

## **Migrations and visitations: Sacred sites and sacred stories in East Sepik Province, PNG**

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### **Abstract**

In PNG it is said that 97% of the land is owned by traditional landowners, and only 3% is alienated. The impression this figure gives requires a great deal of modification in the light of long term leases and private deals by citizens. On what basis do the villagers claim rights to their land? It seems incredible to many visitors to the region that land rights are claimed on the basis of visitation by spirits, the burying of the old people, by extended migrations stories from the originating times, or by the emergence of humankind from holes in the ground. Land disputes are settled on the basis of those who know the sacred stories. This account will draw on materials from the East Sepik Province. It attempts to give meaning to such expressions as, “The land is our mother,” and “we belong to the land” and to offer insights into the social topography of East Sepik by showing an interest in sacred sites and stories.

**Key Words:** land rights, relation to the spirits, masalai places, places of origin, migration stories, stories of foundation, dead as conscience.

### ***Introduction***

The topic of sacred sites in Papua New Guinea is a critical issue for the societies of PNG. It is on the basis of sacred stories about land that Papua New Guineans claim their land and the property on it. Although the principle of “being in possession is nine-tenths of the law” makes obvious sense everywhere, the knowledge of spiritual realities in the locality is the hard reality for many villagers, and must not be taken lightly. Possession is not just a matter of sitting there; it is a matter of “tuning-in” to encounters. In the East Sepik Province (ESP) there is a lot of wild jungle in which you simply cannot go or sit where you want to, because of intertwining vines and branches, sharp slippery embankments, and thorny bushes and grasses shedding fire ants and hosting lots of mosquitoes. It comes as a relief and a joy to find that the local residents can encounter spiritual personalities anywhere throughout this jungle. Villagers throughout the jungles and the grassy plains expect the action of spirits in their domains, they respond to the spirits taking action, and get a response in turn. Therefore the villagers know they are *papagraun* or *mamagraun*<sup>1</sup> of their own distinctly marked areas. Sacred sites and sacred stories represent their relationship to the earth. In common law, you can say they are “landowners”, but this term is fraught. Customary law prefers

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<sup>1</sup> Tok Pisin: father of the land, mother of the land

expressions such as “the land is our mother who nourishes us”, “we emerged with the land”, “we belong to the land”. These are expressions of rights and belonging shared with First Nation peoples throughout the earth.

***Prelude: The Case of Land Rights in Australia***

It is impressive that land rights are being decided in courts of law in neighbouring Australia on the basis of knowing and maintaining sacred sites.

In the beer-gatherings of Australia, the topics of mining and of sacred sites are regularly treated as follows: “Do you know how the aborigines find their sacred sites? – with a Geiger counter!” This is an unworthy comment in multi-cultural Australia, but it does give an indication of the incredulity that greets the topic of sacred sites amongst such European-type Australians, who can understand wanting to own the site of a uranium mine, but not the idea that religious respect is given to the earth. As Wootten<sup>2</sup> reflects, there is a host of misunderstandings concealed in this little bad taste joke. As a court rapporteur he recalls the extended Hindmarsh court battle which for eight years struggled with “bitter recrimination about the genuineness of Indigenous claims, the appropriateness of processes for evaluating them, and the proper role of experts such as anthropologists in those processes”<sup>3</sup>. He shares from his experience:

The category of the ‘sacred’, and the items assigned to the category, are constructs of the culture that uses the term. One could not expect that it would translate with ready equivalence between cultures as different as the modern, capitalist, predominantly secular culture of mainstream Australia (which itself would contain many differences of interpretation), and the cultures of Aboriginal groups or individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Rather we might start with a minimalist view of the sacred in Australian matters by the terminology of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act*<sup>5</sup> which provides effective protection for a significant Aboriginal area, that is, “an area of particular significance to Aboriginals in accordance with Aboriginal tradition”.

The Geiger counter joke denies a meaning to “sacred”, cheapens any history of religious experience, and reduces land claims to the possibility of monetary compensation. In Papua New Guinea however, it is clear that the whole system of land ownership is based on overlays of history; a bundle of rights to land on the basis of sites, stories, migrant routes; a set of expectations about meeting spirits; and inalienable title to land such that no expense is spared to bring

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<sup>2</sup> “Resolving Disputes over Aboriginal Sacred Sites: Some Experiences in the 1990s,” in *Negotiating the Sacred. Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*, ed. E. B. Coleman and K. White (Canberra: ANU Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Wootten, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Wootten, 193.

<sup>5</sup> “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 278,” *Government Gazette*, no. 79 (1984): 340–48.

persons from town back to the village after death. In this context, it is frequently stated that 97% of the land of PNG belongs to traditional owners. Only 3% has been alienated in a permanent way. It is a law in PNG that land cannot be sold to anyone else other than the state, and that common land use other than by traditional villager landowners is only in terms of 99-year leases. Trebilcock<sup>6</sup> reports:

Over 97 percent of the total land area (47 million hectares) in Papua New Guinea is "customary land", that is land owned under traditional or customary title by nationals. Less than three percent of the land (1.2 million hectares) has been alienated from the customary landowners. Of this three percent, a small percentage (about 125,000 hectares) comprises private freeholds, mainly held by missions and plantations. Most alienated land is owned by the Government. The Government owns some of this land beneficially (about 120,000 hectares) and has granted long- term (99 year) leasehold interests in the rest to other parties.

Peter Donigi further takes a rather militant stand on the acquisition of land by the Government as not including that which lies under the soil:

Successive governors of Papua went to great pains to protect the natives and their lands and possessions. They did so by controls placed on acquisition of traditional or native land and property. Direct dealings in land were prohibited. Only the Governor could acquire land on behalf of the Crown. It is therefore clear that rights to land and sub-soil resources were never ceded to the British Crown and Crown rights to all minerals, including the Crown metals of gold and silver, never became part of the law of Papua in its applicability to traditional or native land.<sup>7</sup>

These views need to be amplified by Colin Filer's report that the now condemned Special Agricultural Business Leases (SABL) have effectively alienated more land: "Between the beginning of July 2003 and the end of January 2011, almost 5 million hectares of customary land (11 percent of PNG's total land area) has passed into the hands of national and foreign corporate entities through a legal mechanism known as the 'lease-leaseback scheme'.<sup>8</sup>"

What then is the basis for land holding for the PNG village landowners? We want to highlight what the differences might be between common law and customary law in PNG. In this paper I want to give an

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<sup>6</sup> "Customary Land Law Reform in Papua New Guinea: Law, Economics and Property Rights in a Traditional Culture," *Adelaide Law Review* 9, no. 1 (1983): 194.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Donigi, *Indigenous or Aboriginal Rights to Property: A Papua New Guinea Perspective* (Utrecht: International Books, 1994), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Filer, "The New Land Grab in Papua New Guinea," in *Global Land Grabbing at Institute of Development Studies*, ed. Institute of Development Studies (Sussex: University of Sussex, 2011), 2.

account of the basis for land rights for a couple of communities in the East Sepik Province.

### *1. Meeting the Spirits*

I had an illustrative experience with the villagers of Nimbohu village in Numbo Local Level Government area. One day I arrived in the village to witness the bride price exchange of a long-standing marriage. It was expected that there would be a substantial amount of shell valuables and money given on this day. Once the crowd had gathered, an old man stood in the forum to give a formal speech--he was a *painankle tue*<sup>9</sup>. This man begins by slapping the earth at one place with a coconut spathe, then giving his speech as he walks to the other end of his path and slapping the earth again with a rhythmic “Hoi, hoi.” He continues for about ten minutes. Apparently, there is a belief that this is speech which enforces claims, because I heard some younger sceptics behind me complaining, “Why does the *painankle tue* go on and on? He accomplishes nothing.” But the text of the speech, given in archaic language, was translated for me as, “Before, in the old times, our ancestor was crying for the loss of his wife. He wandered from his old place through the bush crying, until he came to this place, and lay down here to sleep at night. At night the *masalai*<sup>10</sup> came and appeared to him and said, ‘This is my place. Now you come and settle here, and I will be your *masalai*, and you will be my man.’ And so our clan owns this land.”

Other villages have told me that they were residents in their area from the long distant past. In Sausenduon near Yangoru, totemic eponymous apical ancestors were a blue cockatoo, a green cockatoo and a snake. One ancestor is said to have pissed one night and his piss went into the mouth of the snake, and so that clan was born as a line of men and women. Then when another clan, the white cockatoo, wanted to enter the area, they too were granted a place to make four clans in the village area.

I gather that there are various ways to establish land rights through relation to spirits. Down on the Sepik River, there were land mediation hearings, and the person who could tell the story of the coming of the first spirit or the first man to this site, was acknowledged as clearly the rightful landowner (cf. tales “of birds dropping a huge *kwila* tree to create a lake containing water spirits. . . . But then . . . the Sepik had broken into the lake and the spirits had escaped, expanding the clan’s claim”<sup>11</sup>). At one such hearing two large round stones were presented near the Sepik, in an area that is covered with silt and where stones are normally not to be found. These stones were the testicles of the ancestor, clearly putting the storyteller in contact with his rightful claims. There are many stories on emplacing myths or using material objects to support that the story being told is true.

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<sup>9</sup> “speech- making man”

<sup>10</sup> “nature spirit”

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Bragge, “The Japandai Migrations,” in *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea* (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990), 47 fn. 2.

In Malimbanja in the Yangoru area, I asked to be shown *masalai* places in the village. The first place I was shown was a pleasing and rather intimate waterhole with waterfall. It was a place that invited a relaxing pause. The next place was a large beating log in the flowing stream. This gave the impression of self-caused motion, but over a deep patch of the stream which presumably moves along with the flood waters that regularly come down the Mt Rurun. Higher up in Ambukanja, I asked about a *masalai* place, and I was told that, over there in the stream there was a particularly bad and offensive spirit. He was causing sickness all the time. When I asked whether the local community knew how to deal with this, I was assured that the spirit caused no offence to the owners of the waterhole, only to others who might trespass. This spirit waterhole also was expected to migrate up and down the stream depending on the deeper places dug out by the floods. I understand that there is no such thing as a “bad spirit” or a “good spirit”. It was just a matter of the spirit being “one of us” or being transgressed upon by strangers, who had no relationship to the spirit. One day, my language instructor turned up with a large swollen face around his left eye. He told me that the day before, he had killed a large frog at a waterhole in his village, and that was an offence against the *masalai*, and so he had to bear this punishment, although a member of the clan of the spirit.

E. B. Tylor (1871) gave a basic definition of animism to include “an idea of pervading life and will in nature”<sup>12</sup>; a belief that natural objects other than humans have souls. and I believe this is what people expect the term to mean. But of course, some modification is required. It is not so much that every rock or plant is believed to have a soul, but that any rock or plant might be linked with a spirit. In this sense, I was introduced further to a set of stones sitting unmarked in the bush. These two large oval shaped stones were identified as “pig stones”, used to locate chants for the calling forth of pigs at the time of hunting. I was warned to be sure not to touch them, or there would be an earthquake, lightning, thunder and a great deluge. Other stones of a similar appearance have found their way into the surroundings of the *Haus Tambaran*<sup>13</sup> of the Sepik River area. These large stones are also not to be touched; they have names and belong each to a particular clan; and have been brought in from elsewhere (in a general area where silt covers the ground and no stones are to be found—even to the extent that young boys wanting rocks for their catapults have to manufacture their own out of clay roasted in sunshine.) Also, in the village Yamuk, there is a large kwila hardwood tree. I was told this was a spirit place, and on one visit found it girded with a chain of coloured balls of fruit from the bush. I was given two explanations: that it must have been just to make the spirit happy on a happy occasion; or originally I was told that it was meant as appeasement when it had caused sickness, and the decoration was accompanied by the killing of a chicken as a sacrifice to the spirit. Either explanation was possible.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Research into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 260.

<sup>13</sup> Spirit houses

On another occasion in village Soli, near Yangoru, I arrived in the village in late afternoon, and was given a highly dramatic account of why the village ground was drenched with rain (most definitely the story was part entertainment on the part of the story-teller.) The man, Manua, told me that he had been cutting some new bush in the morning. Then he took a rest at noontime under a tree stump. When he woke up, he saw a large python hovering over his head, so he jumped up and cried out, "I am sorry, my *kandere*<sup>14</sup>, I did not know this was your place!" At that time there was thunder and lightning and a great downpour of rain. Manua immediately ran and killed a chicken and poured its blood into the waterhole he identified as his *masalai* place. The chicken was eaten by his human *kandere*. In this Manua was following the standardized belief that if you give nourishment to your nephews, they will be like a garden for you, giving back money, valuables and items of prosperity.<sup>15</sup>

Now I will reach a bit beyond my boundaries. Not in East Sepik Province, but in neighbouring Madang I once had a rather dramatic encounter with a *masalai*. In the village, Dimer, along the North Coast Road there is the river Gilegi, a fast flowing stream rushing down between large rocks, bringing large fish swiftly and just as swiftly the men with spear guns following after them. At the top of the stream is a tall, slender, beautiful waterfall, with an almost straight drop of 100 meters. I often visited Dimer, and wanted to get close to this waterfall. I went with local friends and we met with the owner family, perhaps not with the key person of the family to give us proper permission to go. But we got to the top with the accompaniment of some boys, who started to slash around at the luxuriant growth with their bush knives. Although we were told that a swirling part of the water above the waterfall was a tunnel dropping sharply down through the stone, our group nevertheless decided to take a swim in the flowing stream. The waterfall, viewed from far shows two prominent abutting rocks with a stream between, which is about a meter broad at that point. This is the old lady sitting and pissing. The brave can crawl along one of the rocks and look 100 meters below. After the swim it was all hard work for me. I found it enormous work to go around and try to climb down to the bottom of the waterfall. Going up again was even more work as I clung to my friend's denim jacket. Each time I rested I went soundly to sleep and then climbed again. At night in the village there was an enormous thunder and lightning storm which I would dearly liked to have viewed but my stamina was gone. In the course of the storm, a set of coconut trees fell down on three pigs and killed them and buried them. Not for a couple of weeks were the stinking carcasses discovered. By that time, I was gone, and the blame was not laid on me, the visiting stranger who was part of the trespass on the *masalai*

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<sup>14</sup> Nephew – literally, sister's children—a most important relationship in Yangoru, which derives from the sense of a man taking the place of his sister as mother to her children.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Gregory Bateson, *Naven. A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936). *Passim*.

place, but rather on the young boys who had slashed the bush at the head of the waterfall.

## **2.Places of Origin**

Important in the account of belonging to the land are stories of origin from the earth. The first such location I was introduced to was a stone on the side of Mt Rurun in village Walamulu. It was a granite stone about a cubic meter in size and on one of its ridges could be discerned regular grooves. According to local history, this was the location where the first men came out of the earth, striking a mark on the granite to indicate their arrival, and from where they dispersed to the rest of the world. Yes, people of all races and nationalities, whites and blacks, all owed their existence to this place of origin.

Bernbaum<sup>16</sup> addresses the sacredness of mountains in general: “mountains that may or may not be revered frequently contain sacred sites and objects such as temples, monasteries, hermitages, stones, springs, and groves, or are associated with the activities of important holy persons. . . . Mountains commonly awaken in individuals a sense of wonder and awe that sets them apart as places imbued with evocative beauty and meaning”<sup>17</sup>. Mt Rurun is no different. It has an imposing presence in the whole of the Sepik area, especially looking up from the plains of the Sepik River. It features in stories of two creating brothers, Rurun and Konimpo, or some other younger brother if you come from a different side of the mountain. In this area, when pigs are trussed and lined up for an exchange event, each pig has a coconut with a shooting leaf growing out of it put at the head of the pig. At the time of handing over the pig the coconut is held in the direction of Mt Rurun, and the statement is made, “First things to the first man.” There is a term for such spirits, *saie* or *sahi*, which is not a name meaning “divinity” since it can be used of a big man, and I have actually been addressed this way. I was also told that Rurun and Konimpo are basically responsible for the creation of the landscape of the Sepik Provinces. Rurun took large lumps of earth from down below on the plains and heaped the earth to form the mountains above.

In another location, Kিনিambu has a small swampy waterhole from which all the people of the earth are believed to have come forth. Roscoe states that such places of origin are common in Sepik: “Throughout Boiken territory, there are clans that claim to be autochthonous, to be ‘the people of the ground’. Their ancestors are variously said to have emerged from caves, stones, trees, pools, swamps, ditches, fissures in the earth, or even, in one case, Heaven. Whatever the case, all informants, be they of autochthonous or non-autochthonous descent, interpret these claims to mean the ancestor was already present when immigrant clans arrived.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Sacred Mountains: Themes and Teachings,” *Mountain Research and Development* 26, no. 4, Religion and sacredness in mountains: a historical perspective (2006): 304–9.

<sup>17</sup> Bernbaum, 305.

<sup>18</sup> Paul B Roscoe, “The Flight from the Fen: The Prehistoric Migrations of the Boiken of the East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea,” *Oceania* 60, no. 2 (1989): 146.

But of possibly even greater interest is the researched site of origin described by Jürg Wassmann and his team of colleagues from Basel. The team of anthropologists from Basel, who visited the East Sepik Province in 1972-1973 and thereafter, all agreed that the center of the foundation of villages in that Middle Sepik area was the village Gaikorobi. "The place of origin of the present Nyaura population is unanimously and very emphatically declared to be Gaikorobi"<sup>19</sup>. I visited Gaikorobi a number of times, trying to cultivate a relationship for a viewing of the hole in the ground out of which all humankind was said to have originated. I was told it was just a small hole, like a vulva, and it was a spring of water in a collection of rocks in the bush behind the village. On one visit to the village, an enthusiastic man was willing to bring me to the rocks, so we walked along the jungle path. He told us to wait on the path while he located the rocks, and we could hear him in his boots running backwards and forwards through the bush. He finally came out and declared that the site had gone, even though as a child he had regularly played there. When we walked back through the village, a middle-aged woman met us and told us that we had no chance of finding the site because we had not consulted with her first of all.

### **3. Migration Stories with Unifying Effect**

There is a popular story of pairs of migrating brothers who successively came forth from the hole of origin at Gaikorobi. This story and the events it depicts have a marvelous unifying effect on knowledge of the neighbourhood of the Middle Sepik, all the way over the kunai plains up to the Maprik Highway (30-40 kilometers). I am struck that it unifies the large district in the same way that the story of Austronesian migration<sup>20</sup> unifies the pathway from Taiwan to the Marquesas in the Pacific. Wassmann draws up a map of as many as nine migration pathways around the Middle Sepik area. These are recorded in the equivalent of a set of prayer beads used to guide people through the story during singing events. There are knotted cords (*kuraga*) with larger indicators and smaller ones which can guide singing at solemn times in chants that may last from six or twelve to twenty-four hours. The knots and indicators tell of stops and events and notable occurrences or remnants left along the way, and there are names of people and places which survive today and are named in the chants. Some men can delight that their names occur in the chant. In some other villages (e.g., Yamuk), these knotted cords are replaced by long ribs of sago palms with sticks of varying lengths standing bound in the rib and also indicating the highlights of long song cycles.

Comparison is invited between these migration stories and the Aboriginal dreaming tracks of Australia:

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<sup>19</sup> Jürg Wassmann, "The Nyaura Concepts of Space and Time," in *Sepik Heritage. Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, ed. N Lutkehaus et al. (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990), 27 and see fn. 7.

<sup>20</sup> The Austronesian language groups of peoples began their migrations from Taiwan about 6000 years ago, flourished in the northern islands of Papua New Guinea about 1500 BC, and eventually got to New Zealand about 1000 AD.

Dreamings are the great creative beings who came out of the Earth and travelled across the land and sea. The Australian continent is criss-crossed with the tracks of the Dreamings: walking, slithering, crawling, flying, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, giving birth. They were performing rituals, distributing the plants, making the landforms and water, and making the relationships between one place and another, one species and another. They were changing shape from animal to human and back to animal again, and they were becoming ancestral to particular groups of animals and humans (totemic groups).<sup>21</sup>

On a smaller scale, the successive pairs of brothers from the Gaikorobi migration tracks left people and remnants behind to mark their originating history.

Roscoe has also investigated the unifying effects of migrations in the Sepik provinces. He collected 371 migrations stories from the eastern end of the province leading into the Yangoru area. Representing these stories as vectors, and entering them into a cartographic computer program, he has been able to show that many people now living in Yangoru consider themselves to have fled from “the fen”, by which Roscoe means a certain island or promontory which became prominent when the sea was receding back in a north-easterly direction across the land in this area. The raised water level had given them a jumping off place in the original travels coming from the Indonesian side, down the Sepik River which, according to Swadling, held to its present path around 2,500 years ago.<sup>22</sup> As the waters receded, peoples took the chance to disperse throughout the countryside in the direction of Mt Rurun. This is a different migration story from the Gaikorobi account, but gives a similar story of unity. Roscoe’s story does not have an explicitly religious character, but his tracing the migrations back before 6,000 years ago<sup>23</sup> assures us that we are dealing with foundational arrangements.

#### ***4. The Institutionalising of the Spirits***

Wassmann set himself the task of trying to correlate recent known events of the last hundred years in relation to village founding and movements, to the stories of original migration from Gaikorobi. In a world of vanishing architecture, where the houses are made of bush materials, and which might last twenty years at the most, and in a countryside where the roads are only changing paths of least resistance through the bush, there are no clear historical milestones. Wassmann concludes that the villagers regularly make the jump between the recent knowable historical past and the ancient times of foundational events. From the Scandinavian experience of sacred sites, there is also a cautionary note: “Brink has successfully shown that the sacredness of the

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<sup>21</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, “Dreaming Ecology: Beyond the between,” *Religion & Literature* 40, no. 1 (2008): 111.

<sup>22</sup> P Swadling et al., *The Sepik-Ramu: An Introduction* (Boroko: PNG National Museum, 1988), 14–15, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Roscoe, “The Flight from the Fen: The Prehistoric Migrations of the Boiken of the East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea,” 148.

landscape is by no means static, and continues to change and adapt to modern life.”<sup>24</sup> Harkin observes from the Canadian traditions: “If human artifacts, even monumental totem poles, often do not survive beyond a human life span, what sorts of traces remain of human deeds? The answer, much as it is for Basso’s Apaches, is that narrative and related linguistic practices (naming, joking) connect places permanently with human actions. Named features of landscape may thus serve as signs for moral values, shorthand for historical events and periods, and warrants for the present order of things.”<sup>25</sup>

This is nowhere better illustrated than in the occasion of initiations in a Haus Tambaran (a spirit house), as the institution exists today on and near the Sepik River. The Haus Tambaran itself is a collection of mythical records and is treated as a spirit place. Over the years it has accumulated the records of ancestors who have lived and died in this place. There are names for the various sections of the house to correspond with clan and moiety divisions in the village, and there are names for the spears, the drums, the posts, and also for the dogs, pigs, totemic birds and totemic plants associated with these social orders. These are names which belong forever in the Haus Tambaran.

From the village Kandingei in 1973, Wassmann<sup>26</sup> reports creation stories linking in with the initiation events of the Haus Tambaran. There was first the water of today’s Sepik. Then a formation of foam appeared. This grew and became a small crocodile, which became large and turned and turned in the mud of the River. Eventually he emerged as a fully formed crocodile and then split in half, with his upper jaw going to form the sky and his lower jaw forming our earth. This split is represented in the moieties of the village, the opposing sides of the Haus Tambaran, which are *neme* (darkness) and *nyaura* (sunshine). The boys of the Haus Tambaran emerge from the skin-cutting with raised cicatrices which reflect the skin of the crocodile.

When an initiation takes place, it makes a great impression on me as a well-developed institution. For some areas of Sepik, there are six (Kiniambu – Gesch<sup>27</sup>, Ilahita – Tuzin<sup>28</sup>) or seven (Baktamin – Barth<sup>29</sup>) stages for the initiands to go through. At the Middle Sepik River initiation is done with elaborate ceremonies, focusing on a skin-cutting ceremony involving 1,500 –

<sup>24</sup> J Denison, “Sacred Sites and Holy Places: Exploring the Sacralization of Landscape through Time and Space,” *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 606.

<sup>25</sup> M. E Harkin, “Sacred Places , Scarred Spaces,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 2 15, no. 1 (2000): 51.

<sup>26</sup> “Der Biß des Krokodils: Die ordnungsstiftende Funktion der Namen in der Beziehung zwischen Mensch und Umwelt am Beispiel der Initiation, Nyaura, Mittel-Sepik,” in Neuguinea. Nutzung Und Deutung Der Umwelt, ed. M Munzel (Frankfurt am Main: Museum für Volkerkunde, 1987), 511–58.

<sup>27</sup> *Initiative and Initiation. A Cargo Cult-Type Movement in the Sepik against Its Background in Traditional Village Religion* (St. Augustin: Anthropos-Institut, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> *The Ilahita Arapesh* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of Papua New Guinea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

2,000 cuts over the skin of the boys involved.<sup>30</sup> The girls have a skin-cutting ceremony of this magnitude only in Yanket village as a unicity. Then the Haus Tambaran stands as a towering construction displaying all kinds of traditions, shaped in its unique and characteristic saddle-shaped roofing, with a large painted façade at either end, depicting the ranks of ancestors and story spirits. This all becomes a great ponderable: How does a little village like this mount such an enormous display of civility in architecture, ritual, tradition and mobilisation? The whole village and neighbourhood largely stop what they are doing for three months, and dedicate themselves to making the initiation ceremony go well.

The villagers are used to personalizing the institutions of the Haus Tambaran. One enthusiastic witness pointed to everything inside the house and called it all, “*kipnda*”- witnesses from the original times. This witness wanted to relate this all to “*kuragua*” – witchcraft, known in Tok Pisin as *sanguma*. He meant that the tradition itself bears witness to what is true and right, and there is civil punishment for those who need to be brought into line. This latter identification was not well received by others sitting in the Haus Tambaran; he was perhaps pushing meanings too far. The Fijian experience of building up the sacred is similar: “Because old village sites, earthen house mounds, and house foundations are the places especially imbued with *mana* of the ancestors who lie within, they may be dangerous.”<sup>31</sup>

Also linked to the Haus Tambaran are stone witnesses to the traditions of the various clans in the village. As stated earlier, there are no stones large or small to be found in the ground around the Middle Sepik area, which has been silted up over the centuries. But outside every Haus Tambaran there is a pair of dykes (*wambuno*) that runs down the middle of the village, which in some villages is necessary to hold back the flooding water of the Sepik in the wet season. In the space between the dykes, in front of the Haus Tambaran is a mound (*wak*) with some small palms growing out it and with large rocks about a meter in length standing around. These are named and identified with the four or five clans connected to that Haus Tambaran.

### **5. The Orders of Spirits**

Telling the stories of spirits encountered in the Sepik region is reflecting on a world where, at various possible places and times, the natural world can be found full of life, personality and power. It is altogether a friendly picture of the “wild jungle”. Although there are punishments for doing the wrong thing, for speaking the wrong language, and for trespassing on ground entrusted to other families or using their resources, men and women feel there are holy places, separate, into which you can enter and expect to learn something marvelous. But there is not just a pantheist overall presence of spirits. The individual spirits can be ordered into various groups according to how they play their role in interaction with men and women of the village.

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick Gesch, “Conversion and Initiation,” in *Culture, Gospel and Church* (Madang: Divine Word Institute, 1994), 199–230.

<sup>31</sup> M Tomlinson, “Sacred Soil in Kadavu, Fiji,” *Oceania* 72, no. 4 (2002): 47.

### 5. a) Spirits of Foundation

The spirits whose names occur in stories of cultural creation or establishment, such as the institutions of Yangoru by Rurun and Konimbo (or Manup and Kilibob<sup>32</sup> on the bigger scale) or the migration stories from Gaikorobi bound into the *kuraga* knotted cord can all be held to be Spirits of Foundation. They either were linked with stories of physical creation, or with putting in place cultural practices which identify a community, and their main appearance in the community today is in the form of mention in sacred stories. Ownership of the land on Mt Rurun is a money-making matter today. There is a small area of land leased to the mobile phone company for a pylon which serves a wide neighbourhood. Even then the consciousness of the Apache is shared: "Indians take pride in leaving no mark on the land."<sup>33</sup> There was a great struggle to get permission for the tower, and it causes discontent as a mark on the land.

There is a series of stories about the two brothers Rurun and Konimpo. On one occasion, on the fringes of a social gathering for a bride price, a big man volunteered to tell me and some children a few stories to keep us occupied. He began with the story of Rurun going to find pigs in the bush using a lizard on a rope to help him sniff out the pigs. I protested and said that this was just a series of kid's stories. He reacted and made me understand that these were serious stories, but he was telling them at the children's level to entertain them, while there was a more important meaning involved. The stories go like this:

1. Rurun went with his lizard to find pigs, but his younger brother said, "We Yangoruans do not use lizards to hunt. We use dogs." Rurun stopped, "OK" and he got a dog to hunt with. That is why the Yangoruans now hunt with dogs.
2. Rurun was lining up lizards on the playground to give to his friends. His brother Konimpo said, "We Yangoru people do not line up lizards, we use pigs." Rurun understood, "OK". So that is why Yangoru people line up pigs and give them to our friends.
3. Rurun was cutting flesh from his wife's breast. Konimpo asked him what he was doing, and he replied that he was getting skin to cover his hand drum. Konimpo said, "No. We Yangoru people use lizard skin for our drums." Rurun understood. So that is why people of Yangoru use lizard skin for their drums today.

Each story ends with the refrain, "And that is why we people of Yangoru up to today are very smart at doing things this way." That is why we have this

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<sup>32</sup> R Pech, "Manub and Kilibob: Melanesian Models for Brotherhood, Shaped by Myth, Dream and Drama," *Point* 16 (1991). Manub and Kilibob are two brothers, whose names change as the myth is found a long distance in various locations, along the northern coast of Papua New Guinea.

<sup>33</sup> J Hontz and B. F Stinski, "Sacred Sites, Dispute Rights," *Human Rights* 19, no. 4 (1992): 21.

cultural institution. So the story of these two brothers can be compared with the Manup and Kilibob stories of Madang, better known because of the connection to Yali Singina's "cargo cult"<sup>34</sup>. In those stories too, the brothers have a dispute and travel away from their base. As they travel away, they let off groups of people from their canoe flotilla at various sites, and these settlers are given certain skills, e.g., ". . . And that's why the people of Yabob are great pottery makers up to the present time." These are thus seen to be stories of cultural creation.

At Gaikorobi there is a story of Moem<sup>35</sup> which tells of the truth behind the exchange market. When I heard the story, I was told that men find it hard to believe that women who go to market with ordinary bland sago, can come home with sweet fish. The secret is that Moem has sex with all the women at the market site, they fill his canoe with sago, and he gives them the fish in exchange. In village Kararau, the reverse of the exchange is of interest<sup>36</sup>, when fish are given away freely and needful sago is gathered in. This is the story of the institution of the market, and I was shown a small stream in the swampy area of Gaikorobi where Moem used to tie his canoe, before he was killed by all the jealous husbands. This background remains as a lively story with a concrete site as evidence, even though it is not expected that there will be an encounter with this spirit as a living presence.

### 5. b) Spirits of Right and Property

The spirit who was mentioned in the *painankle* speech in Nimbihu, as recounted earlier, can be considered as one of the Spirits of Right and Property, the *masalai* of this clan. His appearance is not so much in myth as in the narration of an encounter with a known person. There are also the spirits of Malimbanja who assure people of their rights in this ground. Others trespassing on this area or using the resources without regard for the owners, will be punished. My language teacher was punished as a youth for killing an unusually large frog at a *masalai* place. He was the owner of the ground, but he was showing a lack of due care.

Villagers identified for me a place in Bukienduon which looked like round bubbles which had formed in volcanic lava flow. The unusual character of this led the villagers to say, "It is a place that they say 'masalai' to" – meaning it is identified with the family spirits. If I asked what a *masalai* might look like, men will draw a geometric design perhaps referring to a grass or a certain leaf or an animal in an abstract way. These designs have a totemic relationship to a clan. When there is a common work such as weaving and putting a roof on a big house in the community, then the women will prepare bowls of food for each clan, and the clan will know its bowls of food by referring to its "masalai", its totemic leaf or animal, or the abstract design for this. If there is an abstract design on the façade of a *haus tambaran*, this will represent the spirits of the various clans in the village. One young girl, on the occasion of her first menstruation, was taken aside and shown a bull-roarer

<sup>34</sup> Peter Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964).

<sup>35</sup> Marcus Schindlbeck, *Sago Bei Den Sawos* (Basel: Basler Beiträge, 1978), 215–31.

<sup>36</sup> Schindlbeck, 227.

with a totemic design on it. This was otherwise a secret sacred object not for women to see.

### 5. c) The Dead as Conscience and Blessing

The identification of the role of the spirits of the dead as conscience was suggested by Ahrens<sup>37</sup>. “Melanesian man does experience his conscience, or rather does experience himself in his total existence *as* conscience, while he is faced with the withdrawal of blessings by the spirits of the dead.”<sup>38</sup>

Villagers feel themselves chastised by the presence of dead people and usually find a reason in the recall of an offence they have recently committed. I worked with a man in his garden one sunny day and it was suggested that we have a green coconut to drink for lunch. My friend went up the coconut tree and threw down a coconut. It gave a hollow echo. So he threw down ten more. When he opened them up with his bush knife, he found the green coconuts had nice white flesh, no water, but a big black mark in each one. We guessed that this had been caused by a lightning strike the night before. My friend knew what was wrong, “It’s OK, I know the problem. I was cross and mean with my younger brothers this morning, so our dead father is chastising me.” Because of his social offence against his brothers, he was being punished by the dead man as a form of conscience to remind him of his wrong. Later in the day he walked past the empty house of his father and threw in a sprig of betel nut, saying, “Here, Paragombi, this is for you.”

In another example a villager told me that he had been very unlucky lately in shooting pigs with his shotgun. When he took aim, the gun diverted away, and he would habitually miss. I told him that he was simply not a good shot, but he said he had a very good reputation as a hunter of pigs. A month later he came to me and told me that he was now killing pigs successfully. The problem had been that he should have given a pig to his dead mother’s brother. As a result, his dead mother was causing his aim to be diverted. Once he had given the pig to his mother’s brother, he was successfully on target once again.

When a significant member of the community dies in Yangoru, there will be a festival one year or so after the burial, called *nimpi rafie*<sup>39</sup>. This is a dance event that starts with a slow and sad mourning procession, which is interrupted by a more joyful group invading the dance place. Further, individuals leap into the dance arena with challenges to issue about the capability of the bereaved to match their giving of pigs. This confusion evolves into a generally joyful dance which is meant to tell the dead spirit that it should leave the bush now and come back home to the village. In later days the ground near his house will be spread with white ash so that the footprints of the dead person can be identified when he returns in the night time. The community thus turns its grieving into an expectation that the dead spirit will come back and bring blessings to its family. There was quoted to me on occasions a proverb

<sup>37</sup> “Local Church and Theology in Melanesia,” *Point* 2 (1978): 140–58.

<sup>38</sup> Ahrens, 151 f.

<sup>39</sup> “cut the hair”

which said, “The masalai goes ahead, and the dead spirit follows behind.” The dead spirits are thus linked to the sacred places of the masalai too.

### **Conclusion**

The jungle and the whole landscape is thus a friendly world, inhabited by personalities with whom an outsider must negotiate your way and your rights, visible village persons and hard-to-see spiritual persons. But these spirits are in the nature of family: you belong to them and they belong to you, in good times and in bad times. Because of its nourishing work, to the people of the East Sepik, the land is a nourishing mother. Because of that which is already institutionalized in terms of local identity, villagers belong to the land more than having a commodity at their disposal which can be bought and sold. “The land is our mother”, “we belong to the land”. The spirits are met at holy places, and gain their status by resounding stories around these places. These sites are sacred. The mountains are identified with foundational spirits; you can meet spirits or colonies of spirits in the bush; there are sacred sites which react to trespass by outsiders or offensive activities; there are stories which link large areas because of migrations of founding spirits; and there are the dead, who might consider that you deserve punishment or blessing. The jungle is a spiritual place and you need a discerning mind to make your way suitably around this place where all kinds of encounters will be waiting for you.

There can be no cynicism about sacred sites and land-ownership. These connections are winning large areas of land for the indigenous in Australian courts of law. “Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites”<sup>40</sup>. “Nations around the globe must recognize the significance of such places and their integral associations to the social, cultural, and spiritual lives of indigenous peoples”<sup>41</sup>. This is presented also in the Constitution of Papua New Guinea where “Every person has the right to freedom of conscience, thought and religion and the practice of his religion and beliefs, including freedom to manifest and propagate his religion and beliefs.”<sup>42</sup> In Papua New Guinea, the most important aspects of religion are derived from the sacred sites and the sacred stories that belong to them. In common law, land might be a commodity that can be freely bought, sold and leased according to need, but in customary law in the villages, it is not thinkable that the land can be alienated. Everybody in town has the feeling that he or she can go back home to their land. The land forms the basis of a given language and the institutions of culture and offers the promise of security which gives the persons of Papua New Guinea great strength of character.

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<sup>40</sup> Roxanne T Ornelas, “Ornelas, Roxanne T,” *Great Plains Research* 17, no. 2. (2007): 167.

<sup>41</sup> Ornelas, 169.

<sup>42</sup> PNG National Government, “Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea” (1975) Part III, Division 1, 43 (1).

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