

## Nation-Making In Public Tank, Sisiak

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### Abstract

Typical of many squatter settlements throughout PNG, Public Tank was a highly visible community beside the Northcoast road out of Madang prior to its eviction by government riot squad agents in December 2003. The article reports on the ways this community was built from various ethnic groups, and how they managed to live together and form some kind of common identity. The primary focus rests on the motile collection of young men who come from the villages to live an impressively tenuous and poorly resourced life in town, but who provide dynamic links both backward to the villages of origin and laterally to the communities of the neighbourhood. Their strategies for resolving conflicts and supplying basic social needs to the squatter settlement are investigated.

Public Tank, in Sisiak, north of coastal town of Madang, Papua New Guinea is a settlement which has integrated ten or so Sepik village communities with each other<sup>1</sup>. It represents an example of how differing villages have moved to close quarters and devised systems for integration, conflict resolution, and their relations to the State of PNG. Over the course of nearly 18 years of contact with the Public Tank community I have been impressed with the community as an example of how a few local communities can integrate themselves with each other, and how they become aware of the larger social reality of the nation, which in PNG is made up of so many cultures and languages<sup>2</sup>. The Public Tank community is not greatly diverse when compared to the whole of PNG. However, their interactions are typical of many of the squatter settlements around the towns of the Nation.

In 2000, the Public Tank community consisted of about 500 people residing on the four corners of a staggered intersection leading on the one side to the Madang airport, and on the other side to Beon Corrective Institution, while it traverses the main road leading up the North Coast. It would be hard to define the community boundary closely because the settlements continue on each side, however it is largely a community that meets face to face on a daily basis, and daily uses the water source of Meiro River at the bridge on the main road. It is

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<sup>1</sup> The Public Tank community is no more, since the evictions of December 2003. Although three corners of the crossroads contain housing, the principal community under discussion here has been dispersed. This paper is presented as an historical memory, describing processes common to other settlements in PNG.

<sup>2</sup> My presence in Sisiak was that of Acting Parish Priest of the Catholic Community. This position began in 1983, and was resumed at various times after two interruptions of a couple of years each time, until the end of 2000. Public Tank is at the entrance to Sisiak road, and with a popular market in recent times, has been the most accessible of areas in Sisiak.

accepted that the first residents in Public Tank were a few Ramu River men who came to work on Matupi Plantation, five kilometres to the north. They had been living with some Sepik River men (from the Pagwi District) on Kerosin Island off the Madang coast. The Ramu men came to Public Tank agreeing with a local Sisiak man to live in the area and help him to pay for his bride price. The Sisiak man accepted the offer, and in the first deed of cooperative living in the settlement, took some money, not as transfer payment, but as an act of integration into social exchange. The Ramu people accepted their position as squatters, but today they remind everyone that to have them moved from their locale, would require the return of all the money that had been given in the past.

There was not much to recommend Public Tank. It was very swampy, as it remains today, and filled with sago palms, pitpit cane and bananas. Some of the Sepik acquaintances of the Ramu men soon asked to join them. They found work in the Wewak Timbers sawmill and needed a place to live. They brought sawdust from the mill to fill in the swampy places, but that made the whole area spongy. In later years overhead pipes were installed over a cement slab near the road corner, and trucks doing roadwork would come to the pipes and have their tanks filled to water down the roads. From this function came the name of the area as 'Public Tank'.

A Public Tank pattern was established: friendliness, co-residence, followed by mutual collaboration, which was held to be irreversible without compensation. When Matupi Plantation was returned to the villager owners in the early 1970s, there was a need to find some place to live for the Sepik people who had accumulated on Kerosin Island, since this little plot was to be absorbed into the runway of the airport.

The Madang town authority decided on Sisiak, which was a village with three parts. Payment was made to the indigenous owners. The Ramu people delight in saying that the original Sisiaks spent all their money buying second hand trucks, which they soon ran into the ground because of a lack of maintenance. Still, all this money would have to be repaid by the original Sisiak landowners if they were to think of trying to remove the settlers. Living on top of the sawdust, and feeding on the bananas that grew everywhere, life was tolerable to the increasing numbers of people coming from the middle Sepik.

It is hard to say that the migration from Sepik to Sisiak was economically motivated. It is widely proclaimed by nearly everyone in Sisiak that *ples i gat olgeta samting* (the village back home is richly endowed). The amount and the diversity of food in the village, the maintenance of the cultural traditions, the ability to find all the materials necessary for traditional housing and the sheer comfort of being at home continue to count for the Public Tank Sepiks. The motive for migrating to town was in fact more intellectual and even ritual.

One of the most salient features of the squatter settlements of PNG is the presence of young men unattached to spouses. The number of young men exceeds the job opportunities in the towns, and as part of a clumsy kind of

capitalism, are necessarily labour in excess to be able to establish the economy of the towns. To learn more about the motives and status of these young men, Yat and Gesch undertook a survey in 1994<sup>3</sup> using a questionnaire, combined with long personal association, to draw up a picture of what it was like to be a young migrant to Madang. I now proceed to give a summary of these findings. Then I will move on to the topics of integration mechanisms, conflict resolution, and national perspectives in Public Tank.

### **Sepik migrant youth in Madang**

As I have suggested, there is a certain ritual overtone, that of a rite of passage, in the migration of Sepik youth to the towns. Labour recruitment from Sepik before the Second World War was at such a high level as to threaten the continuation of the initiation ceremonies. This sounds reasonable on the level of numbers, but one can hardly fail to be impressed with the central enormous place that an initiation house—a Haus Tambaran, plays with its architectural presence in a village, and as the near total focus of events for the whole village while ceremonies are going on. The scarification of skin from shoulder to knee is outrageously demonstrative and Sepik men heartily confess that it is their job to ‘show off’ these marks wherever they go (Bateson, 1972, p. 129). It needs to be suggested that a suspension of the Haus Tambaran could only have found place if everyone suspected its function was being fulfilled in another manner during this time.

I can bear witness that for the Yangoru district, in the intensely populated mountain regions of the East Sepik Province, it was explicitly stated by a ritual leader that the initiation ceremonies simply had to be stopped in the face of going away to work on the plantations (Gesch, 1985, p. 224). The ‘new times’ were breaking in, and there was no point in pursuing the old pathways to true knowledge, when they were not capable of putting men in charge of their destinies. If initiation is seen as the normal progressive set of stages to knowing what is important about life and how to make things work, then the labour recruitment journey had to be seen as a necessary further step along the way to finding out the secret of how to put men in charge of their own lives. I find to be corroborative of this connection, the fact that women’s initiation in Yangoru resumed vigorously in 1973, because the women did not share in this feeling of incapacity brought on by the migration experience (cf. Camp 1981).

On the Sepik River, some initiation ceremonies of men were resumed and filmed in 1973, following the prompting of the Basel Ethnology team (Schlenker, 1984)<sup>4</sup>, but the men’s ceremonies in Yangoru-Sassoya could only be resumed in fading attempts in 1974 and 1975, which were not found to be convincing (Roscoe and Scaglione 1990; Gesch 1985, p. 257, p. 266; Wallison, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> The results are as yet unpublished, but appear in a paper ‘Public Tank as an Elite-Imprinted Community’.

<sup>4</sup> Roscoe and Scaglione attempted to analyse the ending and revival of initiation ceremonies in places reported on in the East Sepik Province. Their conclusion was that a ceremony was the more likely to die out when the exchange aspect of one side initiating another side in turn was missing.

The dominant reason for youth migration from Sepik to Madang is probably the intellectual one, 'What is it like in the town?' I remember walking through the village Auleimbit of the Torembi parish area, when I was caught in heavy continuing rain. A young man heard I was a priest, and volunteered to carry my rucksack some two hours through the rain to the village I was heading for. Besides the curiosity of visiting a new village, he pursued his curiosity of asking many questions about what it was like in Madang and in Public Tank, and plied me with questions during our time in the other village.

I came to understand that he had heard many stories about Madang over the previous years, and although only about 17 years old, had decided it was time to go there. Whatever departure plans he had made with his home village I do not know, but not long after my return to Madang, he turned up in Public Tank also. He had managed simply to get into a truck visiting Torembi and made the trip to Wewak. Then a wantok stowed him away aboard the Lutheran Shipping vessel for the overnight trip to Madang. He arrived in Public Tank with only the clothes he stood up in, without benefit of any thongs, toothbrush or spoon.

This scenario is repeated over and again with the migrant youth of Public Tank. With as close as possible to zero in material resources, these youths come to Madang and spend a good two years with the same set of clothes which become their identifying characteristic ('are you talking about the boy with the black and red shirt'). They are told from the ship where to find Public Tank, and there they find a house to stay, and a plate of food left out for them every day. They stay in Public Tank for up to two years, then most go back to the village, before finding out whether they want to venture forth in a more permanent way.

In each house of Public Tank, the mother of the household will always put out at least two plates more of food than members of the household that she can account for. The drifting youth will come past and be offered food, or the plates will be consumed by anyone else who has experienced the tenuousness of survival in Public Tank.

The housing is built of pieces of flattened corrugated iron, sheets of plywood, or cardboard boxes from Wills Tobacco factory, on posts that are scavenged from various opportunities. There will be days when the boys are offered no food, not even the one plate a day that they count on. Then they will turn to the bananas growing in Public Tank or at Meiro River, and throw some of the fruit on the open fire in the hope of putting something in their bellies.

The youth suffer an ambivalent reception in Public Tank. If they are found helpful there will be few complaints, but the first signs of trouble will bring out strong statements about sending the boys home, and about the difficulty of feeling any security in town while the relatives are draining away all the resources. However, the boys bring a sense of the village to the town. They represent other families, and other obligations, and the hope of future benefits on return to the village. They bring a sense of liveliness and spontaneity to the rather harsh conditions of town.

Most of all they fulfil a role in providing security for the household while the men are away at work during the day or night, and a sense of security for the larger community from the home village, who must trust themselves into the hands of their neighbours in a way that never happened back home.

These days there are men in Public Tank whose children have been born there, and which children have gone on to raise their own families. Since residences are close to each other, and somewhat mixed between home villages and districts, there is a realisation that Public Tank is becoming one village to some extent, and that the boys from different village backgrounds have as much in common as that which keeps them apart.

### **Devices of integration**

(a) *Proximity*: Although most of the residents of Public Tank are Sepiks from the Pagwi District of East Sepik Province, there is a further community that has come into being down the road next to Meiro River. It is included in Public Tank because most residents go past this settlement, two or three times a week, for a more traditional wash in the river. This community of people comes from the Morobe Province and surrounds a Lutheran church, and includes many youth who add an unexpected touch of the Pentecostal to their Lutheran worship. It is said by the Public Tank youth that these Morobeans would be defended if necessary in any trouble they had in town. The following incident was recounted to me:

In a fight at Public Tank, Allan<sup>5</sup> was about to hit a Markham fellow that he did not know, but he was stopped. Afterwards the big men said, 'That's a Markham man from Meiro River. Don't hit him.' Allan said, '*O sore*, we did not see that you were one of us.'

This account surprised me with the notion that the Sepiks had gone beyond familiarity to the point of mutual identification and the taking of one another's interests to heart.

(b) *Street boys*: It is also a surprising characteristic of friendship in Madang settlements, that the youth do not invite outsiders to their homes or settlements. A youth might show enthusiastic signs of recognition and appreciation on meeting some youth from a different province in an unexpected place. The explanation is, '*Mipela i save raun wantaim long taun*' (we go around together when we are in town.) The difficulties of coming back to the settlement together are rather material. If the friends are to spend much time together, then the question of food for the visitor becomes a difficult one. The settlements are very much regionally based, and someone from a different region is likely to feel very uncomfortable in such a neighbourhood.

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<sup>5</sup> We will use likely Christian names in an alphabetical ordering to present the cases.

There is a title, *'ol strit bois olsem mipela'* ('street boys' like ourselves), which indicates that young friends must keep on the move if they are to share time together. Schoolmates or other youths who live in the established suburbs of Madang are more likely to go visiting at home. Once a youth has independent financial resources, his friends will come home.

(c) *Working the wantok system:* Active too in Public Tank are all the devices of the wantok system<sup>6</sup>. 'Wantok' is an affably used term meant to include all those who are of the same language meeting together in a place distant from home, or those who can claim some connection to the community, or as a general term of familiarity much like the Australian 'mate'. It has its negative side in the use of insider opportunities to gain advantage over others, whether at the expense of a company or government department, or at the expense of transparency and equal opportunity. As a topic of conversation, the wantok system is universally deplored.

As a fact of daily life, the expression, *'wantok i bikpela samting'* (having a wantok is very important), is almost a confession that life can scarcely be imagined without the wantok advantage and connection. It is easier to trust and deal with a wantok than an anonymous stranger—it is even easier to sack that person from work. If you don't know how a government procedure works, then you rely on the wantok for guidance. In this light, the need for wantoks opens up linkages wherever possible or desirable. The use of this device in town is only an expanded version of what is required in the home village.

In Public Tank there are only a few unlikely linkages based on some marriages across provinces, religious denominational connections, and the idea of Sepiks being somehow one group when they are away from Sepik. Public Tank is a pleasant place to live, because people live in village-derived groupings, which are a comfort to newcomers, and the establishment of boundaries for others.

Inevitably marriage leads the communities outside of their boundaries as the following story indicates:

Bob, who is a mixed Buka-Torembi fellow living with the Torembis, came to the house of Charles and called out in the night for the adopted girl of the house to come outside, asking whether she was cross. Those in the house sat quietly and listened to this, and came to the conclusion that he was behaving like a married man towards his wife. Donna (Chambri) came out and said, 'Put K10,000 cash in my hand right now, and you can take her away.' This upset Bob and the rest of the Torembi village people, and they came to fight the next day. Eric told them that if they crossed the ditch at the road, then it would not be a fight by hand

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Stevenson wrote his monograph on the beginnings of the Labour Movement in Madang in the 1960s. He gives useful descriptions of how wantok connections were established when the number of genuinely related persons was quite low, and the need for a social safety network was more acute than today.

but with sticks. But the men of the girl's community were upset at the woman Donna for making this fight into a big thing. It should have been easy to fix.

### Conflict resolution

It has been one of the features of life in Public Tank over the years that noisy fights occur between the youth of villages that are neighbouring at home. Some of the fights have seemed dangerous at the time, in the use of iron rods and chains and large knives. They have usually resolved at one stage of the proceedings into a plurality of what are called 'fair fights'—meaning boxing matches between various pairs of contestants. This seems to satisfy the demand for good order for the communities concerned, although just as often the boxing matches degenerate into a *raun pait*, which is a free-for-all. Then there will be a process of fixing up the dispute by '*kastam pasin*' (customary means).

This usually means that a locally elected government magistrate will hear the complaints and course of aggression, then appoint a fine to be paid by each side for conspicuous offences. The parties will usually be required to offer live chickens to each other with a branch of betelnut. The above story was given the following resolution:

A fight broke out and was then directed to the open space at the market. After two fair fights between Kembiem and Torembi, the gathering dissolved into a '*raun pait*'. Eric hit anyone from Torembi. Even Bob, who was calling for peace, got a kick in the upper side from Eric. Afterwards Bob came and held him, and stressed that he was trying to finish the fight, not participate, and they were at peace. The whole trouble was later resolved by both sides bringing two kakaruk and K10 and eating betelnut together.

The nature of the oppositions and the way of fixing things have often been closely modeled on alliances back in the Sepik. I remember walking with a Public Tank young man in the plains of the Sepik and asking him if he was likely to face any hostility in the village we were coming to. He pondered for a while and replied, 'We don't have any of their heads in our *haus boi*, and they don't have any of our heads in their *haus boi*, so it looks as if we are *mentek*'. *Mentek* has the meaning of being an ally or a neutral observer.

On October 8<sup>th</sup> 2000 there was a killing at Public Tank. The course of this event would indicate to me at least that the community is robust. An older person from Yamuk village who has a regular income, provided beer for his wantoks on a Saturday evening previously. The agent of the killing was about thirty-five years old and was happily drunk at about 10:00 am on Sunday in the market area. He asked a girl from Witupe in the market for a kiss ('*Mi laik kaikaim maus bilong yu*'); she was insulted and ran to her relatives about half a kilometer away. The youth from Witupe came down in a large crowd and started an uneven brawl, in the course of which the Yamuk man is said to have grabbed a knife and to have swung it at a Witupe boy.

The boy was stabbed in the heart and was found to be dead on arrival at the hospital. In short order the Witupe had taken off their shirts, painted their skins black with soot, and began swarming around with bush knives and iron spears. The older men were urging the youth, '*Goan, yumi slipim wanpela Yamuk nau tasol* (OK let us lay a Yamuk man out).'

Intent on murder, the Witupe youth charged from one side to another of Public Tank, and down to the river, following reports of where a Yamuk man might have been seen. There had been a preliminary raid on the housing of the Yamuk, where the women and children were ignored, some bags were carried off, and the men were allowed to escape. As the morning advanced it became clear that everyone from Yamuk should hide for a while. By the evening, the Yamuk people were not to be found, their property had been looted, and one house where the agent of the killing had slept some previous nights was burned down.

This highly serious incident was running according to Sepik understandings, and after a couple of weeks, even the Yamuk people were able to say, '*Sapos ol i man tru, ol i mas kilim wanpela bilong yumi taim ol i belhat. Tasol nau em i let tumas*' (If they were real men they would have killed one of us in their first anger. Now it is just too late.) Although the Yamuk men considered their lives and the lives of their sons were in danger for a couple of weeks, the matter has been settled about five months later by a payment of K3,300 where K100,000 was demanded.

The looting and house burning weighs heavily on the Witupe as a reason not to ask for further compensation, and they themselves have two further serious incidents going against them at the same time in Sisiak. The two villages are only 20 km apart in the Sepik, and only 500 meters apart in Public Tank. There seems some sort of inevitability that they would have to settle quickly. This almost certainly does not mean that the matter will be forgotten, as a murder 15 years ago of a Korogo man on the other side of Yamuk is still a live issue today, preventing free commerce between the villages. Clearly these serious matters are settled as a matter of home district significance.

### **Ideas of the nation in Public Tank**

There is a wide variety of opinions about the likely success of the PNG nationhood project in the minds of Public Tank people. Many of the lesser-educated people say, 'The Government makes no difference.' By this they often mean that the politician they elected has done nothing for the development of their area. There was a statement by a church leader in the home village who spoke of their totally neglected area, 'Government is for the town only. It has nothing to do with us in the villages.' This seems obviously true to most of the villagers living in settlements: people from the village have been to town, and enjoy the benefits of some remissions of money to the home village, but generally the village schools are very weak, there are only memories of aid posts, and there are no services in terms of roads, radio or coffee buying or wharfing facilities.



An educated highlands man whom I interviewed in Sisiak Three was rather upbeat about the Government and its great benefits, but it turned out that he was talking entirely about his home place in Western Highlands where a relative was the national politician. Another educated man assured us that the Government would disintegrate, just as Sisiak Three was often disintegrating because of the volatility of the temperaments of the rascals in the neighbourhood.

None of these views of the Nation are very profound. They all have to do with experiences of the local scene, and little to do with informed debate in the newspapers or on the radio. It seems unlikely that Papua New Guinea as an idea of national unity can generate much enthusiasm in the settlements, until they have some confrontation with outsiders. The reputation of PNG on the international scene is barely an issue for villages; international sporting events such as the Olympic Games do not give rise to much patriotism. And yet, the settlements such as Public Tank are undeniably an experience of meeting people different from oneself, and of believing the possibility that you can work with them, and even grow into a superordinate village community with them. That is one step along the way to making a Nation.

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Pat Gesch starts from Townsville, Australia. He got started with schooling in 1949 by spending a couple of years in Port Moresby. In 1962 he joined the Divine Word Missionaries and his priesthood training took him to the United States for seven years, where he enjoyed the breaking out of seminary training into the interdenominational, intellectual life of the university networks of Chicago. His first appointment was to Papua New Guinea, and he has remained firmly oriented here ever since, despite absences of a few years from time to time. The East Sepik remains his point of reference for all things bewildering in PNG, having spent ten years around Negrie (Yangoru), and frequent extended visits to the Torembi area since. He did his doctoral work at Sydney University, and spent three years in anthropological editorial work in Germany. He took a look at Polynesia with half a year on Manihiki (Cook Islands), and his last exotic foray was into Information Technology at the University of Queensland. He is currently the Pro Vice President of DWU's Modilon Campus. Email: [pgesch@dwu.ac.pg](mailto:pgesch@dwu.ac.pg)