

## **Symbols of Life and Death in Traditional Melanesia: How they are communicated and interpreted**

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### **Abstract**

Humans, as social beings, discovered various ways of identifying themselves as belonging to a particular group of people. One way was through the use of cultural symbols, which bind people together as a group. These symbols gave meaning and purpose to their lives, leading them to establish relationships of identity and mutual interaction. These symbols were upheld, as embodiments of the peoples' beliefs. They were seen as having spiritual, social and cultural connectedness with the people and the world around them. Papua New Guinea societies were no exception to this universal norm. However, these societies developed their own meanings, interpretations, definitions and affinity to the symbols.

### **Introduction**

This article is written from a Papua New Guinean or Melanesian perspective on the significance and meaning of symbols. Obviously it excludes the secular meanings of symbols and dwells on the religious or the spiritual dimension because no traditional symbol in Papua New Guinea or Melanesia was considered merely as a sign, which represented something else. Rather symbols play an important role in people's lives, experiences and expressions.

### **Definition of symbols**

Symbols have many meanings subject to the culture one comes from and how they define symbols, especially sacred symbols. Here I intend to write only on the sacred symbols, which are deemed as possessing inherent 'powers'. For this reason a working definition that best represents the Papua New Guinea (Melanesian) definition, interpretation and meaning of symbols is put forward. And the definition is this; '*A symbol is a representation of the 'other', who is personal, and is involved in the affairs of the individual as well as the community*'. Therefore any other definition or meaning or interpretation I believe would deviate from this intrinsic meaning that is nurtured and cultured in the beliefs, traditions and customs of the people of Papua New Guinea. Some literature on the subject of symbols, suggests that symbols are just like signs which stands for the something else (Whitney, 1960, p.20). A similar interpretation of symbols, is given by Gross (1992, p.70), where he suggests that symbols are observable objects that refer to ideas and emotions outside themselves.

This understanding does not subscribe to the meaning of symbols from a Papua New Guinea perspective. It would be a western construct.

My view is that the understanding of the significance and value of cultural symbols in Papua New Guinea has been constructed and understood from the Europeans or expatriates, who have conducted studies into this area. In most writings, the western perceptions, interpretations, definitions and meanings have dominated the understanding of the cultural symbols of Papua New Guineans. Westerners imposed their understanding of Melanesian symbols as can be derived from this definition of symbols by Whitney (1960, p.20) who defines 'symbols as anything which stands for something else', a definition that best fits the understanding of signs which stand for something else.

In Melanesian understanding, symbols do not stand for something else. Symbols stand for themselves as representing the 'other'. For example, a sacred mask symbol represents a living 'other' which we may call a deity who has a personality and interacts with the community. If we take a national symbol like a flag (a secular symbol), the same interpretation applies. The flag is not a sign, which stands for something else, but rather the flag stands for itself as the embodiment of values, identity and a people of a particular country.

This paper is an invitation to both expatriates and fellow Papua New Guineans to launch into a deeper search for the meanings, definitions, values, interpretations and the significance of the cultural symbols as lived, experienced and expressed by the people. It is also intended to open up discussion in this rather complex area, which numerous authors have written about.

Since arriving on PNG shores, Westerners including missionaries, defined, interpreted and gave meanings to the cultural symbols of PNG using their own meanings and definitions. This has resulted in conjectures and presentation of the beliefs of the people and their inherent beliefs of their cultural symbols from a Western perspective. I believe that this article will contribute to a better understanding of the cultural symbols from the Papua New Guinea perspective.

In particular, the paper will discuss the three major characteristics and attributes of symbols associated with the beliefs of the people:

- sacredness
- power
- efficacy.

### **Sacredness**

In Melanesia the sacredness of a symbol is demonstrated by the rituals to which the people must adhere. A symbol that is considered to be more sacred than others is accorded strict ritual observance. It is seldom displayed in public and very often revered. For example, the Tumbuan in Tolai society (a male society

in East New Britain) is considered very sacred. Therefore it is revered and accorded great respect under strict and formal ritual observation and obligations. The custodian of a Tumbuan has certain obligations which are all interconnected with relationships. The custodians must at all times look after the welfare of the Tumbuan and be in constant harmonious relationship with the Tumbuan. Observance of certain taboos and performance of certain obligatory rites must be accorded to the Tumbuan. For the custodian there is always that dilemma of establishing and maintaining a right relationship. The correct relationship will bring prosperity to the custodian and ultimately the community will benefit from the outflow of blessings. Similarly, if there is a broken relationship, the life of the community is endangered including that of the custodian. So the custodian has a responsibility to himself as well as to the members of the community.

### **Power**

It is believed that cultural symbols have power. This power is represented by the symbol and it is dynamic. A proper relationship will draw the benevolent effect of the power that is represented by the symbol. This power needs to be controlled and this is done by proper relationships. In other words, the symbol represents the presence of an invisible 'power' that is real and personal at the same time.

### **Efficacy**

It is also believed that symbols have powers of re-creation or creating effects. Symbols, being regarded as sacred and representing the 'other', have power that makes things happen. For example, if one is to touch a sacred object, the power flows onto the next person and it also flows onto the next person he or she comes in contact with or even the things he or she touches. Therefore, Melanesians believe that symbols have an efficacious nature. Any symbol that has attributes of sacredness is treated with reverence and fear. For Papua New Guineans, even the educated elite are still attached to traditional beliefs, and live a life of double consciousness. They know they are modern, yet they still carry with them the consciousness of the living tradition.

The article further explores how these three dimensions are experienced, lived, and expressed as well as how these dimensions become the terms of reference whenever cultural symbols are involved in either cultural performances or other ceremonies

### **Setting the context**

Papua New Guinea is a land of diverse cultures, traditions, customs and many tribes and languages. Likewise each ethnic group has its own cultural symbols of life and death which find expressions in the way they live, experience, and express them in their daily livelihood or at cultural performances. In Papua New Guinea, one does not necessarily speak of one cultural symbol as having the same meaning and value as another. Though there could be similarities of

meaning, however, the value and significance of the symbol may be quite different. That is how complex the issue is. And if Westerners define, interpret and give meaning to the cultural symbols of PNG using their meanings and definitions, they may not truly represent the beliefs of the Papua New Guineans, who live, experience and express these beliefs from day to day.

### **The Melanesian beliefs and understandings of symbols**

In Melanesia, especially Papua New Guinea, where the concept of spirituality permeates all activities in life, every symbol has meaning and communicates a constant flow of a relationship. Therefore every symbol is a representation of life and death. In the Melanesian or PNG context, the underlying belief is that symbols stand for the 'other'. The 'other' exists and is represented by a symbol. This means that each symbol is considered to have a spiritual or religious power.

Some scholars have used the Polynesian or the Melanesian term '*mana*' (power) to capture this concept (Moore, 1995, p.6). The Wikipedia Encyclopedia explanation of Melanesian *mana* suggests that *mana* is a sacred impersonal force existing in the universe. *Mana* can be in people, animals, plants and objects. Similar to the idea of efficacy, or sometimes better known as luck, the Melanesians thought all success was traced back to *mana*. One could acquire or manipulate this luck in different ways (for example through magic). Certain objects that have *mana* can change a person's luck. However for Melanesians, I believe the idea of *mana* is that it is sacred and personal, and real. It is not considered a matter of luck but a question of relationships. So the idea of *mana* being an impersonal force existing somewhere out there in the universe, to me, is a Western construct.

The symbols possess inherent powers, which can be responsible for benevolent or malignant outcomes. Cultural symbols establish a living network of relationships to the living as well as to the dead and the spirit world. The symbols are revered as embodiments of peoples' beliefs of the power that is dynamic and real, connecting them to the 'other'. Therefore for Melanesians (traditionally), symbols were not seen as mere identification marks of which society or a group of people one belonged to, but more importantly, the symbols evoked spiritual connectedness which was a living reality. For example, Moore (1995, p.96) cites Tuzin (1980, p.324) who says, the 'Tambaran' is more than the sum of ideas and artifacts.

### **The meaning of life and death**

The meaning of life and death is broader than just physical life and death. It includes the existence and the prosperity of the community. Therefore the significance of the symbols is not only of personal interest but is community centered as well. In traditional societies, it is through the community that one finds security and meaning in life. So there was a complex network of relationships and the symbols were not to be seen in isolation from their relationship to the community. In any public display of sacred symbols the

community was seen as partaking in the life-giving source of energy. Subsequently this energy had to be controlled and protected in order that abundance of life or good times will flow into the community. This would explain why before a public performance there is always 'custom' to be considered. Before the public display the process of negotiation and consolidation is put into motion. The leaders or the organizers through their intermediaries get to work months before the event takes place. This process is far more important than the actual display of colour and finery that one sees in the public arena. I shall now discuss this aspect of the importance of symbols to the welfare and prosperity of the community.

### **Symbols and community**

Symbols play major social, religious and economic functions in the community. Correct relationship to symbols enables fullness of life for the community. In practical terms it connotes good health, long life and abundance of cultural goods such as spouses, children, land, crops, animals, game and fish, physical beauty, power, local wisdom and knowledge and prestige. In this living process of establishing and sustaining relationships, the community intends to avoid calamities which include death, sickness, barrenness of women, loss of power, loss of physical beauty, loss of ancestral land, drought, famine, etc. Right relationship to symbols gives hope of continuous prosperity. The meaningfulness of life is sourced through the network of relationships.

According to Mantovani (1984, pp.195-210) community life is the only source of the fullness of life. For the societies in PNG, tradition has taught them that the fullness of life is attainable only within a community. It comprises human beings, ancestors, local spirits, animals and land. Hence the greatest ethical principle is whatever enhances community life is good; whatever endangers community life is ethically bad or wrong. The whole traditional ethical system is clan or community oriented. It is the community which has a nearly absolute value. The greatest punishment therefore is to be socially alienated or ostracised from one's community. Therefore the work of establishing right relationships is paramount, including relationship to the symbols. Relationships are created, maintained and mended through exchanges which are seen to be reciprocal giving and receiving. By tradition, people have always exchanged in the form of gifts and valuable items as the medium, sometimes together with consumer goods and artefacts, to sustain and reciprocate life.

### **Media representation of symbols**

Since the establishment of the Western media in the form of newspapers, radio, and television in PNG, the media has been writing, broadcasting and televising traditional performances of the people. The media's representation, I believe, has been the one of delivering to the public the exotic elements of the cultural performances and the different types of dances in PNG and their aesthetic patterns and array of colours. It is to be noted that these images of public performances are only outward expressions for the sake of entertainment. The spectacle may neither please nor satisfy the onlooker. The deeper dimension is

that we must pass beyond the sensuous form in order to penetrate its more extended and more profound meaning

However in its good intention of promoting the culture of the people, the media has at the same time disconnected the intrinsic spiritual and social values that give meaning to these cultural representations. This disconnectedness has contributed to the view that cultural shows are mere performances, void of any cultural value and meanings. Cultural performances represent the beliefs and the values people have which bind them together in their respective society or community. Therefore cultural performances are symbols of the interconnectedness people have with one another and the world around them.

To discuss this point we will look at a case study where the media was oblivious to the issue of the cultural significance of the dance but merely reported on the differences of the parties involved. This case study refers to the discontentment which arose with the engagement of the Tumbuan of the Tolai people of East New Britain to perform at the African, Caribbean and Pacific Meeting which was held in Port Moresby (PNG) in June 2006. The Tolai Tumbuan Society opposed the idea of Tumbuan leaving Rabaul and going to Port Moresby to entertain the APC delegates. The custodians of the Tumbuan argued that it was culturally not proper for the Tumbuan to be taken out of their natural and cultural environment. They argued that if the delegates want to see the Tumbuan, they had to come to the province. They raised concern that a sacred dance such as the Tumbuan must not be taken out of the province. This amounts to disrespect of the sacred tradition and the meaning of its cultural significance and value is diminished.

The following is how the media, PNG Post Courier, June 8, reported on this issue of cultural significance

#### **PNG 'MASK' SOCIETY PROTESTS UNAUTHORIZED DANCE**

PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea

More than 1000 tumbuan [masks] are understood to be preparing to march to the East New Britain provincial headquarters today to protest the movement of a sacred dance to Port Moresby last week. The Kinavai dance was performed in Port Moresby last week during the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) and European Commission Council of Ministers meetings. Attempts to get confirmation of the protest from a senior member of the Tumbuan Society, Melly Paivu, were unsuccessful. However, another senior member of the society, John Robin, who had previously stood up with Mr Paivu to protest the bringing of the dance to Port Moresby, said there would be a demonstration today that will be attended by tumbuan from the Gazelle Peninsula, Duke of York islands and New Ireland. It is understood the tumbuan

would gather at the provincial government headquarters at Vunadidir and demand a compensation of 250,000 tabu, (traditional shell money) which is the equivalent of PGK500,000 from the provincial administration and organizers for not consulting them before taking the dance out of the province, which is against the Tumbuan Society's laws. Mr Robin and Mr Paivu were against the movement of the tumbuans out of the province. Both men said a meeting held in a men's sacred place decided that the tumbuans would demand compensation from the provincial government and organizers who took the dance to Port Moresby. Failure to pay them would see the tumbuans boycotting the Mask Festival this year. 'If these people know well that they have done wrong, they will immediately pay compensation to the other tumbuans,' they said. Mr Paivu had said the provincial government had not abided by its laws that the tumbuans remain in a sacred place and not to be used to entertain or be taken out of the province. Mr Robin said according to the Tumbuan Society's law, the tumbuans, who were due to gather at Vunadidir today, would wait until they were given what they wanted. Attempts to speak to the provincial administration were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, a chamber of commerce meeting planned for today has been postponed and members cautioned about possible effects on business of the planned protest.

#### **Why did the Tolais take this stand?**

The following comments try to explain the stand taken by the Tolais by looking at the intrinsic value of symbols as understood by Papua New Guineans, which might assist the reader in appreciating the reasons for the resistance.

Any symbol which has attributes of sacredness is treated with reverence and fear. For many Papua New Guineans, even the educated elite, are still attached to traditional beliefs and live a life of double consciousness. They know they are modern, yet they still carry with them the consciousness of the living tradition. According to Thomson (1996, p.6) this is because:

'tradition survives, on this account, as a refuge for individuals who are unable or unwilling to live in an age of radical uncertainty. But it is difficult to believe that there is nothing more to it than that. To view the persistence and renewal of tradition as merely a defensive reaction to the process of modernization is to fail to see that there are certain aspects of tradition which are not eliminated by the development of modern societies, aspects which provide a foothold for the continued cultivation of traditional beliefs and practices in the modern world'.

The concept of symbols is one area that falls into this category.

Today in the media many aspects of culture are presented as entertainment and for promoting tourism. Many of these presentations are seen from the perspective of a contemporary display of art forms. However, with regard to certain sacred symbols of cultural presentations, the rituals behind the scenes have to be consolidated. This is to say that the custodians of the cultural presentation have to perform certain rites and rituals to celebrate the success of the event as well as to ward off any unforeseen ill effects that may fall upon individuals or the community. It is a matter of life and death and the case of the Tolai Tumbuan Society dramatically illustrates the point that sacred symbols deal with life and death.

### **A case study**

The following reports on an interview conducted with a Tolai person whose family members are custodians of a tumbuan. The person made the following remarks in relation to the saga concerning the tumbuans going to Port Moresby to show case PNG culture to the ACP-EU delegates. His comments as well as the others, highlight the saga surrounding the incident which sparked off this debate.

According to the interviewee, tumbuans are sacred, so they must be accorded special reverence. Ample time must be given for the custodians to go through the process of engaging the tumbuan, meaning establishing a dialogue. This is all done through a ritual process. After that the tumbuan leaves for the occasion. All this time there is always a constant dialogue. After the performance the tumbuan departs for home. Back home the process of welcome, appreciation and thank you is accorded to the tumbuan with rituals and ceremonies of cleansing. For an outsider, a non participant or a spectator, this is not their concern. All these hidden ceremonies, rites and rituals of cleansing are an expensive and time consuming exercise. So the concern of the Tolai tumbuan society was more related to these aspects rather than the performance or the entertainment aspect of the tumbuan dance. The demand for compensation was not for the sake of compensation as such but rather for dialogue and establishing relationships because it is in the nature of the tumbuan to be interactive in relationship with the members of the community.

Tumbuans are believed to be spirits of nature who are encountered by people especially those who have been initiated into the tumbuan society. This encounter can take place in the bush or creeks or parts of the forest where people believe these spirits live. This can happen when the person sleeps in the forest or at home and the spirit or spirits come to him in a dream. In the dream then, a particular dance is given to the person. The words of the dance, the style, rhythm and how to design and make the mask are all given by the spirit. The person learns all these from the dream. This is when the process of capturing that particular spirit in a certain form in the tumbuan mask begins. The person who now is the custodian of the tumbuan erects a sacred sanctuary where he begins to design the mask and at the same time teach others the



dance, the words and the style of beating the drums. According to the informant, the tumbuan is brought to life by a human person to be used for a particular occasion.

The making of a tumbuan can be from a dream or a person can buy it from another person. If it is from a dream the person is said to be given the words of the dance, the style and beat of the drums as well as how the mask and the decorations are to be made. When the tumbuan is said to be alive, he is kept in a secluded sacred place. While the tumbuan is there, the custodian of the tumbuan arranges for constant company and supply of food beginning from the day the tumbuan was brought to life. Only the male initiates are allowed to enter the sanctuary of the tumbuan and this is where they sing songs and make the headdress of the tumbuan. The tumbuan sanctuary is divided into two sections, the outer section and the inner section. The outer section is open to other male initiates and the inner section is reserved for men who are custodians of tumbuans. During this time when the tumbuan is said to be alive, the community's day to day lifestyle changes. Mothers are told to keep the babies quiet. There is generally less noise. Family members and others provide food to those who are participating in learning the dance and are in the secluded area. Women are to keep away from this area. In this way, respect and reverence is given to the tumbuan.

During the eve of the occasion for the tumbuan to perform, the custodians of other tumbuans will come with rings of shell money as fees for the tumbuan to perform. The tumbuan will leave its seclusion in the dark of night to relocate to a shelter that has been prepared where the dance or the performance will take place. The tumbuan performs during the day only and then retires. Returning to his sacred sanctuary the tumbuan is symbolically buried. The masks and everything that was part of his decoration are buried. He can be revived again when needed for another occasion.

Some observances occur during the time when the tumbuan is said to be 'brought to life'. In the community where the tumbuan is said to be residing the day to day activities of the community go into a different mode. The general mood of the community is to be quiet. There should be less noise from crying of babies or shouting and making rowdy noises in the community. If a baby cries persistently and is making a lot of noise then the tumbuan will come and making its presence known in front of the house. This means that it wants to be compensated for the disturbance caused. The parents of the baby now have to give some shell money to the tumbuan. If the tumbuan is happy with the value of the shell money then it gets the shell money and retreats to its sanctuary. Subsequently the symbol of the tumbuan as with other sacred symbols is seen as a medium for communicating and establishing amicable relationships with the world around them.

### **Summary**

For the communities in Papua New Guinea, symbols are living entities and defined as representations of the 'other'. Cultural performances are not

performed without 'custom' and are part of the process of negotiation and consolidation through social networks. A lot that meets the eye goes into preparation of song and dance. In essence what one sees is the outward expression only. Deeper values and obligations have to be constantly negotiated by the owners of the dance or the symbols. This process is an ongoing life activity and becomes more critical at times of public displays or public performances.

As the case story shows, the more important point of debate was not necessarily the compensatory demand. It was all to do with the values, the sacredness and the importance of the tumbuan in the life and culture of the Tolai people. The custodians of the tumbuans were placed in a dilemma knowing that what they did would have deeper social implications. It ultimately was the matter of life and death. The discussion has not been on the philosophical and psychological interpretations of symbols, which would not make sense to a traditional Papua New Guinean. Rather the approach was more on the lived and shared expressions of the people from day to day.

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