custom, tradition, positively regarded indigenous ways.
3. A substantiating list of references would be of little value. The concept's wide usage suggests both its utility and that the term itself has become a key symbol of engagement with the literature on symbolism. By way of indication of its abiding appeal, a GoogleScholar search (6 June 2011) for "+Ortner +'key symbols'" generated 697 results and listed 465 citations of the original version of the article. Given that it has been reprinted a number of times and that some of the key phrases have been cited or quoted in numerous places not covered by GoogleScholar, this

must be a significant under-representation of its ubiquity. The same search on 6 February 2012 generated 37 results for 2011 alone, demonstrating its continuing significance.

A search for “+‘key symbols’ -Ortner” (6 June 2011) generated 3910 results. Granted, this is ambiguous, since the phrase turns up in multiple laboratory and science publications which are unlikely to have been influenced by anthropological studies of symbolism. Further, at least a proportion of social science and humanities’ uses of the expression are likely serendipitous matches. Still, I also take it as an indication that the concept has escaped Ortner’s typology and entered the scholarly vocabulary as a careless phrase evoking, generically, important symbols.

4. This is reminiscent of Turner’s (1967) distinction between the emotional and abstract poles of a dominant symbol. Ortner references Turner’s work in an early inclusive statement in her 1973 article, but does not elaborate (although see Ortner 1990: 61). In contrast to Turner’s argument that dominant symbols have poles of meaning, for Ortner, a given symbol may or may not have both summarising and elaborating qualities. The other major difference between the two is that Turner is largely concerned with ritual symbols, whereas Ortner places key symbols in wider cultural-symbolic systems.
5. Son’s wife/husband’s mother relationships on Simbo are marked by respect formalities focused particularly on corporeal integrity and performed ignorance: neither should be aware of the others’ intimate functions. The SW is held responsible and liable to pay compensation if these restrictions are violated. As in this case, such relationships may become affectionate and loving and the formal expectations be ameliorated or abandoned, a reflection of persistent cultural notions that persons and relationships are ultimately made, rather than fixed or given.
6. *Tuqu* “my offspring”. Used of one’s own biological or adopted offspring, close kin in the descending generations and occasionally, metaphorically, of those who are much younger than one and of whom one is very fond. I use “child”, “son” or “daughter” to avoid the awkwardness of the transliteration.
7. Typically, the only other such meals were smaller events, usually involving only some close kin. These were held on the tenth day following death, the first anniversary (when the chief mourners were able to cut their hair and shave), and when the grave was cemented (if this was not been done on the anniversary and if it was done at all).
8. People usually called upon these foods for symbolic and practical reasons. In many ways rice was more valued than garden food and rice and tinned fish a virtual staple. At funerals, they were more readily provided in haste by families too grief-stricken or busy with other mortuary obligations to go gardening or fishing. The tinned fish also eliminated the uncertainties of fishing at a time when the family must provide food for others.
9. My fieldnotes suggest that this was the dominant response, but I suspect that this is more a reflection of how strongly and negatively some people felt than of a consensual critique.

10. For those who did not know her, symbolic elements prevailed in their discussions of Simbo as a moral society. Individuals who had a personal relationship with her moved between the two modes of personal relationship and symbolic elaboration and summation, their ties perhaps lending added emotional and moral intensity to their accounts of her as a good person, good Christian and social model.

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#### ABSTRACT

Sherry Ortner's concept of key symbols has been a mainstay in symbolic studies since its publication in 1973, but it has been little developed since then. This paper proffers temporality as a significant, but largely overlooked element of some key symbols. A

case study of an old-woman's death on Simbo, Western Solomon Islands, demonstrates how key symbols may emerge and decline rapidly in contexts of uncertainty and political negotiation.

*Keywords:* key symbols, Sherry Ortner, symbolism—time, Simbo, Western Solomon Islands