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Markus Schindlbeck



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Stones in swamps: remains of a mythical past in the Sepik area

by

Markus SCHINDLBECK*

ABSTRACT

Early documents on Middle Sepik cultures mention special mounds, which fascinated the first travellers in that region, in front of the huge men's houses. Situated in the midst of the well-groomed meadows of the so-called dancing grounds, these mounds attracted the explorer's attention, but their meaning remained hidden. Their beauty was enhanced by tall palm trees and colourful bushes, as well as by carvings – some of them huge – and several upright stones (menhirs, stelae) surrounding the mounds. Later research revealed that they were associated with warfare and headhunting, but also with the founding ancestors of villages. This article summarizes these early descriptions and then proceeds to the later, more detailed research. Additional information is included from the author's own fieldwork among the Sawos and Kwanga people, and a comparison is made with data from neighbouring cultures of the Middle Sepik region.

KEYWORDS: prehistory, stonework, headhunting, Iatmul, Sawos

RÉSUMÉ

Les documents anciens sur les cultures du Moyen Sepik mentionnent des buttes remarquables devant les grandes maisons des hommes. Ces buttes fascinèrent les premiers voyageurs dans cette région. Implantées au milieu de l'espace le plus souvent plat fréquemment qualifié de place de danse, elles attirèrent l'attention mais sans révéler leur sens. Leur beauté était soulignée par des bouquets de palmiers et des plantes au feuillage coloré qui entouraient la butte et auxquels étaient parfois mêlées de grandes sculptures. Quelques fois, elles étaient entourées de plusieurs pierres dressées, menhirs ou stèles. Des recherches plus récentes ont montré que ces buttes devaient être mises en relation avec la guerre et la chasse aux têtes mais aussi avec les ancêtres fondateurs du village. L'article résume les premières descriptions et rend compte des recherches détaillées plus récentes. Des informations complémentaires provenant de mes recherches de terrain chez les Sawos et les Kwanga sont données et une comparaison est faite avec les informations sur les cultures voisines du moyen Sepik.

MOTS-CLÉS : préhistoire, pierre, chasse aux têtes, Iatmul, Sawos

Although early visitors and anthropologists observed and commented on the ceremonial mounds and stone settings in front of the men's houses in the Sepik area, their meaning and cultural inclusion were subsequently never discussed. As they were related to warfare and headhunting behaviour and ritual, their use could no longer be observed and analysed after these practices had been banned. This paper tries to fill this gap by presenting the results of the author's

own fieldwork¹ compared with information from literature and archive material on the Sepik region. As the standing stones are associated with the founding ancestors of settlements, information on them was scarce and difficult to obtain. This may be one reason why we know so little about their history, their social context and their representations.

In the history of Sepik anthropology, monoliths formed part of a synthetic approach to a recon-

1. Fieldwork among the Sawos in 1972-74 (funded by the Schweizerischer Nationalfonds) and among the Kwanga in 1979-81 (funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft).

* Former curator of the South Pacific Department, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; m.schindlbeck@outlook.de

struction of Pacific settlement in Melanesia. This method of using quite varied and unrelated cultural phenomena to define migration movements disqualified any further research on the distribution and meaning of stone settings. The work by Alphonse Riesenfeld (1950) probably represents a last compilation of this type of research. The archaeological work that followed, based on detailed research, unfortunately did not include an analysis of these stone monuments. Among other things, the focus was on mortars and pestles and Lapita pottery. As these stones were almost never included in the Western collections and their export was prohibited early on, they do not appear in the richly illustrated volumes on Sepik art. The art market was never interested in sparsely elaborated stone figures.

In a cultural and social setting in which the contrast of water and earth is of crucial importance for the construction of cosmological views, the materiality of stones (similar to bones) receives an additional perspective. In the surrounding regions of hill country inhabited, for example, by the Abelam and the Kwanga, stones have a comparable but definitely different meaning for the respective societies.

Stones were not only erected and displayed in public but also hidden and kept secret as part of clan identity. We probably need to distinguish between this latter use of usually smaller stones for ritual clan purposes and the public use which is of ultimate importance for village identity. Another aspect of the standing stones is their association with certain plants. Most conspicuous among these are plants like *Cordyline sp.* used for the decoration of masks, carvings, and human bodies. Besides this more obvious purpose of decoration, however, they also have a more hidden meaning which is not talked about openly: they are associated with the world of the dead. Hence, the sacred stones in the Middle Sepik area are clearly connected with warfare, headhunting, and death. Without linking this pattern to any “wave of immigration”, it can be compared with similar cultural phenomena in Southeast Asia and Melanesia. The present paper will give an analysis of these aspects and compare them with some other uses of sacred stone settings in the Sepik area and Melanesia.

Early documents

The first description of the ceremonial places with the stone circles and associated mounds was given by Otto Reche, a member of the Hamburg South Seas Expedition in 1909, who travelled only a few days on the Sepik river. Having much difficulty in communicating with the village in-



PHOTO 1. – Stone with face in Angerman (© Roessicke, 1913: 677; Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)

habitants, the members of the Hamburg expedition were only able to record the village names inaccurately and incompletely. Hence, they calculated locations of villages using distance information from the mouth of the river. In the village 293 kilometers away from the mouth, which is named Radja on the attached map and was later identified as the village of Angerman,

“in front of the fenced-in ornamental shrub we found something very unusual for this area, namely three stones set upright in the ground. The outer, smaller ones were heavily weathered, and only traces of chiseling had survived; the one in the middle, in contrast, was well preserved, and the representation of a human face was clearly visible on it.” (Reche, 1913: 149-150)² (Photograph 1)

Reche says that the stones come probably from the Hunstein mountains, and publishes a photo of the stone with a face on it. In more detail he describes the mounds with ornamental bushes. They were carefully tended and enclosed with a dense fence of poles and bamboo:

“The house and surroundings always gave the impression of a sacred place, (...) just like a solitary little church lying in the woods.” (Reche, 1913: 148)

The fenced-in ornamental shrubs formed a circular ground plan with a diameter of 2-2.5 m. Often

2. All translations from German into English are mine.

the planks used for the fence were richly carved, for example, one at the village of Angerman. At the time of Reche's publication there were several such planks, which taper towards their lower ends, in the Stuttgart collection: two from Angerman, one from Jaunda (Kanganamun). In a photograph of a men's house in the village 252 km (Timbunke) published by Reche, the ornamental mound is clearly visible (Reche, 1913: Plate xxxv, 2). In a photo of the back of the men's house in the village 375 km (Kaulagu and Korogo) a fenced-in ornamental mound with palm trees can be seen too (Reche, 1913: Plate xxxi, 2).

The next detailed descriptions of the mounds and the erected stones go back to the members of the Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss Expedition in 1912-13. The aim of that expedition was to explore the numerous tributaries of the Sepik, as well as to compile an extensive ethnographic, botanical and zoological collection and to make preparations for recruiting men for the coconut plantations on the coast near what is now Madang (Schindlbeck, 2015).

Adolf Roesicke, the only participant of whom a detailed diary has survived, reports on May 9, 1913:

"From Kaulagu [a settlement opposite the later Korogo], 3 canoes came down the river with 35 men singing and dancing, as recently. They said they had fought against Schengo [a village near present-day Pagwi]. This time they had killed a woman. Baio said she was from Malu, he recognized her face (her head had been brought along), and Jangvat agreed. The dancing in the canoe was the same as the previous time, and so were the adornments and painting. The latest in fashion are red headbands made of loincloth. Two older women from Kaulagu set out to them, discarded their loincloths, and with one hand embraced a man from the returning canoe, and together the pair jumped into the water. The other day at Jaurangai they did the same thing, but I did not see it so clearly and thought that somebody had fallen into the water in the heat of the moment. On the shore they rushed to the nearby assembly house shouting and brandishing oars and spears as in an attack. There the head of the woman and the spear were deposited on the ceremonial mound." (Schindlbeck, 2015: 279)

This is the only eyewitness report on a returning headhunters' party of the Middle Sepik. Important is the information that the cut-off head and the spear were laid down on the ceremonial mound. Roesicke also photographed the scene.

About the two villages that Roesicke called Kararau I (today's Kamanembit) and Kararau II, he writes on August 16, 1912; with regard to Kararau I he reports:

"In the middle in front of two of the assembly houses was a cylindrical mound about 2 m high, surrounded by planks, the planks partly painted red, a facial mask on one side and a betel palm in the center. On both places stood stones of granite, one of them a good two meters high, reminiscent of the one in Kuome [village



PHOTO 2. – Ceremonial mound in Kararau I (© Roesicke, 1912: 225; Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)

of the Kwoma]. They were decorated with red stripes." (Schindlbeck, 2015: 162) (Photograph 2)

The next day he went to the village of Kararau II, the present Quednschange, which is situated at a lagoon:

"On the broad village road, which is not grassy but consists of barren hard mud, we saw at three intervals three assembly houses with their towering gables and the large, painted, plaited gable masks. In front of them was a similar round mound, on which a few plants grew, fenced in with carved and painted planks. The stones we saw yesterday in the other village were missing. The empty space between these houses was kept very clean, on both sides of the street were partly fenced-in beds with taro, tobacco, bananas. The coconut palms are missing here. Both villages have the name of Kararau." (Schindlbeck, 2015: 163) (Photograph 3)

Three months later, on 10 November 1912, he visited the village of Palimbei:

"The arrangement is very similar to that of Kararau. The assembly houses sit longitudinally in a long broad clearing where there are, among others, coconut and betel palm trees on interrupted walls. Behind the walls at right angles to the assembly houses, [are] the residential huts ... [...] The often large open spaces between the assembly houses are grassy and decorated with bosquets or circular plantings of palm trees. Around these places are stones, very often on a central line of the clearing." (Schindlbeck, 2015: 205)



PHOTO 3. – Ceremonial mound with carved and painted planks in Kararau II (© Roesicke, 1912: 231; Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)

In the neighbouring village of Malingai, Roesicke found erected stones too. He was the first European to visit the mountains or villages of Chambri and Aibom, where the stones of the ritual places came from. Roesicke wanted to explore the origin of the pottery, which was widely distributed in the Middle Sepik. First he reached the mountain of Chambri:

“The southeastern foothills of the Chambuli mountain are cleared by slash-and-burn, and the rocks are huge blocks of rocks on the banks of the lake. A sharp bend to the north [...] the first roofs of Eibom are visible, it is 10 o'clock, a couple of canoes with people from Jentschemangua and Kaulagu approach us. Following them, we came to a canoe landing and boat building place, where we left the canoes. The trail led first through the sago stands along the lakeshore, then uphill over large stone blocks to a meeting house, in front of it a tall *Borassus* palm and erect stones. One of them bears carved ornaments which people claimed to have made. The assembly house is only moderately large. Then crossing the village, always along large blocks along the slope, often with a wide view over the Sepik plain. People show Palimbei and Kararau, on the other side one can see the silhouette of the central mountain range with a tall peak rising from it.” (Schindlbeck, 2015: 282)

Roesicke also photographed the stone with a face on it in Angerman. In reply to his question he was told that it had not been made by any man from Angerman, that it had not been carved with an axe but created by *sagi*, the ancestors. In the village

of Jaurangai he saw a heap of stones in a house at a main pillar (Schindlbeck, 2015: 259, 276).

Walter Behrmann, who had participated as a geographer in the expedition of 1912-13 and evaluated the expedition material after the early death of Adolf Roesicke in 1919, gave an overview of the men's houses many years later, and thus also on the ceremonial mounds and stones. In addition to his own observations and Roesicke's field notes, he evaluated the photographic material of the expedition. In his article he describes the villages in a sequence of going upriver. For Timbunke village he mentions a ceremonial mound in front of the men's house “slightly offset to one side” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 316). Then he mentions the stones in front of the men's house in Angerman, which were seen by Reche and Roesicke.

Behrmann does not mention stones from the next village, Mindimbit, and does not present a picture of the great men's house. But the members of the expedition were there on 7 December 1912 and traded for artefacts. The next place mentioned is Meimandanger (Roesicke calls it Kararau I, today's Kamanembit). He writes about this village:

“The ceremonial mound photographed by Roesicke is remarkable, with spears placed in it, grass tufts braided around the piles for decoration, but above all 4 stones appear around it, each decorated with a string of tufts of grass.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 318)

About the neighbouring village of Kararau Behrmann writes:

“The ceremonial mound is remarkable because of the presence of two large facial masks, besides many ornaments of grass and coconut fibers.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 318)

Of the next two villages he had no records. The next village described must be today's Palimbei:

“The ceremonial mound in front of the assembly house was planted with 3 betel palms and fenced only by beams, at least 2 stones stand around it. On the photograph by Roesicke one could recognize on one almost a face.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 319)

About the village of Malingei Behrmann writes the following:

“In front of the assembly house there are 2 planks in which human figures are engraved.”

Then he mentions the village of Kaulagu and its ceremonial mound. At that spot Roesicke is said to have photographed the warrior in front of the mound, with the woman's cut-off head (see above). So there were ceremonial mounds, but no stones are mentioned. About the men's house in Yentschemangua Behrmann says:

“At the right distance in front of the house, exactly in the middle axis, lies the ceremonial mound, adorned by a lushly beautiful fan palm.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 321)

About Yaurangai:

“A conspicuous feature of the village layout is the well-cultivated ceremonial mound on which grow a fan-shaped palm and 5 betel palms.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 322)

About Sapanaut:

“In front of the house is a ceremonial mound with 2 betel palm trees.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 322)

About the village of Jamanum:

“On the ceremonial hill grows only an ornamental shrub.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 323)

For Avatip he mentions a men’s house under construction, with a ceremonial mound with a betel palm (Behrmann, 1950-51: 323); for the village of Malu he does not mention a ceremonial mound, although eight men’s houses were counted there. Behrmann writes about two small villages in the mountain range of the Zuckerhut:

“In front of the assembly houses, 12 splendidly carved planks were arranged in three rows.” (Behrmann, 1950-51: 324)

With regard to Jambun he mentions no ceremonial mound, and following the river upstream to the village of Yeshan, he describes a different population (Kuome) lacking any ceremonial mounds (Behrmann, 1950-51: 325).

The situation between 1960 and 1990

Later travelers have given more precise information about the stone settings. On the other hand, it can be assumed that changes in the settlements also brought changes in the stone arrangements; stones were no longer visible, covered by vegetation, or had sunk into the ground. It is not stated in the existing literature whether new monoliths were produced in the recent period.

Silverman, though mainly focusing on the symbolism of male cult houses, does not mention any mound or stones for the village of Tambunum.



PHOTO 4. – Standing stones and flat stone in Palimbei (© Roesicke, 1912: 498; Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)

This may be because initiation was no longer practised among the Eastern Iatmul when he did his fieldwork in 1988-90, and because the senior cult house was destroyed by allied bombers during World War II (Silverman, 2001: 24). It is also possible, however, that there never were stone settings in Tambunum and that the village of Timbunke was the eastern boundary of the occurrence of stone circles. In the photograph of a men’s house of Tambunum in the publication by Townsend (1968, chapter 9, after page 96, 3. plate) there is no mound to be seen. Nevertheless, a photograph from 1938 showing a men’s house in Tambunum suggests a mound with palms and shrubs in front of the men’s house Kerambit (Mead, 1977: 236).

On a map by Hauser-Schäublin (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, village map) one can recognize two stone settings in the village of Kararau that were either not mentioned by the early travelers or set up at a later time. For Kanganamun, Eike Haberland gave detailed information after his brief visits in 1961 and 1963.³ In most cases two monoliths can be seen in the photographs of the famous Wolimbi men’s house. On both sides of the house were ceremonial mounds. In front of the other men’s house, Mindjemböt, which had stood unrebuilt for many years, there were two mounds as well, and southeast of them two monoliths. Palimbei⁴ had been visited by Roesicke, but he did not describe the complex stone setting although he photographed it (photograph 4) According to Haberland, there are two monoliths east of the men’s house Nambareman and another two on its other side. Towards the Paiembit men’s house is another monolith and a

3. Strikingly, the most recent work on Kanganamun by Moutu, 2013, based on research from 2000-01, contains no information on the ceremonial mounds.

4. Unfortunately, the works of Florence Weiss (1981) and Milan Stanek (1983), who have been in Palimbei and surrounding villages several times since 1972, contain no details on ceremonial mounds and stone structures.

ceremonial mound with several standing stones. Further to the southwest stand two single monoliths and three smaller stones, as well as a ceremonial mound with a stone plate about 2 m wide with monoliths standing to its right and left, surrounded by smaller stones. For the village of Malingei Haberland mentions three ceremonial mounds and a monolith called Tanguntumbe.

Soatmeli has special significance within the locally transmitted oral history of Middle Sepik villages, being the place of departure for the various village foundations of the central Iatmul. At the time of the visit by Meinhard and Gisela Schuster a number of ceremonial mounds existed in today's Old-Soatmeli in 1972, each surrounded by "menhirs" almost 2 m high. For Old-Soatmeli the names of nine men's houses were given. Four names of the monoliths were known. Both the ceremonial mounds and the monoliths had names, two monoliths were classified as male and female respectively (Schuster, 1973).

Douglas Newton, who conducted several research trips in the Sepik region in 1964-73, has also given information about ceremonial mounds, which partly contradicts the information of the previous travelers. According to Newton, the Manambu with the main villages of Avatip, Yambun and Malu constitute the group closest to the Western Iatmul. They, too, had mounds and stones:

"Ceremonial mounds, planted with crotons, betel and other totemic plants, stood in front of them (ceremonial houses); as did sacred monoliths." (Newton, 1971: 65)

"The original ancestors were said to have planted ginger (*lagi*) in the ceremonial mounds; the plants still in existence are descended from these." (Newton, 1971: 71)

According to Simon Harrison, who carried out his research in 1977-79, there are no more references to stone settings among the Manambu, the neighbours of the Western Iatmul (Harrison, 1990: 29-30).

"In front of a subclan's ceremonial house stands a mound, or *tupwi*, which is an important focus of ritual. Many kinds of flowers and shrubs used in ritual are grown on it, some of them totems of the subclan." (Harrison, 1990: 91)

It is striking here that the word *twi* is used for the ceremonial mound, whereas the Iatmul use that term for the hills that delimit the dance place at its longitudinal sides.

Another group, which is no longer regarded as part of the Middle Sepik in the narrow sense, are the Bahinemo. The Bahinemo are part of the Sepik Hill Family, a language group in the Hunstein Mountains, to the south of the latter and in the hills extending eastward towards Krosmeri River. Newton mentions the ceremonial houses and the space surrounding them:

"A small cleared space is kept in front of the ceremonial house. In the middle of it is a low mound planted with croton bushes; this is also the site, at Namu, of sacred stones [and] the heads (from headhunting) were buried in the ceremonial mound." (Newton, 1971: 18-22)

The Nggala (the Kara of the Behrman map, near April River) had ceremonial mounds as well:

"In front of each house is a small mound (*ambatok* - also 'headrest')." (Newton, 1971: 34)

There also existed the custom of dancing around the mound to celebrate the taking of human heads (Newton, 1971: 34). When the successful headhunter had died, the heads captured by him were also buried in the mound (Newton, 1971: 36).

Although no mounds and stones are reported in front of the ceremonial houses of the Kwoma and Nukuma, Meinhard and Gisela Schuster could observe remains of them in 1966. On the way to Saserman and in front of the old men's house they saw mounds with stones called *mangua*, and they collected a myth of two brothers who turned into stones (Gisela Schuster in her diary 21.6.1966). In Wagu, too, there was a mound in front of the men's house, covered with stones and planted with ornamental bushes, around which people danced (Schuster, diary 17.6.1966).

"In Yembiyembi there used to be a stone in the house Tambaran, which was worshipped. If a new house was built, the stone was taken to the construction site, and no villager was allowed to eat until the house was ready. In a neighbouring house was a pit from which the stone originated, in which one burnt waste and dirt of an enemy before one went to battle. The name of the stone is Ga'awa. Although the stone is now no longer revered, it was taken along to the new village. Round like a large egg, it lies neatly on a board surrounded by colorful shrubs in front of the new men's house. Among the people following the taboo of not eating during the migration of the stone were also those of Sangriman and Mensuat. The three villages belonged together in other ways as well, spoke the same language, etc., and belonged to the man-eating mountain population." (Schuster, diary 10.-12. 2.1966)

Finally, another region has to be mentioned in the south-east of the Middle Sepik. Of the Yimar on the upper Korewori, Haberland and Seyfarth (1974: 34, 276) report that in front of the men's houses were small mounds with several stones on the mostly circular places. Even at the time of Haberland's and Seyfarth's stay in 1963, the monoliths were said to have been taken along when people left a hamlet and moved to a new village. The engravings on the stones show mostly stylized human faces. After a successful headhunt, the captured heads were said to have been carried around the mound several times without laying them on the stones or mounds. The heads or bodies of the dead were not buried under the stones, either. On

the other hand, there is not only a relation to head-hunting but even more to hunting. In a narrative reproduced by Haberland and Seyfarth (1974: 278) it is said that a monolith was placed in the men's house to be rubbed with the excrements of game animals. But the monolith turned into a man and molested the women until the men put it on the mound.⁵

At Kaningra in Mowtyagu, Schuster saw stones with engravings, with a hint of spiral-shaped faces (Schuster, diary: 6.5.66). In the area east of Korewori, there seem to have been no more stone settings. Philippe Peltier (2003), who conducted his fieldwork among the Adjirab in the region of Porapora in 1984-92, does not mention anything about them in his description of war and headhunting. However, there are much smaller stones with engravings which are mobile, such as a stone collected by Alfred Bühler in 1956 (Peltier *et al.*, 2015: 232, 235). They are carefully kept secret and hidden.

Christian Coiffier (1995: 1447-1450) gives a very cursory but comprehensive list of the existing monoliths, but without any further additional explanatory information.⁶ The number of stones among the Iatmul are estimated to have been about 95 at the time of his research 1987-88. He mentions another 56 standing stones for Sawos villages and 71 for the southern Middle Sepik area. The interpretations by Coiffier (1995: 1463), based on semantic speculations about a relationship between the words *wak* (ceremonial mound), *wagin* (powerful ancestor) and *waal* (crocodile), are not supported by the data gathered by the author of the present article.

Stones in Aibom and Chambri

As mentioned by Roesicke as early as in 1912, there were many boulders and stones in the settlements of Aibom and Chambri south of the Middle Sepik. Gisela Schuster wrote in her diary on 22.12.1965:



PHOTO 5. – Stone with incised face on the hill of Aibom (© Schuster, 1965-67: Vb 104041; Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)

“On the way back we saw two groups of megaliths: the first was a group of three stones, one of which featured an engraved concentric ring (running across an edge), the other two were of different material and without engravings. The next megalith was just a stone – I think of the same material as the first one, but without edges, one face was engraved. Another stone is to be found at the southern end of the village, still another on the mountain itself.”

According to Meinhard Schuster (1965-67), there are four boulders with engravings in the village of Aibom or nearby. Two of these are smaller ones, one is cone-shaped, and another is a broad boulder. The latter shows a face, while the smaller of the others has a pattern of concentric circles, the larger a more

striking pattern. (Photograph 5) Aibom people compared it to the scarification patterns of initiation. A myth was told with regard to this of a first cicatrization during which a man left the seclusion and went to the women. He was turned into said stone. The former Aibom settlements were further up the mountain. At the north end of the village there are three more stones, two larger and one smaller [one of the larger ones with a face?]. There are a series of narratives that tell of the transformations of ancestors into boulders. Others, however, were “only” stones. In the former context, the mythical figure of Kolimangi, which is so important for Aibom mythology, is a case in point. She turned herself into a rock, another boulder represents her canoe, and still another her paddle. There was also a *Borassus* palm on a ceremonial mound at the former men's house Fondimbit.

The numerous stones with partial engravings have a different character than the stone circles erected on the dancing grounds. They are rather related to the fact that certain particular phenomena in the natural landscape are given names, that they represent transformations or even incarnations of an-

5. As hunting-stones they have a different aspect than the monoliths associated with headhunting.

6. Coiffier (1995) mentions stone settings for the following Iatmul villages (in brackets the number of standing stones): Japanaut (1), Kandingai (4), Sotmeli (2), Yamanangwa (20), Aibom (?), Palimbei (15), Malingei (2), Kanganamun (4), Kararau (9), Kaminimbit (4?), Mindimbit (8), Angriman (8), Timbunke (6), Tambunum (2); for Sawos villages: Nangusap (20), Gaikorobi (14?), Marap (9), Yamök (10), Torembi (3); for the southern villages: Chambri (24), Sangriman (16), Yesimbit (12), Kaningara (5), Govenmas (10), Kraimbit (6).

cestors. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there were also ceremonial plants in Aibom.

Chambri is a village located south of the Iatmul on the edge of a hill like Aibom, but still with close cultural relations with the Iatmul. It has numerous large boulders and in former times served as a stone supplier for the Middle Sepik region. The first anthropological research in Chambri dates back to Margaret Mead and her fieldwork in 1932. When she visited the Chambri, they had returned to their former site after having been in exile to the south because of the Iatmul headhunting attacks. They told her that in former times every Chambri boy had to kill a human while still a child. Live victims were purchased from other tribes; a war captive or criminal from another hamlet was acceptable as well.

“The small boy’s spear-hand was held by his father, and the child, repelled and horrified, was initiated into the cult of head-hunting. The blood of the victim was splashed on the foot of the upright stones that stand in the little clearing outside the ceremonial house.” (Mead, 1977: 242)

Mead maintains, however, that the Chambri were “not enthusiastic after warfare” (Mead, 1977: 242) compared to the Middle Sepik peoples.

The research by Mead and Fortune was taken up by Deborah Gewertz, and the most recent fieldwork was carried out by Nicolas Garnier. Unfortunately, however, the published information on the stone settings is extremely scarce. Gewertz (1977: 87-88, 1983: 38-39) did not follow up questions around the upright standing stones. She mentions the stone tool trade which was a male-dominated activity with buyers journeying to their trading partners. According to her the Chambri operated six quarries. These were inhabited by particular ancestors and supervised by one of the respective ancestor’s descendants. Before visiting a quarry a pig or chicken had to be sacrificed. Men spent a night close to the quarry before gathering the stones. Each Chambri man had access to the stone resources. The Chambri were thus agents in this distribution of stones. The primary and secondary contacts reached from the Murik Lakes to Ambunti and the Southern Hill Tribes. The stone tools were preferably deposited inside the men’s house (Gewertz calls it spirit-house):

“The stone, after all, was a sacred object, which was demystified through its exchange.” (Gewertz, 1983: 39)

There are more than 125 stones on Chambri Island. They are considered dwelling places of ancestral spirits and bear names. According to Gewertz (1983: 185-86) they serve to mark the

burial places of a clan’s headhunting victims and are repositories of the respective clan’s strength. Sometimes they are ceremonially decorated to vindicate the stones’ potency.

In connection with the mounds Garnier (2007: 81-82) remarks:

“La présence de ces tertres et d’une (ou plusieurs) pierre(s) dressée(s) permet à chacun de retrouver la trace d’une ancienne maison cérémonielle. Et ces pierres signalent aux hommes un repère archéologique.”

He assumes that details of Chambri origin are explained to the young generation using these stones. In Chambri the mounds are closely connected with the *mungari*, as the stones are called, and up to a dozen of these upright stones can be located around a mound. According to the Chambri, all the stones of the Middle Sepik are from their villages. They were always without ornaments (Garnier, 2007 : 81-82). More detailed information on the stones of Chambri can be found in Aufenanger (1975). It should be pointed out, however, that his information was not gathered during extended field research; hence, not all of it can be regarded as sound, that is, as based on conversations with several informants. He mentions stones as markers dividing Chambri villages or hamlets and monoliths around which people danced after headhunting. Common enemies were buried under the flat stones whereas powerful enemy skulls were placed near the main post in the men’s house (Aufenanger, 1975: 55). Stones were also embodiments of specific ancestors.⁷

On the meaning of ceremonial mounds and stones

Gregory Bateson carried out the first longer field research among the Iatmul in the 1930s. He confirms the information initially given by Roesicke that the bodies of the enemies who had been killed were laid down on these mounds.

“In front of the more important ceremonial houses are the sacred stones and the mounds on which certain trees of totemic importance are grown – the most conspicuous being the very tall (?) *Borassus* palms” (Bateson, 1932: 258)

and:

“In front of the building is the *wak* or ceremonial mound on which dead enemy bodies and captives are laid.” (Bateson, 1958: legend to Plate VII, Photo a)

7. According to Schuster (diary, 18.3.66) deceased people were buried under three stones in Chambri, as was done under hewn stones in Aibom.

Most importantly, however, Bateson is the first observer to give information on the ritual meaning of the stones. According to him, the upright stones are representations of the ancestral spirits called *mbwan*. The prosperity of people and nature depends on these spirits. Prosperity means many children, health, beautiful dances and beautiful men's houses; prosperity is the result of successful headhunting.

"The *mbwan* are regarded as ancestors and are classified roughly with the *angk-au* or potsherd spirits. But in some cases at least, the *mbwan* are really the spirits not of deceased ancestors but of killed enemies. Perhaps they are thought of as ancestors because of their activity in promoting the proliferation of the community." (Bateson, 1958: 140, footnote 1)

"The heads of the killed were placed upon the *mbwan* and in some cases their bodies were buried under the *mbwan*." (Bateson, 1958: 141)

Bateson equals *mbwan* with the stones of *wak*. In his glossary Bateson (1958: 309) gives as explanation of *mbwan*:

"the spirit of an enemy who has been killed and buried under a standing stone or ceremonial mound. Such spirits are regarded as ancestors and are believed to help in warfare and in the increase of population."

In his unpublished notes on "Warfare" Bateson gives some more details, even if they are quite fragmented. The bodies of slain enemies were placed on a bed of *miamba* leaves. The bleeding necks of the beheaded heads were pressed on slit gongs. The upper layer of *miamba* leaves stained with blood and the bodies were put on the standing stones. On the fifth day after the return from headhunting the flesh and hair of the heads and the ashes of the fire were picked up with bamboo tongs and put under the flat stone, and the *miamba* leaves were put on the *wak*. For the concluding rituals pigs had to be killed, four for each slain enemy. Another pig was butchered as an offering for the *miamba* leaves before they were deposited on the *wak*. If a spear was broken and thus rendered useless, it could be thrown on the *wak* as well. During the night there were dances:

"During the dances the heads are exhibited on the fence posts of the *wak* (or may be set on small upright sticks beside it.). During the singing [of *namoe* songs] all walk round the *wak*, to some extent dancing and jumping. The pigs are cut up and put in pots close to the place where the standing stones are, they are set on a pot platform." (Bateson, n.d.)

To the Western mind, it may seem strange that the spirits of the enemies turn into people's ancestors among the Iatmul. However, in the de-

scriptions of headhunting, which could still be documented in 1972 as witnesses were still alive and reports of headhunting could be collected, it became clear in various conversations that people had to protect themselves against the spirits of their dead enemies. The latter's 'transfer' into the ceremonial mounds increases their potency and, at the same time, holds them at bay. Strangely enough, however, *mbwan* is not mentioned in the further literature on the Iatmul.

Bateson mentions another characteristic of the ceremonial mounds and the monoliths:

"The standing stones are phallic symbols, e.g. in the shaman's jargon the phrase for copulation is *mbwan tou-*, 'setting up a standing stone'." (Bateson, 1958: 141)

Haberland (1961-63) received information from the Wolgum clan in Kanganamun: when the men of this clan have had sexual intercourse with their women, they go to the stones in front of the men's house and rub the penis on one of them. Then the children would be strong and the enemies would have no strength. However, it should be noted that this was the information of one informant only. On my own explicit enquiries with regard to a symbolic or ritual sexual meaning of the cult stones, any such significance was denied in the village of Gaikorobi.

Among the Sawos, based on my own research in 1972-74, the ceremonial mounds (*wak*) with the stone structures (*kambak*) are part of the complex of the dance ground (*wompunau*) as a whole, at the end of which stands the men's house (*ngaigo* in Iatmul, *djo* in Sawos). The idea is that the village can also be regarded as a house in which the individual pillars are the representatives of important clan ancestors, the founders of the village. When a beam or post is broken, this means that a clan no longer fulfills its duties, which threatens the village as a whole, especially in warlike disputes with hostile villages. The representation of the village as a house becomes clearer when we consider the indigenous statements about the founding of a settlement. As with a house construction, people clean a piece of forest, ignite a fire, and dig post-holes. The setting of the posts is compared to the burial of the first deceased in the village. The first deceased buried in the ground of the village have a special position, as they are the founders of the village. It is on their backs, on their bones, that the life of their descendants takes place. When the settlement is abandoned, it is these deceased who cause the first deaths among people in a new place. A snake, a rattan, a palm sheath, a sago frying pan and a hearth are also mentioned in the context of the foundation of a new settlement. According to the locals, these objects are supposed to be positioned in the most important dance place of the village or closely linked to it in a symbolic manner. Palm sheath,

baking tray and hearth are closely associated with the women's world. My main informant said that the names of the hearth refer to a female ancestor that was buried at this place. The serpent refers to the fighting power of the village. When a line of warriors set out against an enemy village, they take an imaginary snake with them, and when the warriors surround the village of the enemy, this is likened to the snake coiling around it. After the fight, the snake returns to the village, and chickens and pigs have to be sacrificed as otherwise the snake will be directed against the village that initiated the fight.

Even in the Sawos village of Gaikorobi there were stone circles in front of a men's house which, as among the Iatmul, are connected with warfare and the fighting strength of the village. Collapsed stones indicate a weakness in the village's defensiveness. When a stone has fallen, men of Gaikorobi said that an ancestor had fallen. In the past, no war could be won in such a case, and today, after the ban on headhunting, a fallen stone results in no success in the economic development of the village. Formerly the skull of a dead man was placed in the hole of the stone to be rebuilt. With the aid of a bone oracle, those who had to re-erect the fallen stone during the night were determined. Their names had to remain secret. In November 1972 I was able to observe parts of the ceremonies for the erection of a stone. At night, the long bamboo flutes were blown. Throughout the village, young palm leaves (*kinsan*) were stuck into the ground at places where the ancestors were supposed to dwell. With the same palm leaves men had also beaten the dancing ground. In the same night, two age groups fought a symbolic struggle. With ropes, which were also called serpents, the elderly group chased the younger age group, who then tried to break out of the encirclement by means of long wooden sticks (*ndime*), which were rammed into the ground.

Stones among neighbouring groups

Among the northern neighbours of the Iatmul and Sawos, the Abelam, we find stones on the ceremonial grounds in a different context. In the center of the square is a round stone (*bapmu*) representing the female moon. Near the roof, which reaches down to the ground at the front of the cult houses, are upright stones of various shapes, which can bear the name of a killed enemy, a clan-specific spirit, or an important ancestor. In contrast to the stone in the middle of the ceremonial ground they have an aggressive character. Next to them grow ornamental plants. In addition, stones are kept in a separate house, which are accessible to only a few men. They have great significance for the yam cult (Hauser-Schäublin, 1989: 69-70). One of these secret stones is said to

have decorations like the scarification patterns of the Iatmul (Hauser-Schäublin, 1989: 186). Particularly complex is the relationship between the long yam of the Abelam and these secret stones. Only through a connection between these stones and the long yam gardens can the famous long yam tubers of the Abelam be grown.

The Kwanga represent a culture that has little relation to rivers and fishing. Although a large river flows through the western Kwanga area, it has no significance for them. The orientation is directed to the hills and mountains. Though being the western neighbours of the Abelam and the northern neighbours of the Kwoma and the Nukuma, the Kwanga have no gardens for long yam tubers and no permanent cult houses at a central place in their settlements. Rather, their cult places are hidden, inaccessible to the non-initiates, and often little used. Stones are not found in these places. Nevertheless, there was always reference to stones (*shingia*) when there was any talk of settlements, hinting at the supporting stones that serve as fire places and without which no settlement can be established (Schindlbeck, n.d.). Thus the metaphor "stones" was used when people spoke of a settlement foundation. This was a reference to the significance of these stones in the Kwaramba cult. However, the word "*shingia*" also occurs in myths about the origin of humankind. On the other hand, there was no connection to warfare or the combat force of a village (Schindlbeck, n.d.).

Stone formations, indeed landscape parts, can be seen as part of the material culture insofar as they are included in the conceptual image of a culture. In the everyday life and in the mythical traditions of the Kwanga, "stones" or stone formations have a meaning that is difficult to grasp. The settlements of the Kwanga are scattered on the long-stretched hills, in many places there are rocks. The Kwanga build houses that are not very spacious and do not primarily serve the purpose of accommodating activities of everyday life. That is why their activities, when they are in the village, usually take place in front of these houses. It has to be emphasized that the Kwanga do not have so-called men's houses. The men do not meet in a house but in the open; today, they like to use the stone formations for that purpose. Since these formations are mostly elevated, they also serve as lookout points.

A number of mythical stories tell of the origin of the world, and people mention a stone in that context. It was only through the breaking of this primeval stone that things came into being. Sometimes the origin of the Kwaramba cult, the initiation, was also traced back to this mythic stone. Stones are also part of the fire places, on which the clay vessels rest. In ritual texts, which are sometimes sung at initiation, a passage is frequently used that describes the placing of stones on which clay vessels rest, in order to prepare the food for

the novices. The “erection of stones” is thus a pictorial expression for the practice of initiation.

Stone settings in Melanesia

“Stones marking people’s origins in Melanesia seem a widespread trait.” (Dark and Dark, 2009: 68)⁸

In the Kilenge area of New Britain described by Dark, stones are associated with a wide variety of cultural facts, that is, not only with warfare as in the Middle Sepik. Stones of various sizes were used as support for certain special actions and to foster welfare, and had caretakers for these activities. Food offerings were also made on stones. In addition, stones had a function in the context of gardening. Nevertheless, the idea suggests itself that these stones were of a different past and their use was renewed for other functions.

Another region that became famous because of its stone settings has to be briefly mentioned here. Being overtaken by the outbreak of World War I, John Layard and W.H.R. Rivers decided to go to the Small Island of Atchin (Malakula).

“The Small Islands (...) are conspicuous for their possession of the most highly organised megalithic culture in the whole group, as the most casual visitor setting foot on any village dancing-ground may see from the rows off dolmen, monoliths and stone-platforms that meet his eye.” (Layard, 1942: 11)

They are erected for themselves and their ancestors, and are important for tracing descent and part of an organisation into ranks.

“The importance of standing stones in that region led Rivers and Layard to consider these rituals [surrounding the stones] ‘megalithic’.” (Geismar, 2009: 208)

Because of his association with W.H.R. Rivers, G.E. Smith and W. Perry and their diffusionism and migration theories, Layard was alienated from mainstream anthropology of his time. Nevertheless, another anthropologist who had worked in these islands maintained as late as in 1939 that further research on the so-called “megalithic” cultures needed to be done (Speiser, 1939: 480). After World War II the search for a “megalithic culture” in Melanesia came to an end with the work by Alphonse Riesenfeld (1950). In his review of Riesenfeld’s work, Douglas L. Oliver admits that Melanesia’s history was “possibly even including something like the Megalithic complex in question” (Oliver, 1951: 257), but nevertheless the use and shape of stones were too multifaceted

in Oceania to be explained by any single cause: structures made of stones

“ranged from isolated, single-stone uprights or piles of small stones, to extensive complexes of walls, uprights, pavements, and platforms. Some served as burial chambers or burial markers, some as shrines or temples.” (Oliver, 1989: 102-103)

Still, the stone settings in the Sepik area are such outstanding monuments that they should allow a comparison with similar features in Melanesia and Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

From his experience in Vanuatu, Felix Speiser summarized the relation of stones and sacredness saying that stones can be found on most sacred places, and that these stones have either caused the sacredness of the place or were brought to sacred places (Speiser, 1923: 345). With their carved planks representing ancestors, the surrounding stones as markers of buried enemies, and the plants used for decoration and magic, the Middle Sepik mounds are visible documents of this sacredness, which otherwise is hidden in the men’s houses or in the dwelling houses. This sacredness is clearly expressed through the red paint on stones and planks surrounding the mounds as documented by the early observers. Nevertheless we probably have different layers of historical development given the distribution of the stones with facial and other decorations in the eastern, southeastern and southern part of the Sepik, as compared to the Central Iatmul region. There were no recent recollections of the production of these stone carvings in the 20th century. Probably the use of richly carved planks surrounding the mounds is a recent development and limited to only a few villages of the Iatmul, as is suggested by the museum collections. I therefore assume that the carvings surrounding the mounds are a further development that has emerged from the primary stone settings. Certainly the carvings and the associated vegetal decorations express the revalidation of the ancestral importance of the stone settings for the well-being of the village and its inhabitants. And evidently the use of mounds extended far up the river to the neighbouring cultures of the Manambu, Bahinemo and Ngala with comparable uses during headhunting and associated rituals. In the Central Iatmul and Sawos area the tall *Borassus* palm, with its mythological name of T+pmeaman, stands on top of the mound. This is the so called “brother” of another palm, the sago palm, thus hinting at the dual

8. Unfortunately space does not allow a differentiated comparison of the use of stone settings in Melanesia. Hence, only two examples are given.

structure which is so important for the people of the Middle Sepik. This dual structure is reflected in almost all cultural aspects of Middle Sepik culture. At the same time these stone settings are crucial for the history of villages, in a way similar to the coconut palms which are also markers of human settlements. Coconut palms are planted in villages, they demonstrate the care of people for their homes and their well-being. To make matters even more complex, the stone settings situated in front of the men's houses are remnants of fights and of enemy spirits. The deposition of the decapitated head on the stones or mounds may also be interpreted as a kind of sacrifice to the founding ancestors. Headhunting among the Iatmul and Sawos was never seen as being part of a sacrifice ritual. Offerings to ancestors were normally made in the men's house and attached to hooks. With the disappearance of warfare after the European intrusion, the sacrificial place of the ceremonial mound (*wak*) came out of use. This is why it was mostly the offerings in the men's houses that were described in the ethnographic literature. But in the past the power of the enemy's spirit was too strong to be admitted immediately to the men's house. Thus the mounds with their surrounding stone circles were places for offerings to spirits, ancestors and enemies alike. The fusion of the ancestors and the spirits of slain enemies, which is difficult to grasp in Western thought, received a sacred place in the stone settings for which the Middle Sepik villages are so famous.

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