

# Cultural Anthropology

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**Ongka's Big Moka** Call number: GN 450.4 .K394 2003  
Video

**Plot summary:** Ongka, a Big Man of the Kawelka tribe in Papua New Guinea, has decided that he will arrange a moka to pay back a neighboring tribe that hosted a moka nearly 10 years ago. That tribe gave the Kawelka 400 pigs; Ongka wants to repay them with 600. In fact, 'moka' means 'interest,' the amount of pigs that is given above the amount originally distributed. The Kawelka are horticulturalists, raising pigs, yams and other vegetables and living in sedentary small villages and hamlets. The only way to accumulate much food surplus is to invest extra yams into pigs, turning carbohydrates into protein.

Ongka has 4 wives and 9 children. His favorite wife, Rumbeka (all spelling is approximate), is caring for up to 10 pigs to serve as Ongka's contribution to the moka, and her father has been caring for a large number of pigs for Ongka. Ongka has 'invested' up to 100 pigs with various friends and relatives, one of which is a 2-day walk from Ongka's village. The preparations for this moka have taken 5 years.

Arranging for a moka is hard work for Ongka, his friends, his relatives, and for the women in the group who are taking care of the pigs. Ongka gives a passionate speech in the video about how important pigs are to his people. Pigs are used to "pay for troubles" after warfare or murder, to put on mokas, and to give in exchange for wives. According to Ongka, "without pigs you are rubbish . . . there are men who don't realize this," an attitude Ongka finds difficult to accept.

As a Big Man, Ongka has no real authority. He can only attempt to persuade other men to accept his plans, plots and machinations. Arranging for a moka involves haranguing other men to work hard so that the tribe will be successful, since all the men are expected to contribute, making speeches at small mokas that extol the virtues of Kawelka society, and conspiring against other Big Men in the Kawelka tribe (Raima, for example) about who will be successful in fixing the date for the big moka. Ongka is seen whispering with another man as they decide which date will be best.

**Crisis Event:** The sudden death of a Big Man in the neighboring tribe for whom the moka had been intended delays the event and nearly leads to the Kawelka being attacked. The neighboring tribe (the Tongka tribe, one of whom's Big Men is Perewa, a member of the Papua New Guinea National Assembly), has heard some Kawelka men sitting in a truck, drunk and singing, as if in celebration. This is taken to be evidence that the Kawelka tribe used sorcery to kill the Tongka Big Man. The traditional response was war and raiding, and both Ongka and his father-in-law have participated in raids in the past. Ongka calls to some of his relatives who have married into that tribe, giving them a pig for the funeral/memorial ceremony along with a special branch that marks his oath that the Kawelka had nothing to do with the Big Man's death.

**Resolution:** The moka is eventually held, but not before other troubles occur. As stated, rivalry between competing Big Men in the tribe is unending. Raima, one of the other Big Men in Kawelka, disrupts the moka the night before it is to occur by leaking information that claims he and his supporters did, in fact, kill the other Big Man in the Tongka tribe by sorcery. Ongka is upset, because Raima has

no business bringing the topic up at such a late date, and because the information causes a huge commotion among the people. The following day, the day the moka was to be held, the members of the Kawelka tribe who have married into the Tongka tribe begin a raid on Raima in revenge for his alleged sorcery. Ongka stops them by sitting in the middle of the road. They stop their attack momentarily to listen to his advice, and some of them drop out of the war party while others continue. Raima is not killed, but a few days later four of his pigs are killed. Perewa, who had been waiting at home all summer for the moka, takes the truck that had been bought to be distributed to his tribe at the moka and leaves, returning to Port Moresby to consider matters of national independence.

The moka is held finally. In it, 600 pigs, \$10,000 Australian dollars, 12 cassowaries, 8 cows and a motorbike are given. The truck has been brought back, washed and decorated with flowers and is 'given' again in the moka. In his speech at the moka, Ongka says, "Now that I have given you these things, I have won . . . I have knocked you down by giving so much."

Things to consider:

1. What motivates someone like Ongka to work so hard?
2. What functions does a moka serve?
3. Are there any similar institutions in the USA? How would they be different?

What struck me most . . .