

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin

# Women in Kararau

Gendered Lives, Works, and Knowledge  
in a Middle Sepik Village, Papua New Guinea



Göttingen University Press

2. yanau  
2. laua  
3. lando

3. nggwail  
3. nyanggal

3. laua  
3. nggwail  
3. tshuambo  
(m.s.)

1. yanau  
2. ngual

na  
na  
na

nyan  
nyan  
nyan

nundu  
nundu  
nundu

na  
naisagut  
naisagut

na  
naisagut  
naisagut

3. taworu

1. sase  
2. yai  
3. ial  
tagwa

maema  
ngual  
3. nggwail  
3. nyamul  
4. lanau

3. naisagut  
tawontu

wontu

3. tawontu

nyan  
yau  
iau

u  
imbo

sase  
sase  
tshalshi

kandehe  
nyamun  
nyanggal

nyamun  
maema  
nyamun

walanga  
naisagut

ngual  
tawontu

nyait  
naisagut  
naisagut

yamun  
wontu  
yamun (w.s.)

ut



Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin

Women in Kararau

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Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin

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Photos: All black-and-white photographs by Jörg Hauser; all colour photographs by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (unless noted otherwise).

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In memory of my late parents  
and to Jörg, in gratitude and love





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## Acknowledgements

Forty-six years lie between my first fieldtrip to the Sepik River, where we lived in the latmul village of Kararau, and the writing of these pages. We (my husband and I) went to Kararau for the first time in autumn 1972 and stayed there until spring 1973. We are very grateful to the people of Kararau for letting us stay with them and learn about their lives. Looking back, I have to acknowledge that the experience, however puzzling it was at the beginning, was decisive for my work as an anthropologist. Our departure from Kararau in 1973 was premature and hasty. We had to flee the village after our house – a *haus kiap*, that is, a house used by the Australian patrol officers on their inspection tours – was flooded during the rainy season and the house to which we had been forced to move was about to suffer the same fate. Moreover, I had been granted only a seven month leave from the Museum of Ethnology in Basel, where I was already working as a (part time) curator, which meant I was unable to spend a whole year in the field as most of my colleagues did. However, I was happy to be granted this leave and follow the invitation of the head of the Institute of Ethnology of Basel University, Meinhard Schuster, to participate in a joint fieldwork trip to New Guinea (then still under Australian administration); the expedition was funded by the Swiss National Foundation. I am grateful to both Meinhard Schuster and his late wife Gisela and the Swiss National Foundation for being offered this fantastic opportunity. We were six doctoral students, each doing research in a different village: Jürg Schmid (†) stayed in Yentshan, Markus Schindlbeck in the “bush” village of Gaikorobi, Milan Stanek (†) and Florence Weiss in Palimbei, and Jürg Wassmann in Kandinge (Nyaula); Meinhard Schuster and Gisela Schuster (†) were based at Aibom where they worked on Aibom pottery and pre-colonial settlement history (for details see Schindlbeck 2017).<sup>1</sup>

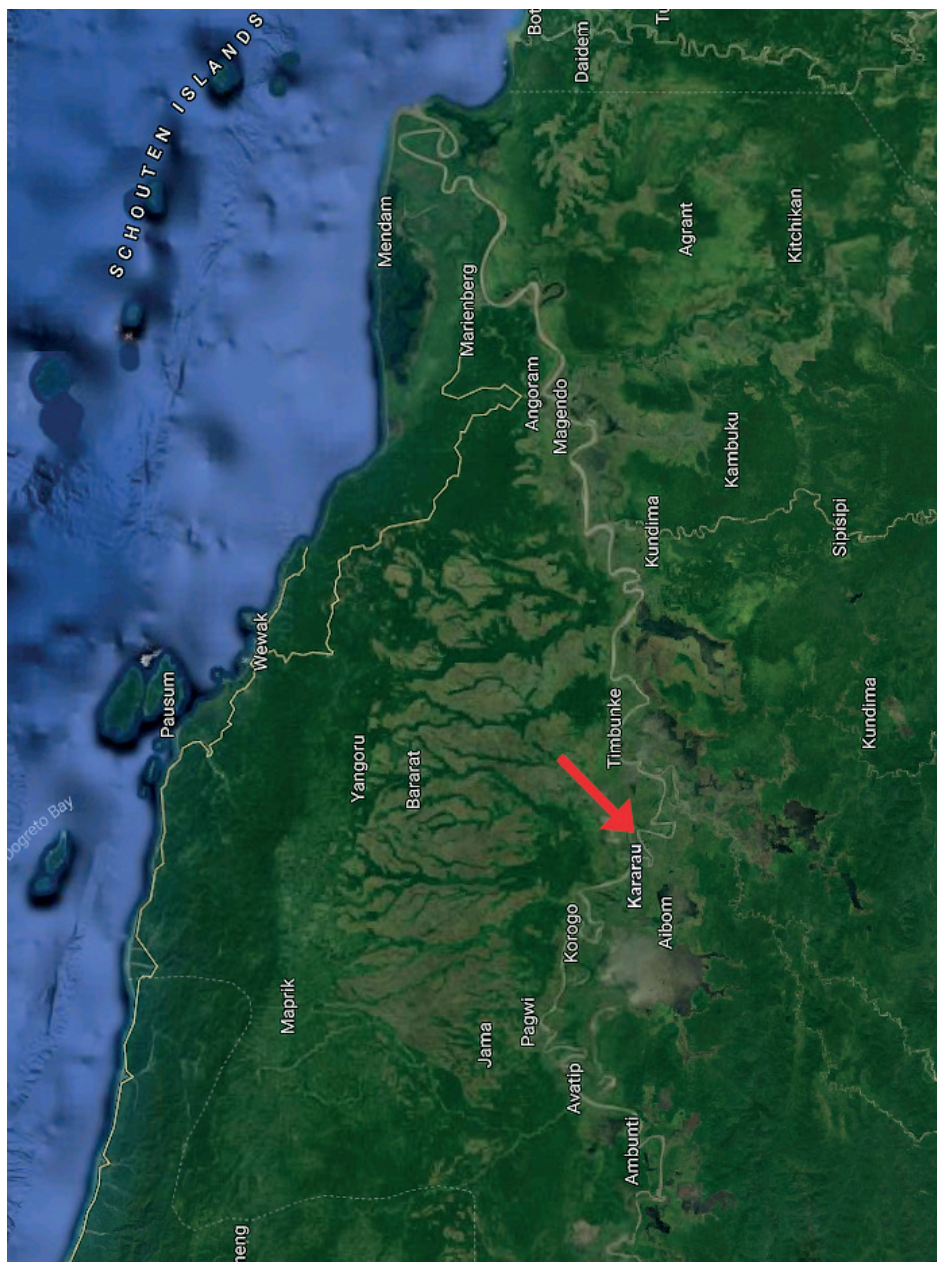
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<sup>1</sup> Florence Weiss worked mainly with children but also with women (1981). She has published extensively on these topics. Milan Stanek focused on men's social and ritual life (1983); Jürg Wassmann documented and analysed mythical songs (1991, 1988); he is the only one of my colleagues whose major works have been translated into English. Jürg Schmid worked on a variety of topics and finally published (together with his wife) a collection of documents on “initiation” (Schmid and Schmid Kocher 1992). Markus Schindlbeck conducted research on sago and the sago palm in their entirety (1980). He has been my closest colleague since the 1970s when we began exchanging data and thoughts about “the Sepik”.

My husband and I returned to the East Sepik Province for the first time after our later fieldwork among the Abelam (between 1978 and 1985) in 2015. One of the purposes of this trip was to present to the people of Kalabu and representatives of the Maprik District the English translation of our book on Abelam ceremonial houses, based on research in the village of Kalabu (Hauser-Schäublin 2016). On this occasion, we also visited the Kararau settlement (called “Ward 10”) near Wewak airport. By chance we met there my most important interlocutor and friend, Sabwandshan (Ruth), from my fieldwork in the 1970s. She was staying there with her son but was longing to get back to the village since the settlement was prone to frequent violence. It was a very moving encounter. Many of the middle-aged women remembered us; they had been small children at the time of our stay in Kararau. During our brief visit to Ward 10, the people talked about my dissertation. It was written in German but contained many illustrations, maps, drawings, and photographs. The women had kept the book safe over all these years. Every now and again, they used it to tell their children stories about life in the village in the early 1970s and show them pictures of now deceased relatives. Since many of the younger people today have a higher education and are fluent in English, we were asked to have the book translated into English. It was at this point that the idea of translating my PhD thesis into English emerged. We went back to Papua New Guinea once more in 2017 and again met up with people from Kararau in their Wewak settlement. A trip to Kararau village, which is situated right on river bank, was impossible since parts of the road leading to the Sepik were impassable due to heavy flooding.

Both trips to Papua New Guinea were funded by my home university, the Georg-August-University of Göttingen, as was the translation. I am grateful to the University, especially to the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology, and to the Ministry of Culture of the Federal State of Lower Saxony, Hannover, for allowing me to continue as a research professor after my official retirement. I am also grateful to the VW-Stiftung, Hannover, for generously funding this professorship. Translating is a difficult business and I am glad that Nigel Stephenson, who is one of the most experienced anthropological translators, was prepared to take on the job. Since he has a PhD in anthropology and has also worked in the Sepik, he was in a position to add the occasional thoughtful comment on my text written forty years ago. It was a pleasure to work with him.

Last but not least I wish to thank my late parents, Otto and Ida Schäublin-Wirth, who always supported my husband and me and also made it possible for my husband to accompany me on my fieldtrips. My gratitude to my husband, Jörg Hauser, who has shared all the hardships (and, hopefully, also the pleasures) of being the husband of a woman anthropologist and has been my companion on all my fieldtrips, goes beyond what I can express. Apart from his personal support, his work as a tireless photographer and documentalist has been invaluable.



*Fig. 1: With its 1,100 km, the Sepik River is the largest river on the island of New Guinea. During the rainy season, the river floods a huge area along its middle course where the Iatmul live. Courtesy Google Maps (© 2019 Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, Landsat/Copernicus, Kartendaten © GBRMPA)*





# 1 Introduction: After Almost 50 Years

## 1.1 The Middle Sepik and previous anthropological studies

It was in the 1960s and 1970s when women anthropologists, heralded by the work of Margaret Mead and a few others, started to investigate the (until then) muted side of “culture”: the voices, lives, works and knowledge of women. This book (a translated and slightly edited version of my dissertation completed in 1975) was written at a time when feminists were starting to demonstrate for their rights in the United States and in Europe.<sup>2</sup> One of the major slogans that encouraged and activated women was Simone de Beauvoir’s dictum “one is not born a woman, one becomes one”. The women’s movement claimed equality and protested against “housewifeization”, that is, being merely the decorative companion of men – not least in anthropological fieldwork.

It was an enthusiastic movement which, at that time, intended to “free” women from male oppression across the world – how wrong the assumption to speak for all women was, emerged only later. At that time, the category of gender had not yet been introduced in the social sciences, anthropology included. Instead, research focussed on “the two sexes”, on men and women primarily understood in terms of biology; however, biology could be overwritten by “culture”. Sex was no longer “destiny”.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Mead wrote: “If one goes back to the beginning of women’s suffrage in this country – and as a small child I used to accompany my mother on women’s suffrage demonstrations – I even learned to recite a monologue which caricatured anti-suffragettes who I grew up to believe were very fast, wicked, rich women with poodle dogs; so that I have in a sense been acquainted with part of the women’s movement in this country since I was a small child” (1972: 175).

<sup>3</sup> For this shift from “sex” to “gender” see, for example, Tarrant 2006.

For me, fieldwork in the village of Kararau (Eastern Iatmul, East Sepik Province) was a thrilling opportunity to study women's lives in a culture in which already Gregory Bateson had worked and Margaret Mead had conducted research among the neighbouring Tchambuli (Chambri), Mundugumor, and Arapesh. Her studies highlighted that it was culture that determined the relationship between men and women and their behaviour. Mead was able to show that allegedly "typical" male aggressiveness and female gentleness, as understood in western societies to be "natural", are the result of "culture" and can, therefore, be modified and even reversed as her study published in 1935 illustrated.

Gregory Bateson developed the concept of schismogenesis in his famous book *Naven*. He tried to answer the question why a culture with such a "schism" (such as the differentiation into contrasting female and male "ethos") keeps working despite heavily contrasting behaviour patterns and does not disintegrate (although Bateson never phrased it in these words). According to him, the men's ethos centres on the spectacular as represented in the splendid men's houses, the performance of rituals and – formerly – head hunting raids. By contrast, the women's ethos, which he describes as "submissive", focuses on everyday activities such as food procurement and preparation as well child raising (1958: 123). Bateson came to the conclusion that, among the Iatmul, schismogenesis between men and women is complementary: men display an assertive and women a submissive behaviour. In interactions between individuals and groups of the opposite sex, each type of behaviour, which Bateson understands as typical for Iatmul men and women in general, acknowledges and reinforces the behaviour of the other. On the other hand, Bateson identified symmetrical schismogenesis based on competitive behaviour among men, especially between ritual moieties. In initiations, he suggested, the ritual moieties are "competing against each other in their bullying of the novices, and prompting each other to further brutalities" (1958: 178). According to this model, competitive behaviour tends to escalate and actually should, following Bateson's logic, lead to deaths in initiation. In fact, competitive behaviour did engender fissions and break-ups in pre-colonial times. However, these were not the result of male behaviour shown by the (all male) ritual moieties in initiations but derived from disputes between male clan members, mostly over wives and sisters, in short: fights over women.<sup>4</sup>

Bateson famously identified *naven* rituals – in Kararau preferably called *sora*, which translates as "funny" (Tok Pisin: *fani*) – as processes in which progressive schism in a society is counteracted by men and women performing opposite sex roles and, thus, exaggerating the corresponding male and female behaviour modes. Bateson, taking a kind of (critical) structural-functional approach to society as a starting point, focused on society as consisting of two categories of humans, men and women.

I was very much impressed by Bateson's distinguished theory, though I found it difficult to fully understand at the time. In my dissertation, I followed up a much

<sup>4</sup> Such split-ups happened all the time and resulted in a region characterized by the continuous migration of family and lineage fractions (Claas 2007).

more down-to-the earth approach by investigating all facets of women's lives, including rituals and the supernatural power and agency which men ascribed to women in rituals, myths, and cosmology. Though I came to the conclusion that men and women lead their everyday lives in separate "spheres" based on different value systems, the question as to why the "society" does not fall apart never came to my mind. My research showed how these two "spheres" were intrinsically interlinked – even far beyond the *naven* rituals.

When we reconsider Bateson's theory of schismogenesis from today's perspective (2018), this opposition of the "sexes" would possibly present itself in a different way. The introduction of the theoretical notion of gender and the understanding that gender is, apart from kinship and seniority, one of the basic principles of social differentiation in Iatmul culture, would probably no longer give rise to the question of schismogenesis. As is well known, gender is multi-faceted and expressed in many different ways beyond the sweeping categories of men and women. The many oral testimonies offered by Iatmul women (and also by men), either in form of life histories or narrations of particular events and also of myths as presented in the next few chapters, show that the presupposed encompassing category of "men" or "women" dissolves into a number of different classifications. Thus, the relationship between siblings of either sex, between fathers and daughters (as well as sons), mothers and sons (and also daughters), mother's brother and sister's child, father's sister and brother's child as well as between particular types of kin persons of either sex differ substantially. It is kinship (descent and alliance) that considerably modify what a man or a woman is in relation to others. These multiple relationships, embodied and sometimes even simultaneously performed by each man and each woman in the course of his/her life, are imbued with distinct emotions and result in different forms of behaviour.

Apart from these kin relations that interlink men and women in manifold ways, the men's association is (or rather was) organized along the lines of clans and moieties as well as ritual seniority. These associations with their particular activities (men's house, secret all-men rituals and warfare) produced a relationship between men and women that differs from those shaped by kinship. These associations generate different emotions and idealized attitudes ("ethos") towards women: women are (or were) conceptualized as an over-all category, as predominantly sexually active beings. They were seen as threatening maleness and men's ritual life and therefore needed to be controlled and elicited "submissiveness". Bateson described the ethos of men and women especially from this level of social organization (which has a lot to do with social control) as most strikingly visible during ritual performances (in a later chapter of this book, I called this level "ceremonial level", see p. 307).

However, the ethos of men and women differ markedly in everyday life and women as wives (not to speak of other gendered kinship relations among men and women) are (or were) far from being simply submissive. They are (or were) very much aware of their power as food providers and wield this power, for example, in

marital conflicts by refusing to cook for their husbands. In such situations, a man as husband was anything but “assertive”. He remained either both scowling and hungry, resorted to his sister or his brother for food or to naked violence (which a wife rarely ever passively endured but fiercely fought back).<sup>5</sup>

In sum, the relationship between men and women differed markedly according to its situatedness, that is, moulded by age, kinship relations, the men’s house associations and their particular value system, the actual context and by personal preferences (affection/antipathy) of individual persons. Bateson’s statement that among the Iatmul “each sex has its own consistent ethos which contrasts with that of the opposite sex” (1958: 198) would need to be differentiated accordingly from today’s perspective.

Bateson identified *naven*, the ceremonies performed by a mother brother’s for his sister’s child when it successfully achieved a task for the first time<sup>6</sup>, as the main factor that restrains schismogenesis (1958: 191, 198-217). In my understanding *naven* performances are a kind of publicly staged formalized kinship relations that also exist, though less conspicuous, in everyday life. These are the relationships between clans in form of wife-givers and wife-receivers and issues of belonging (such as expressed in cross-sibling relations) that are displayed in *naven* (see also Houseman and Severi 1994: 81-120). It is predominantly for this reason, I suggest, that the adult actors (mother’s brother etc.) dress up with female attire (as do the male wife-givers) and male attire (as do the female wife-receivers) in specific ways. Thus, it is the gendering of clan relations through marriage and the ties that link the offspring to either side that seems to be in the foreground rather than sex categories such as “men” and “women” in general.

Moreover, apart from living persons, spirits, mythical and ancestral beings, valuables, animals and other elements of the environment are gendered, too. In myths, for example, the “ethos” of men and women is described as being reversed. Women as primeval beings owned everything that nowadays constitutes male secrets. Men were “submissive” up to the day when they decided to revolt against this social order.

In retrospective of Bateson’s work it becomes evident that the application of gender as an analytical category to the data he presented would probably produce different results and make it difficult to identify schismogenesis. Gender is a constitutive element of the texture of Iatmul society and generates a great number of crossover relations that produce a tight – though not unchallenged – net of social cohesion, thus making the question of “falling apart” redundant.

<sup>5</sup> Violence does not carry negative connotations among the Iatmul.

<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, the father’s sister or elder brother’s wife perform *naven* for their brother’s child. For a detailed description and analysis of *naven* see Bateson 1958 and further interpretations by Houseman and Severi 1994, Hauser-Schäublin 1995, Silverman 2001, Stanek and Weiss 2006.

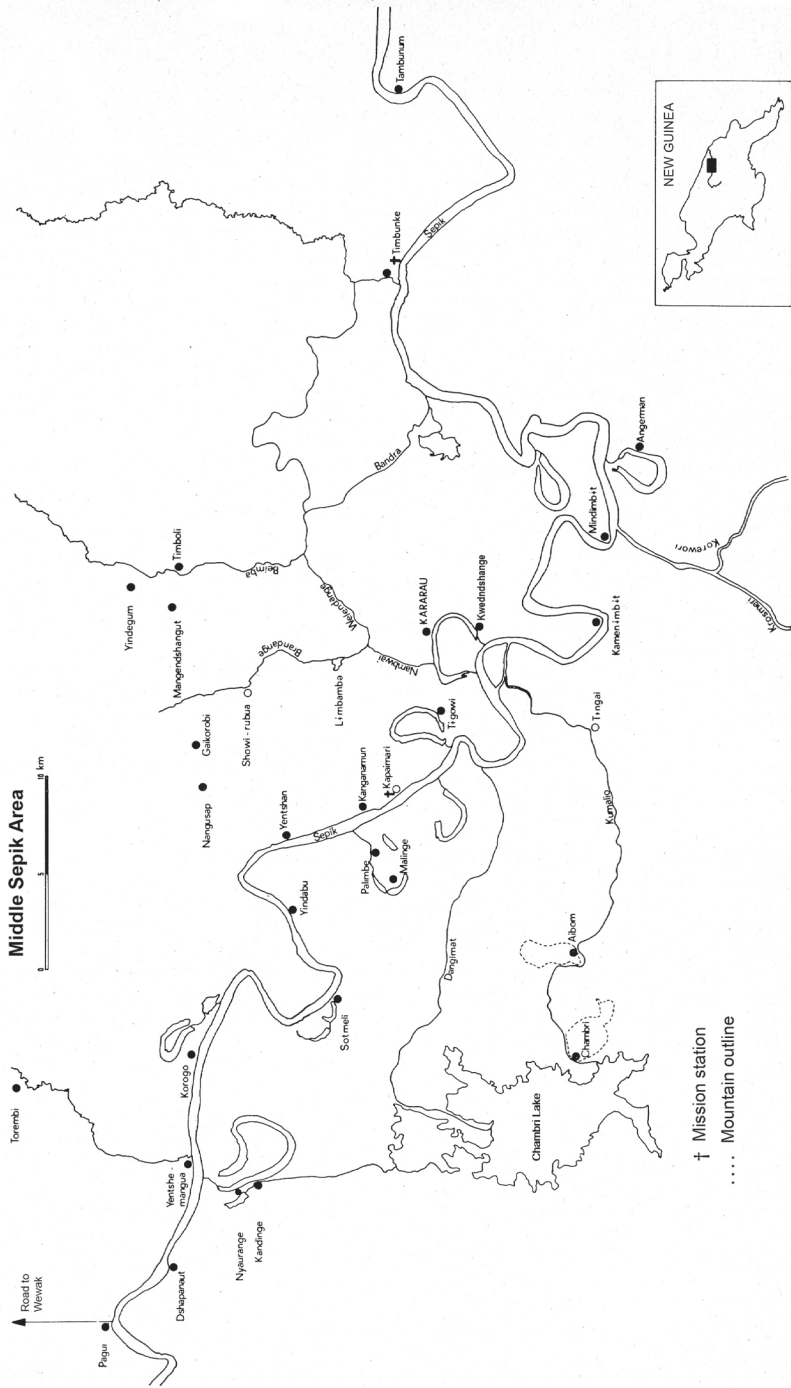


Fig. 2. Map of the Middle Sepik area. The territory of the Iatmul extends from Tambunum to Paga. North of the Sepik River are Sauos villages; note the location of the barter market between Karabau and Gaikorobi, Showi-ruba.

## 1.2 A documentation of the past, and new studies

Still, of course my dissertation displays the traces of the time in many ways. It was written in the form of a monograph yet untouched by the writing-culture debate. By suggesting that women and men live in different spheres, I chose to analyse the relationships between men and women as told in narratives of different types from a structuralist point of view. The main reason for having my dissertation translated into English was the rich ethnographic documentation of the many facets of women's lives, the particular way in which women and men told myths, and talked about their lives. The detailed surveys of women's economic activities, such as fishing, the distribution of fresh and smoked fish, the bartering for sago, the handling of marriage ceremonies and marital relations, women's perspective and knowledge of ritual life and myths, are vivid snapshots of the time, the early 1970s. Moreover, although explored and written from a (moderate) feminist perspective, the rich data have not been pressed into the grid of a particular theory. Apart from the research topic itself, the intellectual mood of the period transpired mainly in the original footnotes in which I had quoted feminist literature. From today's perspective, many of these quotations and statements would be regarded as out-dated, so I have deleted most of them. I had completed my dissertation by the time most of my colleagues had just returned from the field. Their dissertations appeared several years later. Some of these colleagues, such as Florence Weiss and Milan Stanek, have continued working on Iatmul culture throughout their life. Jürg Wassmann later turned to the Yupno (Finisterre Range) and Markus Schindlbeck to the Kwanga (East Sepik Province). There were younger colleagues who also



*Fig. 3: During our fieldwork in Kararau, together with my main interlocutor and friend Sabwandshan (Ruth) and her family in 1972.*

went to the Sepik in the late 1970s, early 1980s. From Basel University these were Nigel Stephenson who studied the Wam (East Sepik Province) and Brigit Obrist-van Eeuwijk who worked among the Kwanga (East Sepik Province) (Obrist-van Eeuwijk 1992; Stephenson 2001). There were other prominent scholars, anthropologists as well as linguists, who worked in villages on the central course of the Sepik River (from Tambunum to Pagui) and its tributaries after we had left Kararau in 1973: Eric Silverman (Tambunum), Christian Coiffier (Palimbe), Andrew Moutu (Kanganamun), Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald (Manambu), Gerd Jendraschek (Korogo), Nicolas Garnier (Chambri), Christiane Falck (Timbunmeli), along with Tomi Bartole, Borut Telban, and Daniela Vávrová; the latter three have been researching in villages of the Korewori River. There are, of course, also colleagues of my generation who have been working extensively in the same region since the 1970s and have published abundantly. These include Deborah Gewertz and Fred Errington (Chambri) and Simon Harrison (Manambu), not to mention those colleagues who have been working among horticulturalists in the adjoining hills and the mountains of the East Sepik Province.

Deborah Gewertz and Florence Weiss have also researched about women and gender and published substantial works (see, for example, Errington and Gewertz 1987; Weiss 1991, 1999). Thus, publications on the region and on aspects of “my” topic have multiplied since 1975. However, all these publication (and all those on



*Fig. 4: A revisit to “Ward 10”, the settlement of Kararau people near Wewak. Ruth (second row, beside me) and her son Max (on my other side) in 2015. (Photo Jörg Hauser)*

the Iatmul which appeared after 1977) have not flowed into the translated text of my dissertation. This would have implied a complete reworking of my thesis and would have resulted in a completely new and different publication.

When my husband and I returned to Papua New Guinea in 2015 und 2017 for brief visits, not only we, but especially some women of Kararau to whom we talked about “the old times” realized how much has changed since the early 1970s (see below). In 1987, after completing my studies on the Abelam (2016), I moved my geographical focus of research to Indonesia (especially Bali and Sumatra), later complemented by studies in Cambodia. Thus, the return to “the Sepik” in 2015 implied a period of more than thirty years in which I had not visited Papua New Guinea.

When I read Christiane Falck’s dissertation (2016) it became even more obvious in what way the lives of Iatmul women have changed over the past forty years.<sup>7</sup> She worked in the Nyaula village of Timbunmeli, located on the banks of Chambri Lake. As her dissertation illustrates, the villagers have adopted Christianity (charismatic Catholicism) and, among other things and ideas, mobile phones; they combine elements of their faith with mobile phones in order to re-interpret their own culture. Consequently, the villagers nowadays understand the spirits of the dead as spirits of God. In charismatic prayer groups, people guided by spirits possessing them receive the words of God. It is through mobile phones that some people have started to “talk” to dead relatives. Interestingly – seen against the backdrop of my own work forty years earlier – these active contacts of women seem to be a new practice that did not exist in this form in the 1970s. At that time, I once witnessed how a woman was “bothered” by the spirit of her dead brother (see p. 191). I had never heard that men were visited by spirits of recently deceased in a similar way. By contrast, the contact with powerful mythical founding ancestors was (and perhaps still is) a prerequisite of men. The ritual activation of “artefacts”, mainly masks, attracts ancestral spirits who then temporarily settle in them (Hauser-Schäublin 2017). The contact with these ancestors and their advice legitimated all ritual male practices. It is for this reason why the men recited long lists of ancestral names before starting any ritual. Today, women seem to take the initiative to contact their dead relatives. Apparently, the men do not try to control them. Christiane Falck will say more about this change in the Afterword (p. 351).

### 1.3 A comparative glimpse back

#### Religious practices and new ideas

Over the past forty years, many things have changed. In 1975, the former Trust Territory of New Guinea, administrated by Australia, together with the south-eastern part of the island, became the independent state of Papua New Guinea. However,

<sup>7</sup> Christiane Falck is lecturer at the Institute for Cultural and Social Anthropology at the Georg-August-University in Göttingen.



transformations had begun much earlier in the wake of colonization, the Second World War, and Christian proselytization. The prohibition of head hunting and the subsequent “pacification” cut short a formerly important part of men’s lives and rituals.<sup>8</sup> By the 1970s, the Catholic Mission station at Kapaimari had developed into a kind of centre. Apart from the missionary’s house, the church, and the school, there was a mission store, a hospital, and an airstrip that allowed fast evacuation to Wewak, the capital of East Sepik Province, in cases of emergency.

Additionally, Kapaimari was in communication by radio with other Catholic mission stations and with the offices of the Australian administration. In 2015, Kapaimari no longer existed. The mission had left, or, as others maintained, been evicted after villagers from Palimbe and Yentshan had requested that the land be returned to the original owners.<sup>9</sup> The current situation of the former mission station was depicted by the words “*bush i kamap pinis*”, that is, “bush has reclaimed the whole area”. Although this mission station no longer exists, the Catholic faith is still widespread among Sepik villagers and the Christian religion in general has become an important and fully integrated part of people’s identity. Timbunke is now the major Catholic mission station for the middle Sepik villages. Today, a road provides a direct link between Timbunke and Wewak, allowing more or less easy and fast trips to the town market in Wewak and the provincial centre of the Catholic Church in Wewak (Wirui).<sup>10</sup> Already in the early 1970s, the Seven Day Adventist (SDA) Mission, based in Angriman, had followers in the up-river villages.

Today, many people of Kararau, especially those living in the satellite settlement of Kwedndshange, are members of the SDA mission. SDA followers are forbidden to eat certain species of fish, crocodile meat, and pork. As Martin Dangi, a highly educated man from Kararau, commented in 2017: “SDA calls ‘culture’ Satan’s work while the Catholic Church accepts ‘culture’ and lets it exist.” The Seven Day Adventists are not the only ones. The villages on the Middle Sepik and beyond are targeted by a multitude of missions and sects – with varying success.

When we settled in Kararau in 1972, some of them old men – as they later told us – believed we were apparitions or spirits of the first Germans who had visited Kararau on the famous German 1912/13 Sepik expedition. They gave up this idea as soon as they realized that I was mainly interested in women’s lives and works, completely different topics than those of the early German explorers. The belief in the return of people who had died long ago still seems to persist in 2017,

<sup>8</sup> The life histories of senior men in Kararau illustrate the extent to which raids and killings (even of a child which the Nyaula had traded to Kararau for shell valuables) were associated with maleness; they were among the most emotional experiences men lived through, see p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Some people even reported that the mission station was smashed to pieces and the mission staff driven off.

<sup>10</sup> A number of new roads (partly dirt roads) from Wewak to the middle Sepik have been built since 1973. For Kararau village, the nearest roads are those starting in Timboli and Timbunke, respectively. The main access roads (“highways”) include the road that ends in Pagui and a newer that leads to Angoram.

even among emigrants.<sup>11</sup> One of the dominant topics that busied the villagers in the early 1970s, especially men, were cargo cults (above all the Mount Turun cult; Turu also called Rurun, see Gesch 1990) or, rather, the idea that white people were holding back from “black” people a major secret, namely, how to produce money instantly (see Introduction 1977). In an interview in 2017, Martin Dangi said that the former leader of the Mount Turu cult had been called “black Jesus”. By 2015 and 2017 these cults had disappeared, only to be replaced, as we were told, by new practices promising the miraculous multiplication of money. Martin called this “false investment” (investment scam). Thousands of Papua New Guineans had invested their money in dubious companies that promised them “a windfall of millions of *kina*”, allegedly from Israel and the United Arab Emirates (Pacific Islands Report 2017).

### Environmental changes and the exploitation of natural resources

Already in the late 1970s, many people, especially young people, left the river villages in search of wage labour and a better life. Some moved to Wewak where they set up a settlement (today officially named “Ward 10”), which still exists today, although probably on a different plot of land since the current settlement is said to have been founded not before 1981. It was there that I met up again with my former close friend, Ruth, in 2015 after forty years (cf. Acknowledgements).<sup>12</sup> Although this site ranks as a “Kararau settlement”, there are also men from other villages living there. These are either friends or husbands of Kararau women. Thus, village membership is not a prerequisite for living there. Some people explained the frequent fights among men as being a consequence of this “mixed living together”. If someone of Kararau origin dies there, his or her body is transported back to Kararau for burial. Evidently, there is still a strong relationship between the riverine village and the urban settlement.

<sup>11</sup> In early 2017, we made a trip to Rabaul, or rather to the place where the former capital of East New Britain Province had been located prior to the volcanic eruption of 1994. We had a local guide who turned out to be a native of Kararau; he worked as a tourist guide in Rabaul. He was born only after we had left the village in 1973. When we told him that we had stayed in Kararau and called the names of his (in the meantime deceased) relatives, he was shocked. He was unable to speak for a while and started sweating. He had been told stories about our stay in Kararau and could not really believe to be meeting us in person after so many decades. His subsequent behaviour was awkwardly irritating and suggested that he might have perceived us as spirits.

<sup>12</sup> The driver of the car we had hired in 2015 refused to take us to the settlement although he was in the company of two other men. We had to go to the police station where the head officer sent one of his men with us; the policeman kept his pistol at the ready in his pocket when we stopped the car and entered the village; however, it was quite calm in the settlement and there were almost no men around. Later, the policeman told us that the police had often been called to that place, especially at pay weekends when many men were drunk and/or on drugs and heavy fighting was going on, occasionally with fatal outcomes.



Fig. 5: The Kararau settlement near Wewak with the house where Helen Pawi and her children live, one of a total of fifteen (2017). (Photo Jörg Hauser)

Already in the 1970s, Sepik people travelled as far as Rabaul in search of work and a new home (Stanek and Weiss 1998). After the volcanic eruption of 1994, which wiped out the city, Iatmul people moved on to other places or even returned to the Sepik. Others left the Sepik to work on oil palm plantations on New Britain (in Kimbe) or moved to one of the country's major cities in search of work and income. Many new ideas and goods were brought back to the Sepik villages by the migrants on their occasional visits home as well by villagers who made regular trips to Wewak in order to sell smoked fish, coffee beans, and vanilla (to mention only two of the introduced cash crops). Today, most of the young and even middle-aged people own a mobile phone which they frequently use for taking pictures. If they can afford a mobile phone subscription, they use them for text messaging and visiting all kinds of internet sites around the world.

Apart from different forms of in- and out-migrations and the new ideas, values, knowledge, and technologies that local people have adopted, the Iatmul's Sepik environment has also changed due to external interventions, such as the setting free of alien fish species and the introduction of floating water plants, such as the water fern (*salvinia molesta*). The import and proliferation of foreign plant and animal species started immediately after the Second World War. During our stay in Kararau, the *makau* (*Tilapia*) had become the dominant fish species. In 2015, we saw a new fish for sale in the town market of Wewak. In Tok Pisin this fish is called

*rabbamaus* (“rubber lips”) since this fish has bulging lips – and rows of frightening teeth. In fact, this fish called *paku* (*Piaractus brachypomus*), belongs to the piranha family, and originates from the Amazonas. The fisherwomen pointed out that they like the meat of this very aggressive fish, which hunts other fish and is known to bite off a finger now and then if you are careless enough to dangle a hand in the water. Probably even more kinds of fish have been introduced; the Australian Geographic mentions twenty-five species (<http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/creatura-blog/2015/01/the-pacu-a-fish-with-teeth> <14 February 2018>). Not all of them have become dominant like the two species just mentioned; apparently, the *paku* also has a negative impact on the river and lagoons’ vegetation in the sense that it also consumes large amounts of plants that serve other fish (as well as young crocodiles) as breeding and hiding places. Conversely, some introduced plants became a plague in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the *salvinia molesta*. A couple of years later, this invasive plant was defeated after the beetle *Cyrtobagous salviniae* was introduced. In 2017, fisherwomen were talking of a new invasive water plant, a water hyacinth, which has “nice white flowers like an orchid” but has started to cover the water surface completely in some areas. These floating masses of water plants are a serious hindrance to transportation and fishing.

Aside from that, the river continues to meander and change the landscape as it has done since time immemorial, occasionally with dire consequences for the people living there, such as when river banks collapse, bringing destruction to whole villages or at least parts of settlements. In oral histories, people of Kararau tell of how one night a whole village, Maimnandanger, between today’s Timbunke and Kararau disappeared in the floods when the river changed its course. Those who survived fled either downriver and founded Timbunke, or upriver and established or became part of Kararau at the site where today the lagoon is located; formerly the main course of the Sepik had flown through here.

When the German Sepik expedition arrived in 2012, Kwedndshange had been Kararau’s major settlement site; later it shifted to the village’s present location, while Kwedndshange was reduced to a hamlet. In 2015 we learned that during a dry season some time ago, the ground on which Kwedndshange stood had begun to cave in. Some people left the settlement and moved downriver to join other villages; others went to live in Kararau’s main settlement.

It also needs to be mentioned that the Sepik environment faces an even greater threat by activities that are taking place far beyond the middle Sepik. These refer to the large-scale logging and mining activities on the upper reaches of the Sepik River, such as the Frieda River Copper and Gold Mining Project. A spill would destroy the whole riverine ecology and, with it, the people’s economic basis since they rely on the water, the fish, and the starch of the sago palm as the basis of their diet. Moreover, the Sepik River (called Avisat or Abisat by the Iatmul) serves as the only traffic way for heavy loads, such as timber, ore, and the chemicals used in mining. The collateral effects of this traffic on the villages and their inhabitants are already

substantial and are likely to increase. Besides, there are almost no benefits for the local people (see also the report by Sepik people, Yambon et al. 2012). However, it is not only the riverine lifeworld that has become exposed to external encroachments. The whole area, from the eastern end of the Turubu District to the western end of the Yangoru-Saussia District (and some say from Angoram as far as the Screw River, which flows from the Maprik area down into the Sepik near Avatip) is destined for agricultural development, that is, oil palm plantations. This vast area with its particular ecology threatens to be turned into a gigantic sweep of monocultures as already existing in other parts of Papua New Guinea and most prominently in Southeast Asia. In a previous study on oil palm plantations in Jambi Province of Sumatra, I described how the former landowners were dispossessed of their land, turning them into day labourers on their own land at the managers' mercy. Additionally, these oil palm plantations prompted a large influx of migrants in search of work, to the effect that the original inhabitants became an impoverished minority (Hauser-Schäublin and Steinebach 2013).

The Sepik Plains have been the target of land grabs in which members of the government have been involved (Filer 2017). This land – as land in many other districts and provinces of Papua New Guinea – can be (and, in fact, is) granted under the Government's Regulation concerning Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABL). The Sepik Plains Grassland is sparsely inhabited. Foreign investors have been competing for parts of this region for quite some time, and the conditions under which they work remain obscure. We visited a plantation in the Turubu District (see also Gabriel et al. 2017). This plantation, "Turubu Oil Palm Project", is run by a Malaysian agri-

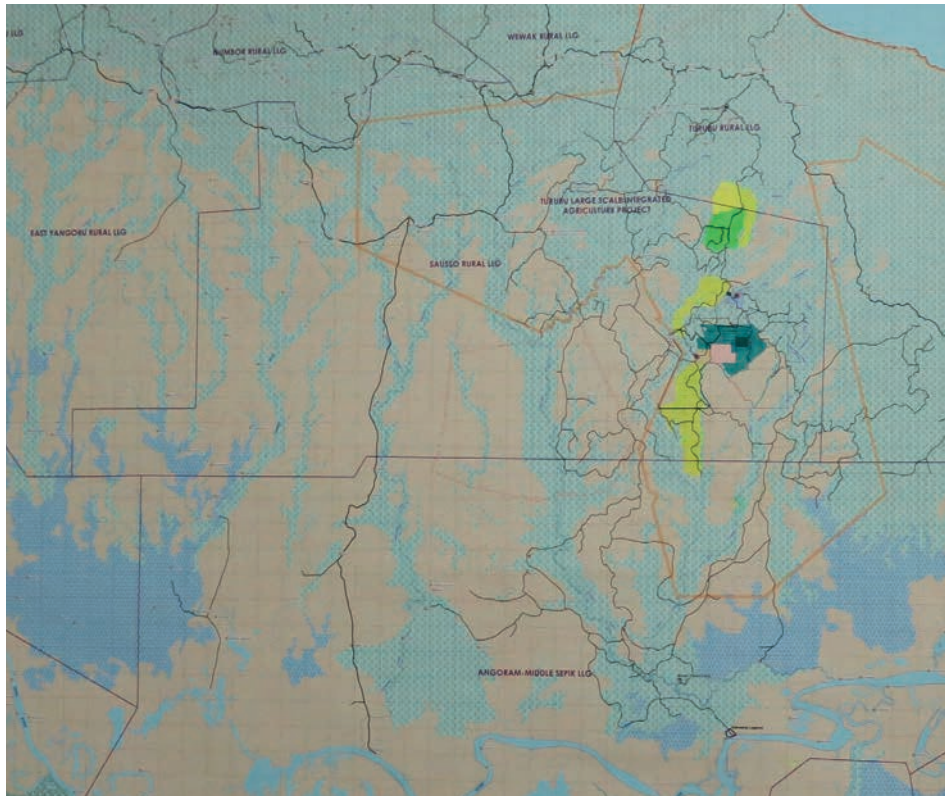


*Fig. 6: Turubu: Entrance to the oil palm plantation run by a Malaysian company and operating under a Special Agriculture Business Lease (SABL) (2017).*



*Fig. 7: In a first step, 4,000 hectares of land (including forests and grassland) of the Turubu area were transformed into an oil palm plantation. It will gradually be expanded as far as Angoram in the south, where an oil mill is under construction, and the Yangoru-Saussia district to the west (2017). (Photo Jörg Hauser)*

business investor by the name of “Giant Kingdom” (<http://www.giantkingdom.com/>) which cooperates with local landowners. When we visited the plantation’s headquarters, the company had 700 landowners from Turubu District and 150 from Angoram District under contract and had been working on 40,000 hectares in the Turubu District and 1,000 hectares of the Angoram District since 2016. According to a business brochure, the company plans to extend the acreage to 80,000, even 100,000 hectares, adding to it lands in the Wewak and Yangoru-Saussia districts. Near the headquarters, and in the midst of the plantation, there was a “New Township” under construction to give the labourers and their families “a solid foundation to live, interact, work, raise and educate their next generation for good in East Sepik” (Light in Palm n. d.) The deal is that the landowners invest their land, the company the technology and the knowledge, including fertilisers and pesticides. The company assists the landowners to have their land officially registered and to receive the respective land title. Holding land title is the prerequisite for a land owner’s cooperation with the company. The company only starts working on the land when the landowners have signed the respective contract. When I visited headquarters we were received by one of the managers (a Malaysian of Indian descent and with a personal success story in small-holder oil-palm cultivation). I saw a few local men studying some paperwork nearby. I was not allowed to acquire a copy of such a contract and the head office in Wewak, too, denied me access. I do know for sure whether the land in Turubu and Angoram Districts is private property or customary land belonging first and foremost



*Fig. 8: Map showing the area marked out for oil palm cultivation. (Photo Jörg Hauser)*

to lineages and clans. However, this is what I suspect. Moreover, when I saw the local men furrowing their brows while studying the paperwork they were supposed to sign, I became doubtful whether they really understood what they were signing – and whether they were indeed entitled to such a step from the perspective of their co-villagers and clans-men.

The company buys the seedlings in Kimbe (New Britain), since import from outside Papua New Guinea is prohibited. As yet, the palm fruits have to be transported to Lae, the location of the nearest oil mill (in early 2017). A substantial part of the fruits decays before it reaches its destination, as palm fruits need to be processed immediately after harvest. In order to have the palm fruits processed swiftly, an oil mill near Angoram is being built. This promises to facilitate processing and shipment via the Sepik to Lae from where the produce is exported to all parts of the world. I could not make out whether an assessment of the environmental effects had been requested before issuing the building licence. The sewage of an oil palm mill is poisonous and, thus, poses an additional risk to the Sepik's ecological system. However, I received no information as to the planned measures concerning the recycling of the sewage.

### From subsistence to market economy

The fishing activities of women living in middle Sepik villages have changed, too. During our time in Kararau, women used fishing hooks, spears, fish baskets (see chapter 3.1). Not long afterwards, women began using store-bought fishing nets. They did not use them as cast nets but laid them overnight. A survey I conducted at the town market in Wewak in 2017 showed that huge amounts of smoked fish from the Sepik (predominantly *paku* fish) were being sold. I talked to several women who were selling smoked fish there.

The fisherwomen I met told me that in the days prior to a trip to Wewak they laid out several nets (of an approximate size of 2 x 10 meters). In her dissertation, Christiane Falck provides an overview



*Fig. 9: Tightly meshed fishing nets in which also immature fish get caught (2017).*

of women's fishing activities in Timbunmeli and the way they smoke them today (see also her Afterword, p. 351). With each net, a woman vendor told me in Wewak, a woman can catch up to 300 fish, thus, in total up to a thousand fish a day. Owing to the large numbers caught, some women are now assisted by their husbands in smoking the fish since this needs to be done immediately after the catch has been brought home.<sup>13</sup> They use up to four-metre long iron grids on which they put the fish on two tiers before lighting the fire underneath. The supply of sufficient firewood – sometimes also gas – needs to be organized well beforehand. Although fish and sago are still the daily staple, many women invest most of their time and labour in the production of smoked fish for sale; they have become impor-

tant suppliers for the regional markets (above all Maprik and Wewak). From a conversation I had with Christiane Falck, I gathered that the distribution of fish among

<sup>13</sup> Men assisting their wives in smoking fish would have been unthinkable in the 1970s. I believe this is a consequence of the transformation of the production mode, from subsistence economy to market production.



women of the same village section and beyond has either disappeared or at least diminished markedly. This was confirmed by Helen Pawi, a former school teacher from Kararau whom I met in the Wewak settlement.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the emphasis now seems to be on market production rather than on fostering mutual intra-village relations among women. The former barter markets – fish for sago with Gaikorobi, and sago for pottery with Aibom – still exist today, but now the produce is sold and no longer bartered.

Fishing with close-meshed nets has an impact on the fish population. I saw that fish of different sizes are sold at the Wewak Town Market. When I inquired about the species and the sizes of the fish, some women explained that “other women” were using increasingly closely meshed nets, with the result that young fish also get trapped. These small fish are then sold on the market at a reduced prize. The women were well aware of the implications for the fish stock but maintained that they, unlike “others”, always let young fish go again.

The Wewak Town Market is a walled structure; it was opened at a new site not far from the old one in 2010.<sup>15</sup> There was a town market already in 1972 although it looked rather rural in comparison with today’s. Apart from Sundays, it is open daily, from the early morning till late afternoon when everybody hastens to get back home. As soon as dusk falls, Wewak becomes deserted and an unsafe place. Every vendor has to buy a two *Kina* selling ticket.<sup>16</sup> The selling and chewing of betel nut is forbidden in the whole market area for reasons of cleanliness and, indeed, there were none of the usual red blotches to be found on the ground. People seem to strictly obey this regulation. The market is run by the local government who appoints a supervisor responsible for law and order in the market. Apart from the supervisor (apparently always a woman – in 2017, the market supervisor was Pauline), market staff consists of a second woman who makes announcements on a loudspeaker, a third woman who looks after the toilets and sells the entry tickets to the rest rooms (one *Kina*), and six security men who patrol the market. As our brief stay showed, their presence is necessary since disputes and brawls seem to occur frequently. The security men are also responsible for cleaning the market when it closes in the late afternoon.

In the main, the market complex consists of three market halls; there is a rather large area with a concrete floor at the waterfront where people relax. There is also a small kiosk which sells, among other things, items such as beverages and rechargeable phone cards. A small stationary is also part of the market area where people

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<sup>14</sup> During a serious fight among men high on drugs and drink in Ward 10, Helen’s husband was severely injured when he tried to intervene. Fearing for his life, he left for Port Moresby where he works as a mechanic for the police. He regularly calls his wife and sends her money. In order to save money, he has not rented a room or a flat but sleeps in a backroom at the police station.

<sup>15</sup> Wewak Market was allegedly established by the Japanese during the Second World War.

<sup>16</sup> During our fieldwork in the 1970s, the Australian dollar (AUD) was the common currency. After independence in 1975, the *kina* was introduced as national currency. Over the years, the exchange rate has collapsed. In 2017 four *kina* were one euro; one *kina* has 100 *toea*.



*Fig. 10: Handicraft section at the Wewak Town Market. Here, women not only sell their produce but also continuously manufacture new string bags and baskets (2015).*



*Fig. 11: A woman trader with her assistant buying baskets for sale in Kimbe, New Britain, where many Sepik people reside who earn their living on one of the local oil palm plantations (2015).*



*Fig. 12: A basket for a mobile phone (2015).*

mostly ask for photocopies and printouts. There is also a small warehouse with a keeper who looks after the goods and sells storage tickets (for a large package of sago, for example, 10 *kina* for the first day and 2 *kina* for each subsequent day). In this stuffy room, we saw tightly wrapped dried fish in bags, sago flour firmly bound into leaves, bunches of bananas, and baskets with peanuts.

The actual market consists of three parallel rows of open market halls with concrete floors; two of them have long vending tables in four rows (thirty-six and forty tables, respectively). Each table provides space for up to three market-women; this results in something around 250 to 300 stalls in these two halls. The third hall has no tables; here the women display their goods on the floor as they do in the inter-village markets. This third hall seems to be less visited; there are perhaps fifty to seventy vendors. In sum, the market is quite big and busy, especially in the morning hours when there are lots of customers, women as well as men. In each hall, particular goods are sold, such as fresh saltwater fish and other marine products as well as smoked freshwater fish in one hall. In the second hall, greens, sago (raw sago, sago pudding, fried sago cakes, and even fast-food bites such as sago-and-fish “sandwiches”), and fruits are on offer. Handicrafts (but also other goods such as dried tobacco, locally produced medicines, and beauty elixirs) are sold in the third outlet. Only a few of the vendors are men. Selling fish and garden products but also handicrafts (string bags, baskets, necklaces, tourist carvings, etc.) are almost exclusively the



*Fig. 13: Women selling smoked fish from the Sepik at the Wewak Town Market (2015).*

women's domain. There are also stalls where textile bags and clothing are sold. Only homemade items are allowed to be traded in the market.

Since the 1970s, a crucial differentiation and, along with it, professionalization have taken place. In the 1970s, a fisherwoman either sold her own fish at the market or a related woman took the stock to the Wewak market and sold it there on her behalf. Today, the women sell their fish for anything between 40 *toea* and 1 *kina*, depending on species and size.

Recently, a new category of vendors has entered the market: wholesale buyers, colloquially called “black market mama”. These are – as far as I could conclude from my three-day survey – mostly women from the Sepik grasslands, that is, from the Wosera, Yangoru-Saussia, and Maprik districts. Some of them also come from the lower middle Sepik villages around Angoram. Almost all of them live near one of the roads that link the riverine villages with Wewak. These women buy large baskets packed with smoked fish from the fisherwomen and then sell the fish, piece by piece, at their own risk. They usually pay 100 to 200 *kina* per bag and reckon on making a profit of anything between 50 and 100 *kina* per bag, providing they sell all the fish. However, in this calculation, the transport costs are not included. The women pay between 40 to 80 *kina* for a return trip, depending on the distance. One of these women said that she usually sells the contents of three to five bags within a week or so. She then returns home for a couple of days or even weeks, before she gets ready for the next tour.



*Fig. 14: Kreer Market near Wewak's "Ward 10" (Karanau settlement) is a small market frequented predominantly by people living nearby (2017).*



*Fig. 15: A sago cake wrap with smoked fish (2017). (Photo Jörg Hauser)*



*Fig. 16: Traditional food (sago and fish) supplemented with spring onion is transformed into a convenience food for busy and hungry town workers (2017). (Photo Jörg Hauser)*

The professionalization of trade is not limited to selling fish. We also met a woman from the western Iatmul village of Yentshemangua who was accompanied by a young woman whom she called assistant. The trader was buying all kinds of baskets, including baskets for sago cakes, as well as ornaments such as necklaces, with the intention of selling them in Kimbe (New Britain). Many emigrants from the Sepik live there, most of them working on one of the many oil palm plantations. It was these potential customers that the trader was targeting.

There were only few fisherwomen from the Sepik River selling their own fish at the Wewak Town Market. Apparently they preferred to focus on catching the fish and were happy to leave the selling to others. During the survey, I did not meet any women from Kararau selling fish at the Town Market. There are other, smaller, markets in and around Wewak, Dagua Market being of respectable size though much less organized than the Town Market. There, betel nut (as well as the ingredients that go with it) is sold and all customers looking for this commodity visit this market. There seem to be no market supervisors and security staff. It was probably for safety reasons that our local companions did not allow us to go there on our own. The Kararau settlement near the airport is located on ground belonging to Kreer village. Nearby is a further small market which is reminiscent of the old local markets: women sit on the floor with their goods spread out in front of them. The atmosphere at the Kreer market, located directly on the seashore, seemed much more relaxed than at the Town Market. Moreover, the Town Market is far away from the Kararau settlement and daily transport is, measured against profit, quite expensive. The vendors and the customers at Kreer market are predominantly women from the neighbourhood (only a few men were there); they sell greens, fish, and other daily food items. There, some women (or rather young girls) from Kararau (but also women from nearby seaside villages) sell smoked or fresh fish. Pauline's daughter has specialized on preparing and selling ready-made dishes, rice and sausage, to school-children and people in search of a lunch. She sells her ware at a nearby school for one *kina*. She sold thirty-one plates on the day we were there, totalling an earning of thirty-one *kina*. However, the price seems to barely cover the costs as a quarrel with her mother revealed upon her return home. She had been using her mother's gas and furniture, and borrowed money from her to buy the sausages. Her mother asked for the borrowed money back but her daughter seemed reluctant to comply.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that – unsurprisingly – many transformations have taken place since 1973, at different levels. The ecological conditions of the immediate environment where the Iatmul live – the Sepik's changing fish and plant population – and the large-scale exploitation of natural resources upriver and in the grasslands on the northern river bank have already had an impact on their livelihood. Potential future scenarios, such as a waste spill or Sepik people becoming wage labourers on their (formerly) own land are not any brighter. At the local level, women (and men)

have gradually adapted their lives to the changing conditions and made use of the new opportunities, such as new fishing technologies, mobility, and electronic devices. The forms of living together and the ideological background (such as religious practices and beliefs) have probably led to a more relaxed relationship between the women and men, though not throughout. Aside from the marital union between a man and a woman, kin relationships do not provide an adequate basis for living together in a migration settlement. Production for a market economy and wage labour in place of subsistence economy have today become an almost indispensable part of people's life. With it, social inequality based on education and jobs, financial means, and political positions has begun to replace former differentiations based predominantly on gender and seniority, as Gewertz and Errington already noted twenty years ago (1999). Nevertheless, in spite of the many changes briefly outlined here, everyday life in the villages shows striking continuity; this would definitely deserve more attention.





*Part One*  
*Women and Subsistence Economy*





Village map of Kararau

Fig. 17: Village map of Kararau

List of the inhabitants/owners (and their wives) of the individual houses

(The numbers of the canoe jetties refer to the corresponding houses)

1. Asenau, Nangusime clan  
Kabun, Korbmui clan
2. Kandshingui, Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan  
Uemanoli (Ueman), Mairambu clan  
Wutnagwan, Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan  
Betshjymbunagui, Yaate clan
3. Gimbun, Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan  
Namui, Yaate clan
4. Gau, Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan  
Kerunda, Emasa clan
5. Mindshindimi (Mindsh), Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan  
Tambaragui, Wuenguendshap clan
6. Pampandaun, Korbmui/Mandali (?) clan  
Kukumbe, Emasa clan
7. Kambakimbi, Semai clan  
Olinganau, Emasa clan
8. Abandoned house belonging to Wuenguendshap clan
9. Gowi, Semai clan  
Dshangu, Sameanguat clan
10. Kubeli, Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan  
Mingunda (Mingu), Kisamalidshane lineage of Emasa clan
11. Kamangali, Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan  
Kwapmei, Yagum clan  
Karabindsha, Sameanguat clan  
Labu, Wuenguendshap clan  
Wanyo, Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan  
Labuanda, Nangusime clan  
Tshui, Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan  
Sapingen, Naua clan
12. Newly built family house of Kamangali
13. House in which Kamangali lives by himself
14. Wosange, Wuenguendshap clan  
Angumali (Angu), Lenga clan  
Wangen, Wuenguendshap clan
15. Tshindu, Kisamalidshane lineage of Emasa clan  
Nagua, Yagum clan  
Gangi, Yagum clan  
Kungun, Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan
16. Yamanabi, Mairambu clan  
Mänditagwa, Yagum clan
17. Wulingui, Semai clan  
Sragui, Emasa clan  
Tibuantshan, Semai clan  
Kandshui, Emasa clan
18. Kabuseli, Yagum clan  
Baragunda (Barab) Semai clan  
Yambunde (Yambombe) Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan
19. Naundu, Mbowi-Nangusime clan
20. Saun, Mbowi-Nangusime clan  
Shamban (Samban), Yagum clan
21. Koliuan, Mbowi-Nangusime clan  
Senguimanagui (Sengui), Kandshene lineage of Mairambu clan  
Ngu, Wuenguendshap clan  
Brmbo, Nangusime clan
22. Sonembange, Yagum clan  
Keimambi, Emasa clan
23. Salbui, Yagum clan  
Maabma, Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan  
Wambrendshan (Wombre), Wuenguendshap clan
24. Sangrue, Yagum clan  
Tipmange, Kandshene lineage of Mairambu clan  
Kengunda, Mandali clan
25. Kolindshimbu, Wuenguendshap clan  
Komeagui, Yagum clan  
Kugua, Kandshene lineage of Mairambu clan  
Kai, Wuenguendshap clan  
Aglimbe, Wuenguendshap clan  
Langda, Mbowi-Nangusime clan
26. Tanguanimbi, Naua clan
27. Kisaman, Wuenguendshap clan  
Amblangu, Mandali clan
28. Wolingen, Emasa clan
29. Dshoimbange, Emasa clan
30. Kindsheran, Emasa clan  
Uangu, Kandshene lineage of Mairambu clan
31. Nimbukua, Naua clan  
Meien, Semai clan
32. Kabusmeli, Sameanguat clan  
Sagnaragwa, Semai clan  
Kabusnamak (Kabus), Sameanguat clan
33. Wolimoe, Korbmui clan  
Pampanda, Emasa clan
34. Yaknabi, Emasa clan  
Gaunamak, Mbowi-Nangusime clan  
Woliragwa, Korbmui clan  
Tshisendimi, Emasa clan  
Mimbian, Yamandane Lineage of Mairambu clan  
Mäm, Emasa clan  
Nimbianda, Wuenguendshap clan
35. House in which Yaknabi lives by himself
36. Teacher's house
37. School
38. Church
39. Village shop
40. House for visiting police patrols
41. House for visiting patrol officers (*haus kiap*)

## 2 The Village

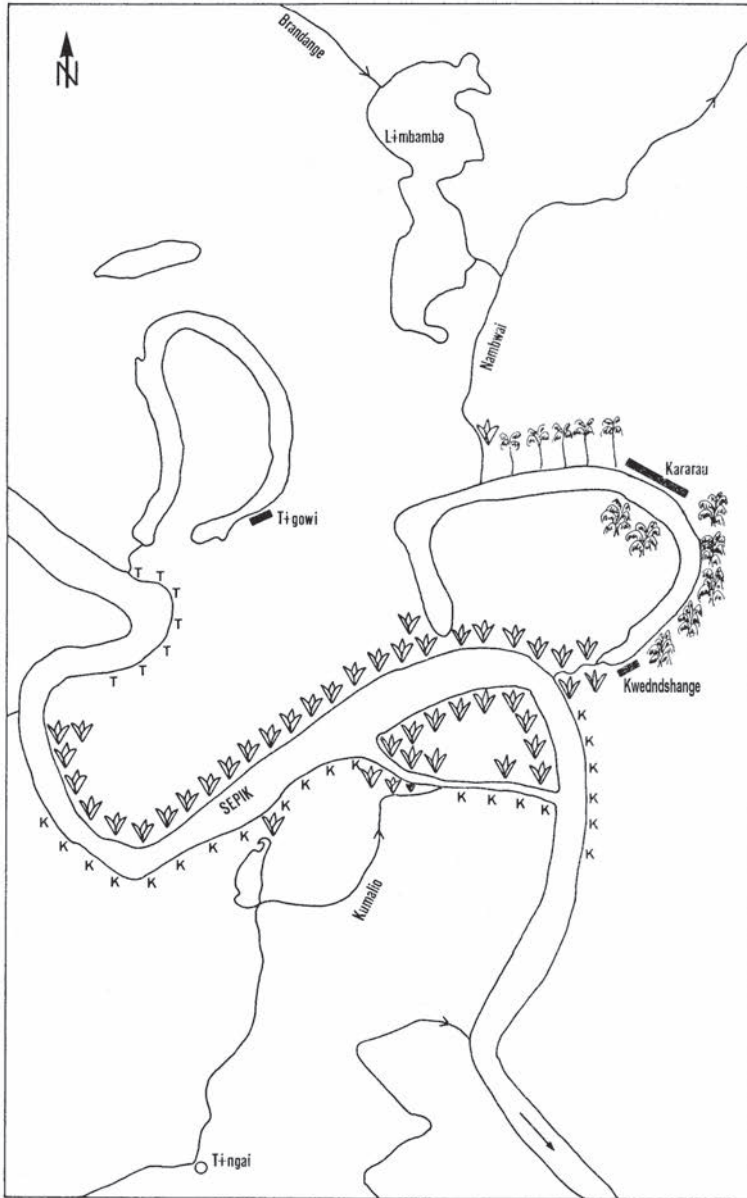
According to local testimony, the first settlers of Kararau originally came from a place near Gaikorobi.<sup>17</sup> This “ur-Kararau” is referred to as “Moot”, “Wagenge” and “Wewunge”.<sup>18</sup> These early groups must have travelled in stages until they reached Kararau’s present location (Kararau is the name of a mythical crocodile). Until the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the village was situated on the open course of the Sepik River, albeit the settlement was never situated in the same location for several decades on end.

Following a raid by Palimbe on Kararau (around 1880), during which many men and women were killed and most of the houses were burnt to the ground, the survivors established a new village about four kilometres away from the old settlement along a then faster-flowing section of the river. Sometime later the Sepik once again changed its course, leaving the village on the dead arm of the river. The new settlement was thus situated where the now defunct meander once flowed into the main river. Behrmann and

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<sup>17</sup> Concerning the location of Kararau in the Middle Sepik setting, see Schuster 1973: 475-478. The spelling of the village names was adapted to the pronunciation used by the villagers, which is why they differ slightly to the spellings on old maps (Behrmann, Bateson, Schuster). Examples: Palimbe instead of Palimbei, Angerman instead of Angriman, etc.

<sup>18</sup> This information from Kararau was confirmed by Markus Schindlbeck who worked in Gaikorobi. He was shown this legendary place where only stones of the old ritual mound are left.



- |   |  |
|---|--|
|  Betel palm forest           |  Kararau gardens    |
|  Sago and limbum palm forest |  Kamenimbit gardens |
|   |  Tigowi gardens     |

Fig. 18: The territory of Kararau skirting the river and the lagoon. Note the location of Tingai, the barter market with Aibom.

Roesicke discovered Kararau in a place now called Kwedndshange (“small leaf”). Kwedndshange was settled around 1910 by men and women of the Mairambu clan who had left their native village of Timbunke following a dispute and founded the village section called Muintshembit – after the eponymous men’s house. Today there remain only a few huts (now reckoned to Muintshembit) in Kwedndshange. Following pacification enforced by the Australian colonial administration around 1930, the village was moved back to its former location. After the Second World War, the new houses were erected in the direction towards Kwedndshange, leading to a renewed settlement shift.

The village map shows that the gardens are at quite a distance from the present-day village, along an open stretch of the Sepik. Most of the gardens belonging to men and women still living in Kwedndshange are in the vicinity of the small settlement by this name. Between Kwedndshange and Kararau there is a stretch of forest consisting mainly of *limbum* (wild black palm) and sago palms. It is divided into plots of various sizes all of which are privately owned. To the northwest of Kararau lies a betel palm forest where most men own a small plot. Here too the boundaries are irregular and not discernible to the unaccustomed eye.

A few gardens are situated along the *baret* called Nambwai (*baret* is the Tok Pisin term for a small stream or branch of a river) which leads from Kararau to a spot beyond Timbunke where it again joins the Sepik. According to the people, the *baret* did not exist before 1925. The section immediately north of the village was dug by the villagers with great effort. Originally the Nambwai commenced its course at the height of the lake Limbambe, which once used to be much larger.

As is often the case with dead river arms, there is always the danger of silting up which means the inlet has to be regularly cleared.

The actual village lies behind a dense row of undergrowth skirting the bank. Only the long bamboo poles used for tying up the canoes stand in the water beyond the bushes. The dense shrub, which also harbours one or the other large tree, serves as a welcome shield against the strong south-westerly winds during the rainy season.

Kararau stretches along the bank of the dead river arm. The village is divided into three parts named after respective men’s houses: at the western end is Muintshembit, followed by the section called Kosembit, and then by Kraimbit. The individual sections are separated by lines of coconut palms. During our stay, Muintshembit and Kosembit still had men’s houses, which, however, were in no way comparable to the ones Behrmann and Roesicke had once photographed in Kararau. Nevertheless, they still served as men’s assembly places. In Kraimbit there was a small hut, which was not actually described as a men’s house but served as a meeting place for the young village men.

The main path stretches from one end of the village to the other, following the riverbank. It commences at the *baret* Nambwai, traverses the betel palm forest and takes you past the two men’s houses right to the far end of the village. From there a small footpath leads to Kwedndshange. The main path is considered the men’s path.

During male festivities women are not allowed to use it and even on normal days women are not allowed to pass between the men's houses and the riverbank, forcing them to make a detour round the back of the houses from one end of the village to the other. One hardly ever sees a man on this path, not because they are forbidden to use it but because the path, although good enough for women, is said to not befit them.

Most of the houses are aligned so that the front faces the water; accordingly, the main door, too, faces the embankment. Only very few dwellings diverge from this pattern.



## 3 Sources of Subsistence

### 3.1 Fishing

The village comes to life at the break of dawn. Children are the first to climb down the house ladders. The women let out the chicken, which are kept in small huts overnight, and go to fetch fresh water. The men wander off to their wash places beyond the settlement. The fire is kindled in the men's house, tobacco leaves are placed on the embers and then rolled into a fine cigar, while one old man turns to his first betel nut of the day. The women get ready to go fishing. A smouldering piece of wood is placed in a fire bowl and stowed away at the back of the canoe, together a fishing spear and a few short fishing rods. They take with them their youngest, yet unweaned children. The baby is placed on a makeshift bed under a palm frond canopy to protect it against rain and sun. The older children stay at home under the care of a housemate or their father. Then the women push off in their canoes, often in small flotillas, barely visible against the still black water of daybreak. The sound of their chatting gradually fades as their canoes glide away from the village.

The women leave the village in small groups but then soon split up, each woman doing her fishing on her own. When the sun has fully risen, some of the women meet at a distinctive spot in the landscape. They place their tobacco leaves over the smouldering log they have brought with them and roll a cigar, leaving their canoes adrift in the bushes of the riverbank. While breastfeeding the baby, a woman might fetch a piece of sago cake from her bag or start scraping the meat from a coconut with a honed spoon (in earlier days shells were used) amidst much chatter and laughter. The women only compare their catch if one woman has caught an unusually large amount of fish, but normally they don't count the fish they've caught. For them fishing is routine, an essential of daily life.



*Fig. 19: Catching fish with a spear in Kararau in 1972.*



*Fig. 20: At dawn, the women paddle to the lagoon in their canoes to fish; Maabma has just speared an eel (1973).*

While some of the women stay on to roast a fresh fish over the smouldering fire, others leave after about half an hour to collect the leaves of a special kind of aquatic plant, which they later add to the fish they cook at home. Before returning home the women usually visit the forest to collect firewood – not just any wood but carefully selected logs known to be ideal wood fuel. They return to the village around midday or in the early afternoon.

### Fishing techniques: rod, spear, and trap

During the dry season the women nearly always use a rod for fishing, consisting of an approximately sixty-centimetre-long bamboo rod and a line (nylon string) measuring several metres. Nowadays they rely on fishing hooks purchased from the mission store. As the women do not use floats, fishing demands a high degree of concentration in order to pull the line in at the right moment. As bait the women use little crabs which they collect on the way to work. For this purpose, they visit a field of swimming aquatic plants. A net measuring between forty and fifty centimetres in diameter is inserted under the plants and then jerked upwards causing the crabs to drop into the net which are then picked from the net. In earlier days, the women used larger fishing nets which they would trawl through the shallow water in pairs Bateson (1958: Plate XVI B). Why this method was given up is not clear; one elderly Iatmul man maintained that the today's women were simply too lazy to make such large nets.

Some women leave between five and eight fishing rods lying in the water, occasionally spread across the dead arm of the river. After an hour or two they return to check for possible catches. The more effective method, however, is to place the rod across the canoe and hold it by hand so as to be able to retrieve the rod as soon as she believes a fish has taken the bait. In this way a woman can catch up to ten fish an hour, mostly the species called *makau*.<sup>19</sup> The *kamui* fish (Tok Pisin: *pis i gat nil*), which is especially appreciated for its delicate meat, is baited with the aid of raw pieces of *makau* meat or its skin. The *makau* is comparatively new to the Sepik but has spread very quickly, at the cost of many other species.

Rod fishing is considered a typical female occupation and is never practised by men, while fishing spears are used by both men and women.

When the water rises during the rainy season and floods the betel palm forest, the women turn to spear fishing. *Makau* prefer shallow waters which makes spearing them easy. Often women are able to spear two or three fish at a time. Now and again men also make use of the fishing spear, mainly at night when they hunt for fish with the help of flashlights.

During the flood season eels are to be found in great numbers. Early in the morning one finds them sleeping on the surface which, of course, makes spearing them very easy. The people have a great fancy for eels not least because of their fatty meat. The eel is a fish which men especially like to spear. When several men are in a

<sup>19</sup> *Tilapia mossambica* (Schultze-Westrum 1972: 65)

canoe and catch sight of an eel on open water they become excited. If one of them is carrying a fishing spear on him he will try to catch it, with the others in the boat offering “helpful advice”. For men, catching eels is akin to the excitement of hunting. This is also probably why they often leave the village in their canoes at daybreak, carrying fishing spears with them, and not so much because they feel they have to contribute to the family’s daily diet. Often they return to the village already after a few hours, the floors of the canoes writhing with slippery eels. This leads to endless bragging about the size and numbers of eels caught.

During an average flood season, the water rises just above land level, turning the ditches dug by the owners of the forest plots into little streams which, subsequently, fill up with fish. The women then lay out their fish traps in the ditches; others, who do not own a forest plot, do the same in the Nambwai *baret*. The water level has to be exactly right, that is, not too high and not too low. Consequently, trap fishing is only possible during a couple of months of the year. Moreover, traps can only be used in flowing water and since Kararau is situated on a dead arm of the river there are not many opportunities for trap fishing.

The women lay out their traps in the late afternoon, usually several in a line. Sometimes they build small weirs, forcing the water through the trap. Along the Nambwai *baret*, the traps are attached to bamboo poles. The next morning the women return to empty the traps, filling the catch – usually smaller fish – into a special basket.

### The fishing grounds

When fishing in shallow waters, the women pay special attention to keeping to their own land or forest plots, especially when laying traps. Nobody would ever consider putting out a trap in the section of a stream that belongs to someone else. And since everyone is aware of the boundary lines, this never leads to conflict.

Fishing in open water, either on the dead arm of the Sepik or on the river itself, is permitted without restriction. In this respect, clans or moieties raise no territorial claims but it is forbidden for men and women from other villages to fish in Kararau waters. In earlier times Kararau and Kanganamun often



*Fig. 21: Checking a fish trap (1973).*

fought over the rights to the lake called Limbambe until, finally, the lake was adjudicated to the people of Kararau by the colonial authorities.<sup>20</sup>

### Catching and spearing turtles

For roughly the last eight years, turtles have been caught with the help of line and hook. Previously they were hunted by women using a spear-like instrument, which had, instead of one pointed tip, a row of prongs – a bit like a comb – to scan the flooded grasslands during the wet season. When a turtle spear (the Iatmul call it *amma*) touched an animal's shell, it gave off a dull thump, and since the entire flood plain harbours practically no stones the woman knew she had probably hit on a turtle, after which she or one of her children would dive underwater and fetch the turtle to the top. This method is no longer applied today.

The women of Kamenimbit were the first to test the hook-and-line method, using as bait a piece of raw *makau*, a food favoured by turtles. And, in effect, it worked. Although the women of Kararau heard about this new technique used by their Kamenimbit peers quite early on, they did not adopt it immediately. The first to try it was a woman called Komeagui, a lively woman then about forty-five years old. Accompanied by her husband Kolindshimbu, she canoed out to the flooded plains to try her luck with a hook and line, with success. The second to try was Maabma, only to return empty handed. On one of the following days she went back to the flooded *kunai* (Tok Pisin for grassland), and this time she came home with a catch of turtles. The other village women soon followed suit. However, compared with fishing the catch is usually quite meagre, averaging between two and six turtles within a time span of roughly six hours. Moreover, catching turtles is extremely strenuous because it means holding out in the scorching sun for hours – there are practically no trees in the *kunai* – and remaining motionless in the canoe after casting the lines since turtles are quick to react to movement and take flight as soon as they perceive suspicious sounds or activities. The women often complain of feeling exhausted and sore upon returning home, but proud nonetheless, as turtles are considered a savoury delicacy.

The men apply a different method. As bait they use pieces of hives that certain insects build on trees. At short intervals they throw morsels of the hive into the water, knowing well that turtles just love these titbits. After a while a first animal approaches the bait, soon followed by others. They only rear up their heads after the first turtle has safely caught a morsel in its mouth. At this moment the man thrusts his spear into the animal's head. Men who succeed in spearing several turtles in one day are highly praised for their skills.

There is actually very little meat on a turtle but the giblets are regarded as a delicacy and savoured after boiling the animal in hot water or roasting it over a fire. Of-

<sup>20</sup> Note by a *kiaip* in the Village Book of 17 December 1968: "Kanganamun forbidden to use or go near roundwater or build houses nearby until Demarcation Committee decides ownership."

ten turtles are not killed immediately but placed in a string bag and carried home. If not for eating immediately, the animal is tied by the neck and front legs so it cannot escape. Some women half fill their canoe with water and place the turtle within so as to keep it alive for later use. With regard to killing, turtles suffer a similar fate as do fish: they are not properly killed before being placed in boiling water or roasted over the fire, often after being left next to a fire bowl for hours with their throats half cut but still alive. Ducks and chicken fare no better. With the exception of pigs, which are often lovingly reared in the village by the women, the people's relationship with (real) animals is impersonal and distant.

### 3.2 Fish survey

Exchanging and sharing food play a key role in Iatmul society, not only in the context of marriage ceremonies between man and wife and between their respective clans, but also between the men's ritual moieties (Kishit and Miwot), and between social groups in general. What interested me in fishing in particular was how the catch was distributed. Given that a woman provides for her whole family, my impression was that the number of fish caught was often larger than required to cover the family's immediate needs.

So I tried to find out by means of a survey how many fish a woman catches per day, how many of them she passes on to others, and how many she herself receives. The aim was to uncover the informal relationships (that is, not relationships predefined by the society's institutional framework) between women. Men's social interrelations are usually enacted within the ceremonial fabric or at least in the context of public life, while those of women habitually unfold in everyday life, one could almost say casually. The surveyed women belonged to different age groups, lived in different parts of the village, and came from different family settings. The survey was carried out for a month on a daily basis, always in the late afternoon after the women had returned home from fishing and had already distributed the catch. In a few cases, indicated below, I had to terminate the survey prematurely.

The inquiry had certain flaws, which are also reflected in the results.

1. The women were not used to counting their catch, but after the first two or three days they had got the hang of it and, on occasion, had already counted the fish before I even had the chance to ask. A follow-up check seemed inappropriate and would have probably jeopardized the good working relationship I had with the women. Since among women – in contrast to the men – competitiveness is conspicuously absent, the danger of receiving false information was low; moreover, some women occasionally even asked me to count the catch myself.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The following is worth noting: after I had begun the survey, some men asked me why I was doing this, commenting that I was probably only interested in finding out who had caught the most fish.

2. I only came across a second potential flaw in the course of the survey: if woman A claimed she had given xx fish to woman B, the logic was that woman B would name the same amount when asked. In some cases, however, this was not the case. When I once asked a receiving woman, she denied having received any fish from woman A although the latter insisted that she had given B fish. I decided not to follow up the case for fear that it might lead to conflict.

The women I chose for the fishing survey and who willingly cooperated were the following:

Kabun, clan: Korbmui, moiety: Nyai; married to Asenai, clan: Nangusime, moiety: Nyai.

Children living in the household: four

Thereof babies: none

Age: ca. 40

Village section: Muintshembit

Additional details: Kabun is a rather quiet woman who prefers to do all the work herself. She didn't ask her grown-up daughter (aged ca. 17) for assistance. Her husband Asenai was unable to help her due to an injury to his knee.



*Fig. 22: Kabun in front of her house (1973).*

Tambaragui, clan: Wuenguendshap, moiety: Nyai; married to Mindshendimi, clan: Yamandane lineage of Mairambu clan, moiety: Nyamei.

Children living in the household: four

Thereof babies: none

Age: ca. 38

Village section: Muintshembit

Additional details: Tambaragui lives in the shadow of her prominent husband. Their two eldest daughters – approx. 15 and 12 – are at school in Tambunum most of the time but return home for holidays.



*Fig. 23: Tambaragui (1973).*

Labuanda, clan: Nangusime, moiety: Nyai; married to Wanyo, clan: Wuenguendshap, moiety: Nyai.

Children living in the household: two

Thereof babies: none

Age: ca. 25

Village section: Kosembit

Additional details: Labuanda is full of initiative and quite energetic when dealing with men and women of her age. Towards her husband she appears dominant.



*Fig. 24: Labuanda (Maria) (1973).*

Karabindsha, clan: Sameanguat, moiety: Nyau; married to Kamangali, clan: Wuenguendshap, moiety: Nyau.

Children living in the household: one

Thereof babies: none

Age: ca. 45

Village section: Kosembit

Additional details: Karabindsha is from a Nyaula village (Tigowi). She is Kamangali's second wife and lives with her two co-wives in the same house. She is especially close to the first wife. Karabindsha is more the quiet type but knows what she wants and likes to take the initiative (see Fig. 38, p.105).

Angu, clan: Lenga, moiety: "half Nyau/half Nyamei"; married to Wosange, clan: Saundshane, moiety: Nyau.

Children living in the household: two

Thereof babies: none

Age: ca. 45

Village section: Kosembit

Additional details: Angu, from Timbunke, is a quiet, reserved woman who leads a withdrawn life. Her husband, like herself, is a very quiet man; he suffers from a leg condition that excludes him from many activities and makes him an outsider in the men's community.



*Fig. 25: Angumali (Angu) (1973)*

Senguimanagui, clan: Kandshene lineage of the Mairambu clan, moiety: Nyamei; married to Koliuan, clan: Mbowi-Nangusime, moiety: Nyau.

Children living in the household: three

Thereof babies: at the time of the inquiry none

Age: ca. 35

Village section: Kosembit

Additional details: Senguimanagui was pregnant during the survey and gave birth to a son shortly afterwards. Since she was suffering from pain during the last months of her pregnancy, she was dependent on her husband for fishing. Senguimanagui is a lively and very intelligent woman.



*Fig. 26: Sabwandshan (Ruth) with her baby (1973).*

Tipmange, clan: Kandshene lineage of the Mairambu clan, moiety: Nyamei; married to Sangrue, clan: Yagum, moiety: Nyamei.

Children living in the household: three

Thereof babies: one

Age: ca. 30



Village section: Kosembiit

Additional details: During the survey her husband fell seriously ill and she had to care for him so that she no longer went fishing. Moreover, she had no canoe of her own. Her husband had started making one before he became sick but was unable to finish it. He died shortly after the survey.

Tipmange is an extremely lively and temperamental woman who appeared dominant towards her more withdrawn husband.



*Fig. 27: Tipmange (left) during a feast (1972).*

Kengunda, clan: Mandali, moiety: Nyau; widow, her husband had been a member of the Yagum clan of the Nyamei moiety.

Children living in the household: one

Thereof babies: one

Age: ca. 22

Village section: Kosembit

Additional details: Since Kengunda had been widowed for approx. five months and had to care for a baby, she never went fishing. Tipmange and Kengunda shared a house, having married two brothers. When Sangrue's condition became more serious, Tipmange moved to the house of her parents with her family. During the survey Kengunda often went to visit her parents in Mindimbit for a few days. Kengunda is a quiet, balanced woman.

Amblangu, clan: Mandali, moiety: Nyau; married to Kisaman, clan: Wuenguendshap, moiety: Nyau.

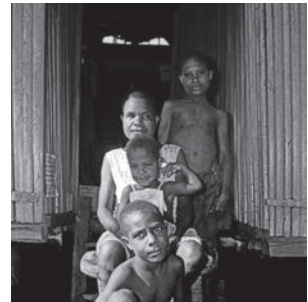
Children living in the household: four

Thereof babies: one

Age: ca. 42

Village section: Kraimbit

Additional details: Amblangu is the dominant person in the family. She tends to be bossy and querulous. Of all the women listed here, she is the only one to have been to school for many years.



*Fig. 28: Amblangu with her two youngest children (1972).*

Komeagui, clan: Yagum, moiety: Nyamei; married to Kolindshimbu, clan: Wuenguendshap, moiety: Nyau.

Children living in the household: two

Thereof babies: one

Age: ca. 45

Village section: Kraimbit

Additional details: Komeagui is a very adaptable but nevertheless strong-minded woman (see Fig. 56, p. 211). During the inquiry she was ill several times. Komeagui and Kolindshimbu (just like Amblangu and Kisaman) are actually from Kosembit but moved to Kraimbit due to health issues.

### Size of the catch

Looking at the supply of fish in individual households, one notices that, with three exceptions, it is the women who supply this key food for their families. There is no strict three-day economic cycle (fishing day – market day – rest day) in Kararau as in other villages.<sup>22</sup> The women fish on an irregular basis, there is no fixed schedule. Tambaragui, for instance, once went fishing on eight out of ten days, Kabun on four out of ten, and Komeagui on three out of ten. On average, however, women go fishing every second day, some every third day. The most prolific fisherwoman during the survey period was Tambaragui with 267 fish caught (her husband caught 30 during the same period, her daughter 56), followed by Angu with 206 (her husband and daughter did no fishing in this period), Karabindsha 173 (her daughter an additional 102), and Labuanda 125 (she went fishing with her husband three times during the survey, totalling a number of 166 fish in the three days). Kabun 153 (her daughter 31); Amblangu 105 (her husband 47, her daughter 74); Komeagui 56 (her husband an additional 30); Tipmange 44 (her husband 24); and Senguimanagui 2 (together with her husband 64, her husband alone 78, and her son 6). The widowed Kengunda who was forbidden to go fishing due to her husband's death and the fact that she had a baby was completely dependent on others for fish.

As the figures above indicate, we are dealing with a few very active fisherwomen, namely Tambaragui, Angu, and Karabindsha. The three do not belong to the group of really young women and thus have no small children to care for and feed. Instead, they belong to an age group with more adolescent children who do not require constant supervision and attention. All the women who went fishing carried the principal responsibility of supplying their families with food on a regular basis, possibly with the exception of Senguimanagui who only ever went fishing with her husband, owing to her pregnancy and the pains she suffered from the eighth month on. Her husband had basic medical training. Possibly this was the reason why he never let his wife go fishing on her own, as is normally the case. As far as Labuanda and her husband are concerned, they were probably the most “acculturated” couple, vacillating between the “traditional” gender relationship and that propagated by Western culture.

Daughters occasionally helped their mothers in fishing, but not on a regular basis, for one thing because some of the adolescent girls went to school in Kapaimari, for the other, because the mothers never bid them to do so (at least not as far as I was able to observe).

<sup>22</sup> Bateson (1958: 143) mentions this three-day cycle for Kanganamun.

### Own consumption of fish

As opposed to the number of fish caught, which varied considerably between women, the consumption pattern per family was more evenly balanced.<sup>23</sup> Tambaragui's family (she, her husband, and her daughters caught a total of 353 fish) consumed, according to own statement, 246 fish. Angu used 222 fish for own consumption (total catch of 206). Karabindsha (total of fish caught 275) consumed 167. Labuanda (total catch 291) consumed 186. Kabun (total of fish caught 184) consumed 185. Amblangu (total of fish caught 226) depended on 226 for her family, and Komeagui (total of fish caught 86) consumed 126. Tipmange (total of fish caught 68) used 100 for own consumption. Senguimanagui (total of fish caught 150) used 171 for own consumption. Kengunda, who caught no fish herself, consumed 21.

The figures show that three of the ten women had caught substantially more fish than required for own consumption. In two cases the numbers of fish caught and consumed were about even, while half of the sample required for their own consumption more fish than they had caught. This indicated that between the women there must be a kind of exchange system in play.

In quantitative terms we have the following pattern: Tambaragui received from other women 20 fish, at the same time she gave 130; Angu received 52 and gave 36, Karabindsha received 27 and gave 135; Labuanda received from other women 48 fish and gave 153; Kabun received 38 and gave 37; Amblangu received 39 and gave 39; Komeagui received 45 and gave 5; Tipmange received 47 and gave 15; Senguimanagui received 113 and gave 92; and, finally, Kengunda gave none of the 21 fish she had received to other women.

As to be expected, the women who had caught more fish than required for their own consumption passed on the surplus to other women. But even though they had caught more than they needed, they still received fish from other women. On the opposite side, even those women who were unable to cover their own needs and were reliant on support still gave some fish to others (with the exception of Kengunda).

### *Conclusions*

As we have just seen, the size of the individual catches varies considerably. However, it would be misleading to simply determine a mean value from the average daily catch of each woman. The collected data indicate that the criteria defining the number of fish caught, used for own consumption and passed on to others, are the following:

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<sup>23</sup> Own consumption also includes the fish later traded for sago at the market near Gaikorobi.

- A woman's age and, subsequently, the number and age of her children. Having to care for small children means that a woman has less time to go out fishing. The most successful fisherwomen were those with adolescent children who were more independent.
- Physical condition: advanced pregnancy, recent birth, sickness. – Senguimanagui was reliant on outside support due to her advanced pregnancy, similar to Komeagui who occasionally suffered from pains and fever.
- Social conventions: Tipmange was not allowed to go fishing as her husband had recently fallen ill. Likewise, Kengunda, who was widowed, was forbidden to go fishing.
- Behaviour patterns that make sense in the light of acculturation: Traditionally, men and women hardly ever go fishing together. Labunda and Wanyo are an exception in this respect, so are probably Senguimanagui and Koliuan.
- Personal preferences and skills: some women are simply better and work harder at fishing than others.

I was unable to ascertain how many fish each family member consumed per day. Sometimes a woman cooked two fish with greens before distributing the dish to several people. I was also unable to determine with certainty how many fish actually found their way to the market.

What we can say is the following: there exists between the various women a system of exchange, which ensures that women who are not able to go fishing nonetheless receive a sufficient supply. In addition, fish seems to serve as means of creating and sustaining social relationships. A conspicuous detail in this respect is that women only ever receive fish from other *women*, in other words, with very few exceptions (the widow Kengunda was the only person who named her father-in-law as a provider of fish) the system works without men acting as intermediaries. This might have to do with the fact that the exchange of food between men and women is usually associated with sexual relations.

### Qualitative analysis

The quantitative part of the survey was complemented by a qualitative section in an attempt to identify the relationship channels between the women involved.<sup>24</sup>

Kabun gave fish to	How many	How often	Kabun received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference <sup>24</sup>	Village section
Kerunda	21	6x		5	1	<i>nyamun</i>	Muintshembit
Tambaragui	1	1x		3	2	<i>suambu</i>	Muintshembit
Labu	9	3x		2	1	<i>suambu</i>	Kosembit

<sup>24</sup> See the kinship terminology chart in the appendix.

Kukumbe	3	1x				<i>suambu</i>	Muintshembit
Labuanda				6	1	<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
Ueman				20	1	<i>kandshe</i>	Muintshembit
Namui				2	1	<i>nyan</i>	Muintshembit

### Comments

Of course, the survey period only reflects a window in a system of ongoing exchange relationships. Possibly I did not even capture all of Kabun's exchange partners.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, what is telling is that during the month of inquiry the same women's names keep on appearing. Kabun entertains relations above all with women of her own village section but none with women from the most distant section, that is, Kraimbit.

Not listed are the fish that were given to us.

Tambaragui gave fish to	How many	How often	Tambaragui received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Kabun	1	1x				<i>nyamun</i>	Muintshembit
Mimbian <sup>26</sup>	10	3x		8	1x	<i>nyan</i>	Muintshembit / Kraimbit
Ueman	2	1x				<i>nyamei</i>	Muintshembit
Dangun-bragui <sup>27</sup>	89	14x				<i>nyan</i>	Muintshembit
Namui	7	2x				<i>nyan</i>	Muintshembit
Labu	8	1x				<i>suambu</i>	Kosembit
Labuanda	7	1x				<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
Kukumbe				12	2x	<i>kandshe</i>	Muintshembit
Teacher from another village	5	2x					

<sup>25</sup> Of course, these considerations apply to all the women included in the survey.

<sup>26</sup> For giving birth, Mimbian had moved to her father's house (village section: Muintshembit) but she went back to stay with her husband during the survey period (village section: Kraimbit).

<sup>27</sup> Dangunbragui works as a teacher in Tambunum and only returned to her natal village for a period of two months. Moreover, since she had a baby to look after, she never went fishing.

*Comments*

According to Tambaragui the only regular exchange she had was with Mimbian, the daughter of her husband's elder brother; but I should mention that, in her case, I was never quite sure whether she was actually telling me the correct figures. Whether this had to do with the fact that her husband was one of my most trusted interlocutors with whom I had more contact than with her and that she resented this, I am unable to say with certainty. But when I compare her figures with those of a person like Kabun (whom I remember as a very reliable informant), I sometimes I have my doubts and consequently thought it too risky to include the results from the survey conducted with her. Nevertheless, I believe the names of her alleged partners were not picked from thin air, but as far as quantity and frequency of exchange are concerned I believe her answers have little value (one fish is not included in the list because she gave it to us).

Labuanda gave fish to	How many	How often	Labuanda received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Sapingen	3	1x				<i>kanget</i>	Kraimbit
Kungun	3	1x				<i>kandsbe</i>	Kosembit
Ueman	50	6x		10	4x	<i>yau</i>	Muintshembit
Labu	29	5x		8	3x	<i>ababu</i>	Kosembit
Kwapmei	28	5x		3	2x	<i>ababu</i>	Kosembit
Karabindsha	20	2x		19	6x	<i>ababu</i>	Kosembit
Kabun	10	1x				<i>nyamei</i>	Muintshembit
Dangunbragui				1	1x	<i>nyan</i>	Muintshembit
Maapma				3	1x	<i>nyamei</i>	Kosembit
Mingu				4	1x	<i>nyamun</i>	Kosembit

*Comments*

Labuanda has a markedly active exchange relationship (as regards frequency and amount of fish) with her husband's mother (*yau*) as well as with the three wives of her husband's brother who live in the same house with her (Kwapmei, Karabindsha, Labu). She refers to the latter as *ababu*, a kin term normally not used for HBW (husband's brother's wife). This indicates that Labuandu does not relate to the three women through her husband. She gave fish to her *kandsbe* and *kanget* without receiving any in immediate return, while herself receiving fish from her *nyan*, *nyamei*, and *nyamun* (ten fish are not listed in the table because she gave them to us).

Karabindsha gave fish to	How many	How often	Labuanda received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Labuanda	18	5x		10	1x	<i>na</i>	Kosembit
Kwapmei	52	11x		6	1x	<i>nyamun</i>	Kosembit
Yambombe	16	1x				<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
Labu	36	8x		5	1x	<i>suambu</i>	Kosembit
Kundia	2	1x				<i>na</i>	Kraimbit
Klimbo	7	2x				<i>na</i>	Kosembit
Sapingen	1	1x				<i>kanget</i>	Kraimbit
Mimbianda	2	1x				<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
Woliragwa	1	1x				<i>nyamun</i>	Kraimbit
Dangunbragui				6	x	<i>yau</i>	Muintshembit

### Comments

On a regular and reciprocal basis, Karabindsha exchanged fish with her two co-wives, with a clear preference for the principal wife, and with Labuanda. All four women live in the same house. During the survey period there was no reciprocal exchange with Kundia, Klimbo, Sapingen, Mimbianda, Woliragwa, and Dangunbragui.

Angu gave fish to	How many	How often	Angu received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Wangen	10	1x		48	4x	<i>dshei</i>	Kosembit
Slagui	20	2x				<i>nyamun</i>	Kosembit
Amblangu	6	1x		1	1x	<i>nyamun</i>	Kraimbit
Kukumbe				3	1x	<i>kandsbe</i>	Muintshembit

### Comments

Angu shares house with the wife of her husband's younger brother. The name by which she referred to this woman, who had only recently moved to Kararau from the "bush village" of Gaikorobi, was that of her husband's younger brother; when asked about the kin term she used, she explicitly stated HyBW (husband's younger brother's wife).

Senguimanagui gave fish to	How many	How often	Senguimanagui received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Langda	30	7x				<i>kandshe</i>	Kosembit (temporarily)
Ngu	11	3x		39	8x	<i>yau</i>	Kosembit
Samban	9	2x		71	7x	<i>dshei</i>	Kosembit
Ngau	1	1x				<i>yau</i>	Kraimbit
Brmbo	41	7x				<i>dshei</i>	Kosembit
Amblangu				2	1x	<i>kasragwa</i>	Kraimbit

### Comments

Langda had gone to live in the house of her brother, Sengimanagui's husband, when expecting her first child. After giving birth she remained there for a further four months. During this time she never went fishing. Ngu, Koliuan's father's second or third wife, was also living in the house with Senguimanagui and Langda. Brmbo is the wife of Koliuan's younger brother. Most of the time she lives in Wewak where her husband has a job, but during the survey period she was in the village and was also staying in the house. She too had a baby to look after. Samban and Sengimanagui have a very close relationship (a fact that I was able to observe throughout my stay in the village); their reciprocal exchange relationship exists throughout the year.

Tipmange gave fish to	How many	How often	Tipmange received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Masai	5	1x		4	1x	<i>nyamun</i>	Kraimbit
Denge	2	1x				<i>yau</i>	Kosembit
Maabma	4	1x		3	1x	<i>yau</i>	Kosembit
Kengunda	4	2x				<i>nyamei</i>	Kraimbit
Samban				4	1x	<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
Uangu				3	1x	<i>suambu</i>	Kraimbit
Sagnaragwa				2	1x	<i>nyamei</i>	Kraimbit
Lamboin				4	1x	<i>kandshe</i>	Kraimbit
Sapingen				18	3	<i>suambu</i>	Kraimbit
Kabus				6	2x	<i>mbare</i>	Kraimbit
Meien				3	1x	<i>kandshe</i>	Kraimbit



### Comments

During the survey period Tipmange maintained a reciprocal exchange relationship only with her sister and a (classificatory) mother-in-law. When her husband fell ill, she was dependent on support. Samban, Uangu, Sagnaragwa, Lamboin, Sapingen, Kabus and Meien are all from what is referred to as “hap bilong meri”.<sup>28</sup> Sapingen is a sister of Tipmange. Towards the end of the survey period Tipmange moved to the house of her mother (in actual fact she was the sister of her deceased mother) where also Kabus lived.

Kengunda gave fish to	How many	How often	Kengunda received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
			Dine	3	1x	<i>kandsbe</i>	Kraimbit (temporally)
			Langda	3	1x	<i>kandsbe</i>	Kosembit
Kengunda didn't pass any fish on			Amblangu	1	1x	<i>yau</i>	Kraimbit
			Tipmange	4	2x	<i>nyamei</i>	Kraimbit
			Slabui	7	1x	<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
			Soni	3	1x	<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit

### Comments

Kengunda, with her baby of a few months, lived with Tipmange in the same house (Kengunda's deceased husband was a brother of Tipmange's husband). Slabui and Soni – two men – are their fathers-in-law. They are the only two men to feature in the exchange system, although their wives also went out fishing. Kengunda was utterly dependent on others for support, which she actually did receive although she was from Mindimbit and belonged to a clan only weakly represented in Kararau and, what is more, had been living in Kararau for just on a year.

Komeagui gave fish to	How many	How often	Komeagui received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Langda	5	2x				<i>kanget</i>	Kosembit (temporally)
Bombian				5	1x	<i>kandsbe</i>	Kosembit

<sup>28</sup> *Hap bilong meri* – Tok Pisin expression meaning a woman's kinfolk. It may refer to a wife's father's or mother's patrilineage (or both). More generally it refers to women from different clans who have married men from the same clan.

Kai				6	2x	<i>nyan</i>	Kosembit
Labu				4	1x	<i>nyamun</i>	Kosembit
Amblangu				30	2x	<i>dshē</i>	Kraimbit

### Comments

According to own account, Komeagui only gave fish to her daughter-in-law. From her daughter she received a total of 6 fish. Komeagui did not mention the 30 fish she had received from Amblangu because, nominally, they were passed on to one of Komeagui's teenage children. Thus Komeagui probably classed this transfer as insignificant and not relevant. Still, the catch benefitted all members of Komeagui's household. Amblangu and Komeagui (and their husbands, two brothers, respectively) are from the village section of Kosembit but they had moved to Kraimbit due to recurrent sickness. Their close relations with Kosembit are reflected in the survey.<sup>29</sup>

Amblangu gave fish to	How many	How often	Amblangu received fish from	How many	How often	Term of reference	Village section
Kungun	4	2x		3	1x	<i>suambu</i>	Kosembit
Kukumbe	1	1x		12	3x	<i>nyambun</i>	Muintshembit
Komeagui	30	2x				<i>dshase</i>	Kraimbit
Mingu	3	1x				<i>kandshe</i>	Kosembit
Dshambe				3	2x	<i>kandshe</i>	<sup>29</sup>
Senguimaganai				2	1x	<i>ababu</i>	Kosembit
Angu	1	1x		15	2x	<i>suambu</i>	Kosembit
Pampanda				4	1x	<i>kanget</i>	Kraimbit

### Comments

According to own account, Amblangu maintained reciprocal exchange relationships with Kungun, Angu, and Kukumbe, all of whom she described as "elder" and "younger" sisters, respectively. She claims to have received 15 fish from Angu while the latter stated that she only passed on 6 fish. In the case of Amblangu, too, her close relationship with the village section of Kosembit, to which she belongs, becomes evident.

<sup>29</sup> Dshambe actually belongs to Kosembit. But she now resides outside of the village with her husband and children after falling ill in Kosembit.

### Conclusions

The qualitative analysis met with a number of obstacles. Information as to how many fish a woman gave to others needs to be interpreted with caution as the cases of Angu and Amblangu and of Tambaragui and Kabun go to show.

Everyday exchange between women is not comparable with the ritual exchange between groups of men as witnessed in a *shambla*.<sup>30</sup> When a woman wishes to give fish to a fellow woman, she will go to this person's house and give her the fish wrapped in a water lily leaf. Often the donor remains standing on the ladder to the house and hands the parcel through the door, exchanging but a few words. The giver might comment on the many *makau* she had speared in the shallows along the bank, or that she had discovered a large snake (a favoured delicacy) hiding in a tree at the edge of the village and that she was going to tell the men about it. – But I never felt that the women paid much attention to these “fish visits”. Occasionally the women would sit down and have a chat or enjoy some betel nut, but there was never anything ceremonial about these encounters. They were very casual affairs you would not have really taken note of unless you were specifically paying attention to them.

We may deduce from the flaws mentioned above that women place little value on strictly upholding the principle of *bekim bek* (returning the quantity received), that is, strict reciprocity. They seem to keep more to the idea of exchanging goods, in this case fish, with specific women whom Ego judges to be of special “value” (hereby no clear distinction is made between predefined kin relations and personal preferences, i.e. “friendship”). Giving and receiving fish are simply acts of strengthening social bonds in which quantity seems to be less important than frequency. Priority lies clearly on the question of “with whom” and less on “how much”.

A look at the women's place of residence shows that especially women who live in the same village section maintain exchange relationships with one another.<sup>31</sup> Given a few exceptions, locality seems to be more important in this respect than clan affiliation (either their own or their husband's). Notwithstanding, I believe one of the

<sup>30</sup> See Bateson (1932: 270) *tjambela*. On the occasion of a men's *shambla* – during which one ceremonial moiety offers its counterpart a rich meal – the men note down exactly how many chicken, how much tee (including cups), how many bags of rice, branches of betel nut, tins of meat, and packets of cigarettes, etc. they received from the opposite moiety, with each man personally taking stock of what he received. When the next *shambla* comes up he is obliged to return the same items and exactly the same amounts. If a man, for example, received a cup of tea (including the cup itself) and two packets of cigarettes, he has to return the same amount at the next festive meal. Among men the notion of *bekim bek* (Tok Pisin for “give back”) is very pronounced, in comparison to the women. During my stay, the women, too, organized a *shambla* but it had more the touch of an enjoyable meal among women. I saw nobody jotting down what she had given and received. Moreover, nearly all the women contributed to the meal in one way or another and there was no division into groups comparable to the men's ceremonial moieties. The women's *shambla* was not a formal, ceremonial event but more like a pleasant, informal get-together.

<sup>31</sup> As mentioned before, Komeagui and Amblangu are two exceptions in this respect. It appears that the assigned place of residence is more important than the temporal place of living.

most significant findings of the survey is that women create and rely on their own, ego-focused relationship networks. Superordinate principles such as clan affiliation or locality may be important criteria, but the momentum of personal choice, the ability to choose one's significant relationships from a pre-given, albeit wide range of potential relationships seems to override.

Within the range of exchange partners, one notices varying levels of intensity and frequency, respectively, relatively speaking, of course. It appears that women maintain more intensive exchange relationships with some than with other women. Women sharing the same house (co-wives, mother-in-law – daughter-in-law, sisters-in-law) exchange more frequently with one another than with women living elsewhere, although shared residence does not seem to be a prerequisite of close relationships: for instance, Labuanda maintained close exchange relationships with her mother-in-law although, at the time of the survey, the latter was married to a man who was not Labuanda's husband's father and was therefore living in a different section of the village (that of her present husband). However, extracting general rules from these observations would be pushing it and not do the actual exchange relationships justice. Thus, in conclusion, one could state the following:

1. A woman maintains relationships with a circle of other women, the number of exchange partners being relative to her own fishing activity.
2. Predominantly, a woman maintains relationships with women who live in the same village section. Women living in the same house stand in an exchange relationship without fail.
3. With some women exchange relationships are very intensive over comparatively short periods of time. In exceptional circumstances (birth, sickness, death) these close relationships can be of utmost significance, serving as a kind of emergency supply system in times of need.
4. With some women exchange occurs only now and then.
5. Exchange can be "delayed", that is, the giving of fish is not dependent on an immediate return.
6. On the basis of the collected data, grouping exchange partners according to cognatic or affinal kinship criteria makes little sense. Likewise, generally valid and fixed rules of exchange are not inferable. It appears that personal preference enjoys considerable leeway in these matters.
7. Judging from points 1 – 6 one can safely say that the channels of exchange are largely informal and non-ceremonial.

### Selling fish in Wewak

Unless intended for immediate consumption, the fish caught are transferred to smoking racks and placed over the fireplace where they can stay for several days. A new avenue that has opened up to the people of Kararau is the sale of fish in the coastal town of Wewak. Every few months a group of men accompanied by their

teenage daughters or, once in a while, by one or two wives, leave for Wewak. The trip to Pagui is by village canoes (using outboard motors) and costs 2 dollars per person. From there they transfer to a truck which takes them to Wewak. A few years back the men and women of Kararau had helped one of the village's most enterprising men to buy a truck, to the effect that all the people of Kararau now can travel to Wewak free of charge. Traditionally (I shall return to the traditional barter markets below), market trading was in the hands of women. But since selling fish today involves money, the men have taken over the business.<sup>32</sup> Although some of the men take along their teenage daughters to do the actual transacting, the men always look after the financial side of the business.

In the days prior to the trip to Wewak, fishing is intensified markedly, and the smoking racks in the houses are bursting with fish. The women fabricate special baskets from coconut leaves for the transport to Wewak.

The stay in Wewak usually lasts up to five days during which the men and women live in a hut that belongs to the people of Kararau. They take with them sago from the village but all other foodstuffs (such as rice) have to be purchased from one of the stores in town, which means the stay in town always comes with expenses (not to mention the other purchases made).

The proceeds from such a fish sale are as follows (a fish is sold for 10 Australian cents):

Pampandaun sold fish worth.....	5 AUD
Wosange .....	4.40 AUD
Wangen .....	5 AUD
Kisaman .....	2 AUD
(and tobacco worth.....)	7 AUD)
Sangumbange sold fish worth .....	2 AUD
Daughter of Karabindsha.....	4 AUD
Kolindshimbu and Komeagui .....	19 AUD

However, for the most part they sold living turtles, between 30 and 50 c. apiece, (according to size) and tobacco.

In a Patrol Report of 1969 the proceeds men and women of Kararau make off selling fish on the market in Wewak run up to 4,000 dollars a year. Given that the canoe trip, there and back, costs 4 AUD per person and that the men and women have to buy additional food during their stay in Wewak, the "business" the people are so proud of can hardly be described as profitable. But such calculations are never made. For the people, business means selling something for money irrespective of the financial costs (not to mention the time input). Great hopes are placed in the planned road leading from Wewak through the Maprik area to Timbun, which is only 30 minutes away from Kararau by motor canoe, thus cutting transport costs. In Wewak there would actually be great demand for fish from the Sepik since the sea catch is not suffi-

<sup>32</sup> In Aibom it is only the women who travel to the market in Wewak (according to Gisela Schuster).

cient to cover the demand. However, the prerequisite of a profitable business would be to get fresh fish from the Sepik to the market in Wewak within hours.

### 3.3 Overview of the most important trade relations with other villages

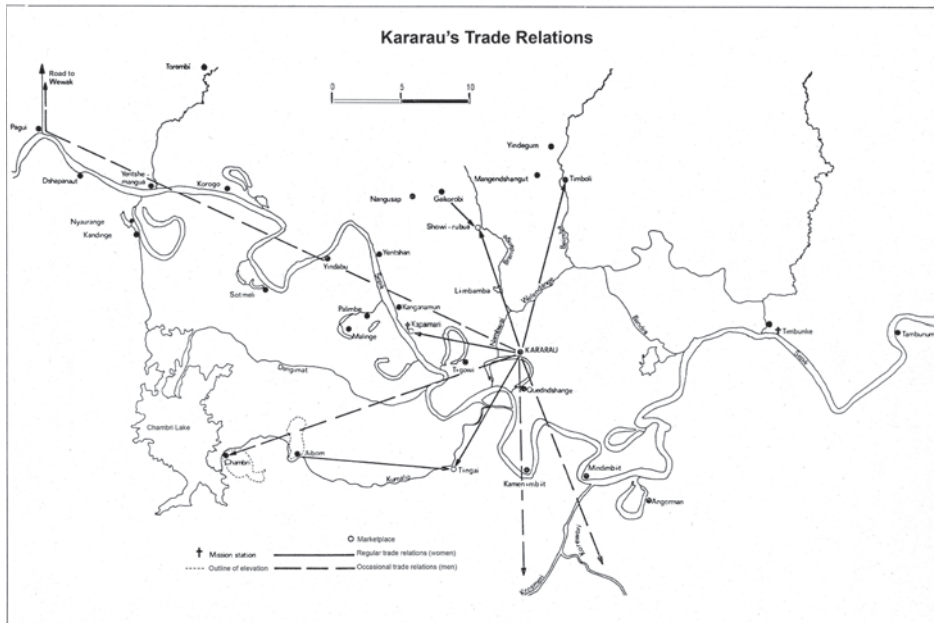


Fig. 29: Map of Kararau's trade relations.

For the Iatmul, barter markets play an important role. The people of Kararau are only self-sufficient as far as fish are concerned, but not in terms of sago. The combination of fish and sago, however, is the people's staple. Since Kararau has not enough land to grow a sufficient amount of sago palms to supply the people over an extended period of time, the people are forced to trade in sago. Apart from Kararau's most important exchange partner Gaikorobi (see below), the village maintains trade relations, albeit quite loose, with a number of other villages. During the dry season, they organize the occasional barter market with the two bush villages of Timboli and Yindegum where again the women – as in the case of Gaikorobi – above all trade fish for sago. Now and again groups of men from bush villages south of the Sepik visit Kararau, bringing with them sago from the Kapriman area which they sell for money.

Furthermore, the Kararau territory has no deposits of edible soil.<sup>33</sup> These minerals, too, are traded in from Timboli and Yindegum, as are the white and yellow earth pigments (*nkamuin-kipma* and *saun-kipma*) which the men use for painting masks. Red earth comes from the Chambri and Kapriman regions and is purchased by men. From time to time, Kararau men sell watermelons in the Korewori area in exchange for edible bark, which is used as surrogate betel pepper but also for ritual healing purposes.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, Kararau purchases pottery from the village of Aibom (see below). In earlier days, mollusc and snail shells as well as carapaces of sea turtles were traded in from the northern coast via the Maprik area and also up the Sepik river to middle Sepik villages where they were used for making shell ornaments.

Trading fish for sago and edible soil as well as purchasing pottery was in the hands of women, while obtaining shells and red earth lay in the responsibility of men.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.4 Sago and the sago market with Gaikorobi

The barter market where sago is traded in for fish is by far the most important market (see Bateson 1958: 143). It is held irregularly, but at least once a week, occasionally twice. Gaikorobi is Kararau's traditional sago supplier. The people of Kararau would never allow any other village to use their marketplace on a regular basis (see Bateson 1932: 282/283). The barter, fish for sago, is an exclusive domain of women.

The journey to the market place is long. Travelling by canoe it takes the women three and a half to four hours. It is located in a sago forest, approximately an hour away from Gaikorobi. During the dry season, when the *barets* are almost dry, the women are forced to travel on foot along bad, often almost inexistent paths which not only takes more time but is also extremely strenuous, not least because the women have to carry the sago home on their backs.

When the *barets* carry enough water, the women travel to market by canoe. Normally they take the large canoes, which offer space for two women plus the load of sago they plan to bring back. If loading the diligently smoked fish on to the canoes is not interrupted by sudden rainfall, the women set off from Kararau shortly after daybreak. The group is usually quite small. Women with babies never travel themselves but give their fish or tobacco to another woman to look after. The market goers are predominantly older women. Although the journey is quite strenuous, they

<sup>33</sup> This is a clay-like substance which is smoked over the fire before consumption.

<sup>34</sup> In the case of sickness the summoned healer repetitively utters an endless stream of spells over the body of the sick person. Now and again he takes a bite from the piece of bark, chews on it and spews it over the patient's body.

<sup>35</sup> Precise data concerning the import of mollusc shells are no longer available. The trade with red earth has receded and today is quite infrequent. Pigments are now mostly purchased from a store.

enjoy going on these trips. During the first one and a half hours, travelling along the wide Nambwai *baret* and then across the large lake Limbambe next to one another, they have time to chat and enjoy a good laugh.

On such a journey, one of the women told of her adventures whilst catching turtles. Whilst recounting her story, Maabma, a mature, very lively woman underscored her narrative with gestures but without ever ceasing to paddle:

“Recently I was out in the flooded *kunai* hunting for turtles. I spent hours in my canoe sitting in the same spot next to a tree, waiting for a turtle to take the bait. Then I felt a gentle jolt to my back ... once, twice. I first thought it came from a branch of the tree I was sitting next to. In the end I turned around and saw that a giant snake [Tok Pisin: *moron*] was lying with half of its body in the back of my canoe, and realized what had been nudging me. I pushed it out of the canoe with my paddle and then made off as quickly as I could.”

Maabma laughed out loud, soon joined by the other women, before she went on to recount the next episode.

„I called to a child of Tshui [a distant relative] telling him to bring me the lighter. When the boy, who’s about four years old, climbed down the ladder he slipped and fell into the water. Tshui, the father, immediately dived after him and pulled the howling boy from the water.”



*Fig. 30: Women on a canoe trip to the sago market with Gaikorobi stopping for a rest at Limbambe Lake (1973).*

In this manner the women exchange banter and stories on the first stretch of the journey. Shortly before reaching the far side of the large, lily-covered lake, the women take a short break. Some try to spear a last fish; others place a tobacco leaf over the ambers in their fire bowl and prepare a cigar; betel nuts are passed around while a woman might grate a piece of coconut before fetching a piece of sago from her net bag and adding the coconut flakes to the rolled-up pancake before she eats it. Occasionally

the women pick small snails from the undersides of the lily leaves, to be cooked up later at home.

After the rest comes the strenuous part of the journey. The Brandandange (often shortened to Brandange), the *baret* that leads from Limbambe to the market





Fig. 31: Sago market with Gaikorobi. Women from Kararau remain near their canoes while the Gaikorobi women offer them sago for barter (1973).

place in the forest, is a narrow, fast-flowing stream. Tree trunks often block the winding course, with rotting palm fronds additionally clogging the passage. It requires considerable strength and skill to avoid capsizing the canoes and reaching one's destination. This is especially difficult when, returning from the market, the canoes are filled to the brim with up to a hundred kilos of sago and the gunwales are only two or three centimetres above water level.

The market place, *showi tuba* (often also referred to as *showi ruba* or *nau ruba*) is a small area jutting out into Brandandange in the middle of the forest.<sup>36</sup>

The women of Gaikorobi have covered the forest floor with palm fronds, the ground still being soggy from the rain. They are waiting for us, sitting on the



Fig. 32 and 33: Women from Gaikorobi besiege the canoes from Kararau in the hope of getting some fish (1973).

<sup>36</sup> The following descriptions are based on two visits to the market, on 11 January 1973 and 15 March 1973.

ground with betel nut branches or a few cucumbers in front of them. Balls of sago wrapped in leaves are stored in large net bags. There are no great words of greeting or smiles when the two groups of women meet; their demeanour is businesslike, almost indifferent, one could say. The Kararau women first unpack a few bundles of tobacco, but only very few fish. The Gaikorobi women remain seated. The Kararaus select the odd cucumber or a betel nut branch, laying down a few tobacco leaves or fish in place. The trading partners hardly exchange a word. Only twice did I see a Kararau woman looking for a specific Gaikorobi woman with whom she then conducted business. This type of free exchange, that is, trade not bound to a specific partner, is the predominant mode of transaction – as the women involved also confirmed. After this brief “prelude” – one fish is worth two to three small cucumbers – the actual bartering begins.

Suddenly, as if by command, the Gaikorobi women stand up, grip their net bags and beset the Kararau women who have taken up position in front of their canoes. The women of Gaikorobi hold out their parcels of sago, beckoning their opposites with the words “*na, na, na!*” The Kararaus are left to choose which parcels they wish to accept, and which to reject. Now and again, a woman might return a parcel after weighing it in her hand and judging it to be too light, and choose another one. For the Gaikorobi women the trading is too slow. They fear they may be left with some of their sago parcels. There is a lot of shouting and tongue clicking. Anything between five to ten Gaikorobi women besiege a single Kararau woman. The latter are gradually pushed back towards their canoes, surrounded by Gaikorobi women clamouring for smoked fish or maybe even a live turtle. “I haven’t received any fish yet”, one hears from many mouths, followed by the ominous *na, na* – the call to pick. But no Gaikorobi woman would ever dare to help herself to fish from one of the canoes. The canoes begin to wobble precariously. The women are now standing up to their knees in water. Occasional shouts of indignation from the women of Kararau drown out the babble of voices, but to no avail. The siege does not end before the last fish and the last turtle have gone.



*Fig. 34: Not all parcels of sago wrapped in leaves have been exchanged for fish (1973).*

The sago supply often exceeds the supply of fish so that some of the Gaikorobi women are forced to carry their sago back home. However, the opposite is also known to have happened.

Occasionally the Kararau women incur debts when they purchase more sago than they have fish to pay for. – The rule of thumb is: one fish for a ball of sago weighing about one and a half pounds. The debt is then squared at the next market. As soon as the last fish has passed hands – approximately an hour after the two parties arrived – the commotion subsides. The Gaikorobi women pack their net bags, heave them on to their foreheads and backs, and set off for home. The parting, like the arrival, is a silent affair, without much ado.

The Kararau women, who clearly dominated the event, carefully load their canoes, spreading the cargo evenly, ready for the journey home.<sup>37</sup> Some of the women return home without stopping, others stop off at the lake for a break and maybe to do some fishing for their main meal later in the afternoon.<sup>38</sup>

On the way to the market I had asked the women for the names of salient points in the landscape. On my first outing, granted only after many futile requests, I received no answers. I was told the path was clandestine and of considerable significance and had been kept secret from the Australian patrol officers. It was only on my second trip that the women were prepared to talk, but told me that I would have to wait until the journey back, the reason being that if they disclosed the names on the outward run there would be no sago at the market or that it would mysteriously “vanish”. On the way back, the women gave me the names but at the time they remained empty terms. It was only when back in the village that I was told (by men) that the Brandandange was the path that led to the realm of the dead and that the names I had been given referred to guardians of the dead, to the door to the realm of the dead, etc. The people of Gaikorobi village, said to be not far from the place of origin of all human beings (see also Bateson 1932: 254), had a very special relationship with this *baret*.<sup>39</sup>

I shall return to the question of what the market and the path leading there mean to the Iatmul in spiritual terms later on.

<sup>37</sup> Gardi (1956: 100) writes about exchange on the other side of the Sepik (“Chambriman”): “One got the impression that the women bartering fish were in a stronger position than those who had brought sago” (translation N. S.)

<sup>38</sup> In the dry season, when the Brandandange is not navigable, the market is held on the lakeshore, about halfway between Gaikorobi and Kararau.

<sup>39</sup> On the occasion of the second mortuary ritual, the mourners place their ornaments (rattan necklaces, decorative cords for ears, hands and ankles) and their hair which they have let grow long during the mourning period on a small bamboo raft which they let drift down the Brandandange. According to a myth, this is a sign for the spirit of the deceased in the realm of the dead that the mourning period is over. – Information provided by Markus Schindlbeck.

### Organizing the sago supply

A market survey (who goes to the market with whom; how much sago does each person bring home) was conducted immediately after the fishing survey. I myself was not party to the market events assessed here. Taking stock of how much sago each woman purchased directly at the marketplace would have been very difficult, if not impossible. For this reason, I waited for the women to return to the village with the sago. I conducted the survey within an hour after return and with the help of a pair of scales. This I had to do because the *kubui nau*, as the freshly purchased sago is referred to, is immediately spread out on palm sheaths and left to dry over the fireplace (after which it is called *kip nau*).

The market events I surveyed took place on 6 January, 11 January, 21 January, and 25 January 1973. The next market was scheduled for 1 February. Twenty-four women travelled to the market on that day, but it appears there must have been confusion between the women of Gaikorobi and Kararau as to the exact date, since only a few women from Gaikorobi appeared at the *showi ruba*.<sup>40</sup> The Kararau women were rather cross about this, returning to the village with only a few sago parcels. They railed against the women of Gaikorobi, calling them bush women who were unable to think straight. The next day, 2 February, four women who had made the long journey the day before went back to the marketplace but only because their sago supply was depleted. Each of the four women had made an appointment with a specific Gaikorobi woman to make sure that the sago would be there when they arrived.

From 1 February onward, it was impossible to continue the survey as the village was under water due to flooding, making it impossible to weigh the sago within a reasonable period of time.

Because the fish survey had revealed that fish was not only used for nutritional purposes but also to foster social relations, I expected something similar in the case of sago. But I soon came to realize that, unlike fish, sago is not passed on to others. Instead, occasionally women took with them fish or some tobacco given to them by another woman and traded it for sago in her name. But I never came across a case in which a woman passed on sago she had "traded" with her own fish or tobacco.

Name	Date	Quantity	From whom	Remarks
1. Kabun	6.1.	13 kg		On 6 January only a few Gaikorobi women had appeared at the market so that Kabun could not trade in all her fish.
	11.1.	15 kg	Labuanda	

<sup>40</sup> In earlier days, the market days were fixed with the help of a knotted cord (1 knot = 1 day). This "cord" (*pai*) has not been in use for several years, instead the day is fixed by word of mouth.

2. Tambaragui	6.1.	30 kg		
	11.1.	5 kg	Kukumbe	Tambaragui washed the 30 kg of sago herself
	21.1.	9 kg	Amblangu	
3. Mingu	6.1.	52 kg		
	17.1.	12 kg		
	21.1.	39 kg		
	25.1.	18 kg		On this day Mingu's unmarried daughter travelled to the market.
4. Kwapmei	6.1.	19.5 kg		
	11.1.	35 kg	Labuanda	
5. Woliragwa	6.1.	27 kg		
	17.1.	3 kg	Mänditagwa	
6. Nagua	6.1.	16 kg		
7. Kandshui	6.1.	36 kg		
	17.1.	30 kg		
	25.1.	16 kg	Sragui	
8. Barab	6.1.	15 kg		
	11.1.	20 kg	Yambunde	
	21.1.	7 kg	Uemanoli	
	25.1.	12 kg		
9. Mänditagwa	6.1.	19 kg		
	11.1.	3 kg	Kukumbe	
	17.1.	10 kg		
10. Angu	6.1.	15 kg		
	11.1.	26 kg		
	17.1.	2 kg	Amblangu	
	21.1.	27 kg		
11. Kukumbe	6.1.	19 kg		
	11.1.	46 kg		
	21.1.	5 kg	Uemanoli	
	25.1.	28 kg		

12. Maabma	6.1.	20.5 kg		
	11.1.	51 kg		
13. Ngau	6.1.	20.5 kg		
14. Mimbian	6.1.	45 kg		
15. Uangu	6.1.	25 kg		
16. Labuanda	11.1.	24 kg		
17. Sapingen	6.1.	20 kg		
	11.1.	15 kg	Kabus	
	21.1.	17 kg	Kabus	
18. Kai	11.1.	50 kg		
	21.1.	18 kg	Komeagui	
19. Brmbo	11.1.	?		Brmbo is from Gaikorobi. She received an unspecified quantity from her family.
20. Sagnarag-wa	11.1.	26 kg		
	21.1.	32 kg		
21. Yambunde	11.1.	30 kg		
	25.1.	6 kg	Barab	
22. Sragui	17.1.	9 kg		
	25.1.	15 kg		
23. Kabus	11.1.	13 kg		
	21.1.	32 kg		
24. Komeagui	11.1.	18 kg	Kai	
	17.1.	21 kg		
	21.1.	20 kg		
25. Amblangu	6.1.	11 kg	Angu	
	17.1.	21 kg		
	21.1.	47 kg		
26. Uemanoli	6.1.	16.5 kg	Kukumbe	
	11.1.	15 kg	Kukumbe	
	21.1.	10.5 kg		
	25.1.	18 kg	Kukumbe	

During the survey period the following women did *not* visit the market:

Name	Date	Quantity	From whom	Remarks
27. Kungun	6.1.	12 kg	Nagua	
28. Dangun-bragui	6.1.	6 kg	Tambaragui	
29. Labu	11.1.	15 kg	Labuanda	
30. Karabindsha	11.1.	40 kg	Labuanda	
	21.1.	18 kg	Amblangu	
31. Wangen	11.1.	7 kg	Angu	Wangen had just recently married and was therefore not allowed to go to the market.
	21.1.	19 kg	Angu	
32. Sengimaganagui	6.1.	6 kg	Ngau	
	11.1.	21 kg	Brmbo	
33. Ngu	11.1.	27 kg	Brmbo	
34. Wambrendsha	6.1.	19 kg	Maabma	
	11.1.	15 kg	Maabma	
	21.1.	10 kg	Amblangu	
35. Nambuoin	11.1.	6 kg	Maabma	
36. Bombain	11.1.	15 kg	Kabus	
37. Kolimange	17.1.	6 kg	Mingu	
	21.1.	3 kg	Mingu	
38. Magi	17.1.	1.5 kg	Mänditagwa	
39. Langda	17.1.	3 kg	Komeagui	
	21.1.	5 kg	Komeagui	
40. Sabwandshan	17.1.	3 kg	Amblangu	Sabwandshan lives in Kwedndshange; therefore it was not possible to ascertain the full amount of sago supply
41. Dshambe	6.1.	9 kg	Mänditagwa	
	21.1.	30 kg	Amblangu	
42. Tipmange	11.1.	25 kg	Sagnaragwa	
	21.1.	10 kg	Kabus	

43. Meien	21.1.	15 kg	Kabus	
44. Betshiyim-bunagui	21.1.	15 kg	Uemanoli	
45. Denge	25.1.	9 kg	Sragui	
46. Namui	6.1.	21 kg	Mimbian	Namui washed approx. 20 kg of sago herself a week later.
47. Wolingen	6.1.	6 kg	Uangu	Wolingen (Philip) is a widower.

As the statistical data indicate, not always the same number of women went to the market. Of the forty-six women surveyed, twenty never went to the market.<sup>41</sup>

No woman visited all five markets held every four to six days.

Four to five market events were visited only by one woman, Mingu, although on one of the four occasions it was her daughter who went.

Three market events were visited by two women, Angu and Kukumbe.

Two market events were visited by eight women: Kandshui, Barab. Mänditagwa, Maabma, Kabus, Sragui, Komeagui and Amblangu.

One market event was visited by fifteen women: Kabun, Tambaragui, Kwapmei, Woliragwa, Nagua, Ngau, Mimbian, Uangu, Labuanda, Sapingen, Kai, Brmbo, Sagnaragwa, Yambunde and Uemanoli.



*Fig. 35 and 36: Sabwandshan (Ruth) bakes a sago cake at the fire place in her house (1972).*

<sup>41</sup> Wolingen (no. 47) is the only male on this list. He is a widower who raises his children in a rough-and-ready manner (according to Iatmul standards). – Three women were not included in the survey.



Fifty per cent of the women went to the market only once during the almost four weeks. This group comprises mainly young women with babies and older women over fifty-five. Of the eight women who went to the market twice, only Kandshui had a baby to look after. The other seven either had no children (Barab) or were over forty years of age which meant they had almost adult daughters old enough to look after any younger siblings.

Angu and Kukumbe (three visits to the market) and Mingu (four visits) were all over forty years of age.

The nineteen women who never went to the market during the survey period belong to different age groups. Nine women had babies, one woman was freshly married and was not allowed to leave the village owing to frequent sexual intercourse (for the purpose of getting pregnant).<sup>42</sup> One woman was forbidden to fish and go to the market due to her husband's sickness. Four women were too old and frail for the arduous journey. I have no information as to why the remaining four women did not visit the market.

### Quantitative aspects

The sago weighings indicate that the various women and household units, respectively, require different quantities of sago.<sup>43</sup> However, it would be erroneous to believe that one could determine the actual sago consumption from these figures: 1. It was not possible to ascertain how much sago each woman had in storage. 2. I do not know which of the women washed additional sago for herself during the period of inquiry.<sup>44</sup> 3. Since household members occasionally went to stay in another village for a few days, the sago consumption per head is a mere estimate. 4. During the survey period, several festive events were staged in the village. On these days the women rarely baked sago cakes, since festive meals today focus on rice and tinned fish.

However, in the light of the quantities of sago brought home from the market, we may assume that a woman like Mingu holds only a small supply of sago in storage and probably does not extract sago herself. – The following figures are estimates with regard to the effective consumption of sago.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See chapter 5, p. 165.

<sup>43</sup> By which I mean all family members who regularly receive food from the woman in question.

<sup>44</sup> This was all the more difficult to ascertain, as the sago is not produced in the village itself.

<sup>45</sup> Townsend (1969: 61–62) investigated the consumption rates for a hamlet among the Heve. For this purpose, she weighed all the sago brought to the village. From this she calculated the daily intake rates per person and day in grams, coming up with the figure of 667 grams per person and day.

*Consumption figures*

Consumption period from 6 January to 1 February 1973, totalling 25 days.

	Number of persons in same household (2 children = 1 adult)
Mingu: 121 kg Per-capita consumption per day: 968 g of sago	4 adults 2 kids
Uemanoli: 54.5 kg Per-capita consumption per day: 1090 g of sago	2 adults
Angu: 69 kg Per-capita consumption per day: 1104 g of sago	2 adults 2 kids
Kukumbe: 98 kg Per-capita consumption per day: 784 g of sago	4 adults 2 kids
Tipmange: 55 kg	1-2 adults 2 kids

Per-capita consumption per day (on the basis of 2.5 adults as Tipmange's husband was ill and ate only little sago): 880 g of sago.

I should add a few remarks to these estimates: a woman bakes sago once a day, two cakes for her husband, one for herself, and one small one for each child (the cakes are then laid aside in a sago basket). When two or three women share a house (with their respective husbands) it occasionally occurs that one woman bakes sago cakes for all the other women, using her own sago for the purpose.<sup>46</sup> The women

<sup>46</sup> Prior to baking, the sago-baking dish is pre-heated on the fire for approx. 10 – 15 minutes. The sago (in crumbly form) is added to a bowl and mixed with a few drops of water. Using a small vessel made from a coconut shell, the chunky sago flour is placed on the sago-baking dish, spread out, sprinkled with a little water and flattened with the aid of the coconut shell. Using a spatula, the woman detaches the flat cake from the dish, turning it as soon as one side is brown. When it is baked on both sides, the woman retrieves it, folds it lengthwise and draws it through a bowl of water, using her hand to wipe off the excessive water. In Kararau, they distinguish between four different ways of preparing sago cakes: 1. *ngus-nau*: sago cake which is dipped in a bowl of water after baking (according to the method described above). 2. *samak-nau*: sago cake not dipped in water; this type should be consumed immediately as it tends to turn hard very quickly; this type is almost exclusively consumed by children. 3. *kandshan-nau*: after baking and dipping in water, the sago cake is folded again and re-heated on the sago-baking dish. 4. *taban-nau*: when the cake is baked it is – while still on the sago-baking dish – sprinkled with water and re-baked. *Ngus-nau* is the favourite version.

loosely take turns, depending on who is doing which kind of work where (garden, fishing, market, etc.). The same pattern applies to the preparation of sago pudding.<sup>47</sup>

### Qualitative aspects

As mentioned above, women do not pass on sago to one another. Possibly, the reason for this is that sago is regarded as having greater value than fish since the latter are readily available and easy to procure – for example, at one of the nearby canoe jetties. Procuring sago requires distinctly more input, and the reliance on trading partners to deliver sago on a prescribed day also means being able to manage one's supplies sufficiently and calculate correctly. A woman who is not going to the market gives her fish and tobacco to another woman to trade in for sago.

Similar to the fishing survey, it was almost impossible to ascertain why and under what circumstances a woman takes over the task of trading in sago for another woman. Shared residence might be an answer but it does not explain everything, nor do kin relationships. It appears that every woman creates her own network of supporters on the basis of more or less idiosyncratic criteria, which she then nourishes and maintains. Not surprisingly we come across almost the same groups of women in the sago survey as we did in the fish inquiry, as the following examples indicate.

Name	Brought sago for	Received sago from	Accompanied in canoe	Term of reference	Village section
Labuanda	Labu Karabindsha Kwapmei Kabun			<i>ababu</i> <i>ababu</i> <i>ababu</i> <i>nyamei</i>	Kosembit Kosembit Kosembit Muintshembit
Tambaragui	Dangunbragui	Kukumbe Amblangu		<i>nyan</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i>	Muintshembit Muintshembit Kraimbit
Angu	Wangen Amblangu	Amblangu	Kukumbe	<i>dshei</i> <i>nyamun</i> <i>kandshe</i>	Kosembit Kraimbit Muintshembit

<sup>47</sup> There are three types of sago pudding (incl. a fourth, somewhat different in form). 1. *Dshangui*: coconut meat is grated and then cooked in coconut water. Meanwhile, the sago is mixed with cold water and then slowly added to the boiling coconut water. 2. *Nondshug*: Water is boiled. Meanwhile, sago is mixed with water in a separate bowl. The boiling water is then poured over the sago before adding grated coconut flakes. 3. *Nondshug*: In a variant of the standard *nondshug*, greens are cooked in the boiling water before adding the vegetable stock to the sago mass. Later the greens are added to the sago pudding.

A somewhat different form of sago pudding is called *waranau*: sago is first pre-baked on a sago-baking dish and then mixed with grated sago flakes before adding to it the coconut water. The pulp is then wrapped in banana leaves and baked on a sago-baking dish.

Komeagui	Kai Langda	Kai	Kabus Amblangu	<i>nyan</i> <i>kanget</i> <i>dshe</i> <i>dshe</i>	Kosembit Kraimbit Kraimbit Kraimbit
Tipmange		Sagnaragwa Kabus		<i>nyamei</i> <i>mbare</i>	Kraimbit Kraimbit
Amblangu	Angu Wombre Tambaragui Karabindsha Dhsambe Sabwandshan <sup>48</sup>	Angu	Komeagui Kabus	<i>suambu</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>dshei</i> <i>dshase</i> ?	Kosembit Kosembit Muintshembit Kosembit Kosembit Kraimbit Kraimbit

If one compares the group of people a woman gave sago to with the people she exchanged fish with, we get the following picture:

Name	Sago	Fish	Term of reference
Labuanda:	Labu Karabindsha Kwapmei Kabun	Labu Karabindsha Kwapmei Kabun Sapingen Kungun Ueman Dangunbragui Maabma Mingu	<i>ababu</i> <i>ababu</i> <i>ababu</i> <i>nyamei</i> <i>kanget</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>yau</i> <i>nyan</i> <i>nyamei</i> <i>nyamei</i>
Tambaragui:	Dangunbragui Kukumbe Amblangu	Dangunbragui Kukumbe Kabun Mimbian Namui Labu Labuanda	<i>nyan</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>nyamun</i> <i>nyan</i> <i>nyan</i> <i>suambu</i> <i>nyan</i>

<sup>48</sup> Sabwandshan lives in Kwedndshange.

Angu:	Wangen Amblangu	Wangen Amblangu Slagui	<i>dshei</i> <i>nyamun</i> <i>nyamun</i>
Komeagui:	Kai Langda Amblangu Kabus	Kai Langda Amblangu  Labu Bombian	<i>nyan</i> <i>kanget</i> <i>dshei</i> <i>dshei</i> <i>nyamun</i> <i>kandshe</i>
Tipmange:	Sagnaragwa Kabus	Sagnaragwa Kabus Masai Denge Maabma Samban Uangu Lamboin Meien Kengunda Sapingen	<i>nyamei</i> <i>mbare</i> <i>nyamun</i> <i>yau</i> <i>yau</i> <i>nyan</i> <i>suambu</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>nyamei</i> <i>suambu</i>
Amblangu:	Angu Komeagui Dshambe Karabindsha Sabwandshan Tambaragui Wombre Kabus	Angu Komeagui Dshambe     Mingunda Kukumbe Senguimanagui Kungun	<i>suambu</i> <i>dshase</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>dshei</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>?</i> <i>kandshe</i> <i>nyamun</i> <i>ababu</i> <i>suambu</i>

### Comments

In the exchange deal Labuanda confined herself to women she shared house with (Labu, Karabindsha, Kwapmei) and to Kabun whom she calls “mother” (*nyamei*). In Tambaragui’s case the two names Dangunbragui (*nyan*) and Kukumbe (*kandshe*) are

listed in both surveys. All three live in the immediate vicinity of Tambaragui. New in the sago survey is the name of Amblangu (*kandshe*).

In both cases, Angu provided the wife of Wangen (*dshei*), who lives in the same house, as well as Amblangu (*nyamun*) and Kukumbe (*kandshe*) with sago and fish respectively. As mentioned above, Amblangu lives in a different part of the village (Kraimbit, not Kosembit).

In both cases, Komeagui (as far as residence is concerned she is in the same position as Amblangu) maintains an exchange relationship with Kai (*nyan*), Langda (*kandshe*) and Amblangu (*dshei*). Her daughter Kai lives in a different section of the village. New on the list is Kabus.

As she did not travel to the market, Tipmange was supplied with sago by Sagnaragwa (*nyamei*) and Kabus (*mbare*). With regard to the sago survey we find next to the names of Angu (*suambu*), Komeagui (*dshase*), and Dshambe (*kandshe*) those of Karabindsha (*kandshe*), Sabwandshan (*dshei*), and Wombre (*kandshe*).

We may summarize as follows: in principle, women consider the same individuals when dealing in sago as when distributing fish, albeit, the circle of women is smaller. It is restricted to closest kin, provided they live in the same or adjacent houses. First and foremost stand the women who live in the same house; here we always have cooperation. Kinship proximity is an additional key factor, with locality being of subsidiary significance as the cases of Labuanda and Kabun (mother-daughter), and Angu and Amblangu (sisters) indicate. But here, too, we come across exceptions: as the fish survey showed, Labuanda maintains a close exchange relationship with her mother-in-law Uemanoli, but this does not apply to sago, according to the respective inquiry. This is probably due to the circumstance that neither Labuanda nor Uemanoli have small babies to look after which means they are free to travel to the market whenever they need to replenish their stock.

In terms of organization, the provision of sago bears many features of a vital supply system while the distribution of fish appears to be subject to personal preferences with a wide range of options. Because the network of relationships is much smaller with regard to sago compared to fish, a woman who does not have the opportunity to travel to the market, for whatever reason, is highly dependent on other women to procure sago for her.

### **3.5 Significance of the market with Gaikorobi for Kararau's subsistence**

The market relationship between Kararau and Gaikorobi is of pivotal significance. Even in the past, during the headhunting days, the women of Kararau travelled to barter with the women of this inland village. Raids by Kararau on Gaikorobi apparently never occurred, although incidents of strife at the market were not un-

common.<sup>49</sup> I remember one specific incidence during our stay. During the rainy season flooding had brought many eels out into the open, flowing waters, allowing the women of Kamenimbit – a village on the other side of the river – to spear eels in abundance for a period of several weeks. In accordance with the women of Kararau, and by way of exception, the Kamenimbit women travelled to the Gaikorobi market to procure sago. Otherwise, Kamenimbit is in a fixed market relationship with the *numan ngi* as the people of the Kapriman area south of the Sepik are referred to.<sup>50</sup> So, on this day, 1 March 1973, the women of Kararau took their smoked *makau* to the market, while the Kamenimbit women arrived with their smoked eel. In the following the Gaikorobi women pounced on the eels, shunning the fish the Kararau women were offering, to the effect that the latter brought back home almost their entire stock of smoked fish. But they did not leave the market place without airing their frustration, shouting to the women of Gaikorobi: “So, you no longer want our *makau*? That’s okay with us, it means that we no longer have to make the journey here.”<sup>51</sup> Their discontent was, of course, also directed at the women of Kamenimbit. Regardless of the controversy, a week later the women of Gaikorobi and Kararau met again at the market, without upsets.

The women of Gaikorobi, on their part, dislike the fact that the Kararau women occasionally prefer to sell their fish at the market in Wewak instead of Gaikorobi. In the run-up to the journey to the coast, the Kararau women usually bring less fish to the local market. In the past this has given the Gaikorobi women reason to complain on several occasions, blaming the women of Kararau of being hungry for money instead of cherishing Gaikorobi’s sago and the good relationship between the two villages.

### Breach of the market peace

Sometime in the 1940s, a conflict ensued at the market with serious repercussions:

In a narrow stream a man from Gaikorobi once wanted to build a weir to which he planned to attach fish traps.<sup>52</sup> In the process he felled a betel palm which happened to belong to a man from Kararau.<sup>53</sup> The owner of the palm tree went to the next market meeting to confront the man from Gaikorobi who was also present. The encounter soon led to a physical fight upon which the people of both Kararau and Gaikorobi left the market place in a

<sup>49</sup> The central and eastern Iatmul used to be the traditional enemies of Kararau. Whether Kararau was ever allied with any other village (apart from Kamenimbit, which is an offshoot of Kararau) remains an open question.

<sup>50</sup> Bateson 1932: 253 refers to the *namunki* which he translates as “foreigners”.

<sup>51</sup> We heard this from various interlocutors on different occasions.

<sup>52</sup> The description is based on information provided by a man of Kararau. We have no counter-statement from the people of Gaikorobi (according to M. Schindlbeck).

<sup>53</sup> Contradicting land claims between villages in the Middle Sepik are the source of many a conflict. The boundaries between village territories are often disputed.

quarrel. For about three months there were no more markets, forcing the Kararau villagers to wash their own sago. – One day a delegation of men from Gaikorobi arrived in Kararau. They came unwashed and dirty as a sign of grief. They rejected the stools the Kararau men offered them, preferring to sit on the ground. They had with them large amounts of sago and betel nut. In the men's house a *paitim tanget* was held.<sup>54</sup> The men of Kararau and Gaikorobi recited the myths telling of the origin of the market and the relations between the two villages. Then they made a *pai* (knotted cord) to fix a date for the next meeting at the market place. The Gaikorobi men then distributed the sago they had brought along for the three men's house groups, upon which the Kararau men reciprocated by giving a large basket of smoked fish, also for each of Gaikorobi's men's house groups to the delegation. In addition, the delegation received another basket for their journey of "repentance". On the scheduled day the men and women of Kararau travelled to the market place. The men hung up two net bags full of betel nuts. One of the net bags represented Kararau and was called Singanoli, the other Gaikorobi, by the name of Branganoli. The two net bags were classed as female and stood for (if I understood my interlocutors correctly) the two female mythical beings who rank as village founders. At the same time, I was told that these two women watch over the Yapmal clan (that is, they are the mythological ancestors of the Yapmal clan). The Kararau delegation did not step on to the market ground but remained in their canoes. The Gaikorobi men recited the *shatkundi* (list of mythological names). They approached the men of Kararau, standing up to their knees in the stream, before handing over a branch of betel nuts and betel pepper for each Kararau men's house group. Only then did the visitors step from their canoes on to the market place. No actual bartering took place. Instead, the men and women of Gaikorobi gave their counterparts sago for which they received smoked fish in return, the focus being on the villages as such and not on single individuals. Then each village took one of the net bags filled with betel nuts. On the market ground an enclosure had been erected in which the men of Gaikorobi and Kararau jointly played the long bamboo flutes. In this manner the conflict was resolved and market trading resumed.

If the conflict had continued, my interlocutors told me, the members of the Semai clan would have died. The clan acts as the guardian of the Brandandange and the market place. It was this clan that had given the women permission to take us to the market, in the first place. After returning to the village after the first trip, our *mbare* had prostrated on the ground and we had to step over their bodies. This *naven* (Iatmul term for certain rites of passage, see Bateson 1958) is performed when a young girl visits the market for the first time.

<sup>54</sup> Reference to disputes in the men's house in which orators emphasize topics by hitting the ceremonial stool with green leaves or twigs.



### The sago market in mythological perspective

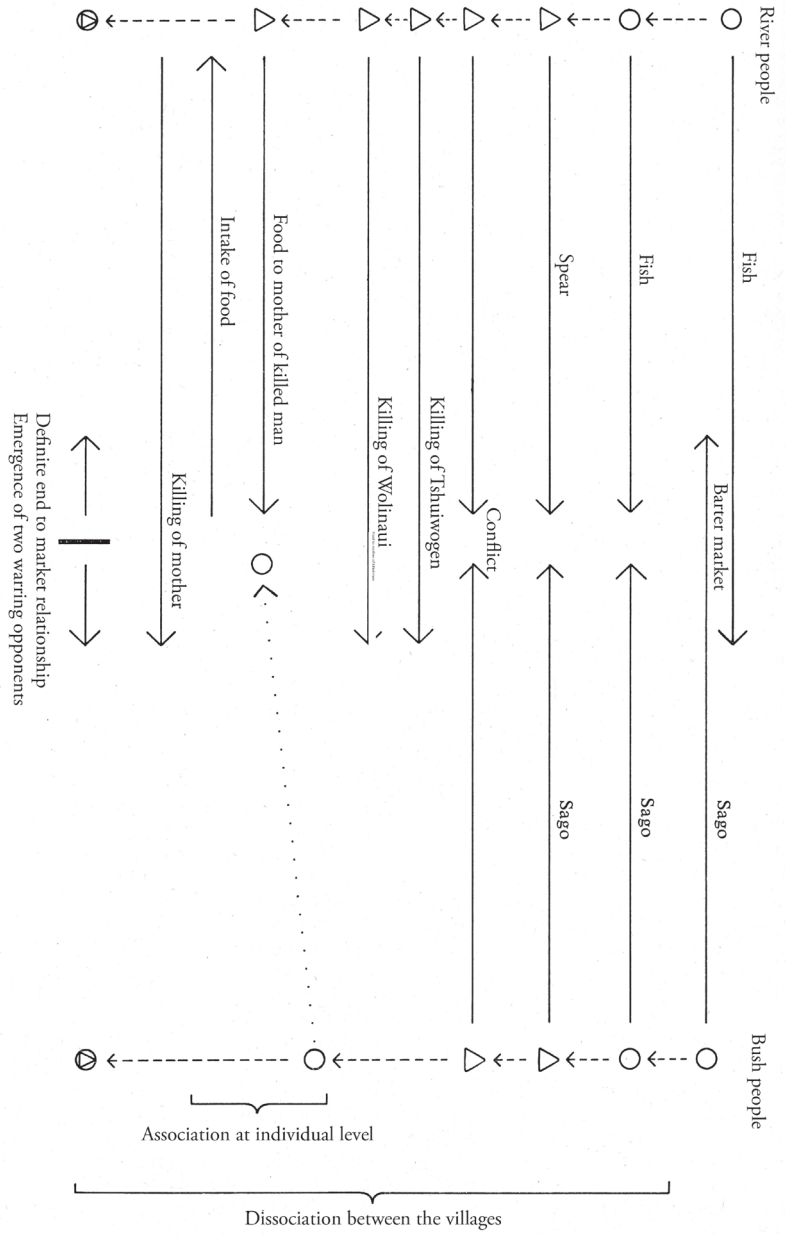
As the description of the conflict between Gaikorobi and Kararau and its resolution indicate, both villages, the sago village as well as the fish village, place great value on good relationships. In economic terms we are dealing with a kind of symbiosis, but in the eyes of the Iatmul this superficial perspective is not sufficient to grasp the essence of the relationship. Before providing any mythological foundation of the relationship, I wish to explain the significance of the sago market in general with the aid of a myth:

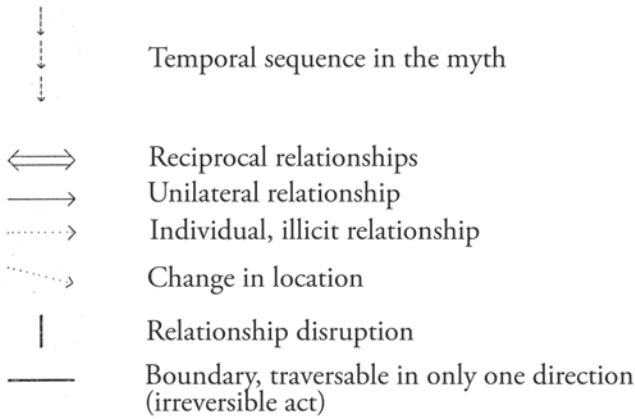
“In Timbunke there once lived two men. Their names were Tshuiwogen and Wolinaui; both of them were big men, strong men, and capable of killing many others. The two men lived yonder of Timbunke. The two, Tshui and Kamangowi, watched over the market trade between the bush people and the river people. Timbunke is divided into a part called Timbunke and another called Mandangu. The two men watched over the market with the bush people. They usually took other men with them when the women travelled to the market place of Timbunke and Mandangu.

One day, a woman caught a large fish which she wished to trade for sago at the market. She said: ‘This fish is worth a large basket of sago.’ The wife [?] of Tshui and Kamangowi answered: ‘I can’t give you a basket of sago for this fish; this full basket of sago is worth two fish’, so she spoke. The two women began quarrelling at the market, quarrelling with words, until the woman from Timbunke no longer wanted the sago of the wife of Tshui and Kamangowi. She took her fish and went back to the village. She told her husband [what had happened], upon which he said: ‘Why should you give her two fish – one fish against one parcel of sago,’ those were the words of the Timbunke woman’s husband. He stood up, grabbed his spear and went to the market. There he asked: ‘Which of these women lied to my wife [who tried to trick my wife]?’

The bush woman was dismayed but her husband said: ‘I did’, and stepped forward.

The men stood there facing each other. The man from the bush village wished for a fight with the man from Timbunke. But the Timbunke man gripped his spear and ran it through Tshuiwogen. The men from the bush village wept and returned to Tshui and Kamangowi’s village. There they told the brother of the victim, Wolinaui, what had happened. He stood up, grabbed his spear and went to the market, intending to kill everybody. But the men of Timbunke caught him and killed him, too. Then the mother of the two deceased men appeared. When she arrived, she began singing a dirge for her two sons. The men of Timbunke felt sorry for her and gave her some food. That’s a big law here: when we offer someone food and the person accepts, we may no longer kill this person.





*Key to the adjacent diagram.*

A man gave the woman food; she ate. Then he took her to the stream where she bathed. Then he took her to his house where she stayed and mourned for her sons until night fell.

The men who had killed her sons heard her mourning; this infuriated them. They became angry and began to make plans. They grabbed their spears, rushed into the house, dragged the woman outside, and killed her. – This meant the end of this law. There was no more market. The two groups had become deadly enemies. The people of Timbunke and Mandangu could no longer trade in sago from the bush people. Tshui and Kamangowi's market was ruined. The river people and the bush people were now mortal enemies.”

The myth's significance becomes more evident when split into separate components, or functions, as in the diagram (opposite page).<sup>55</sup>

The graphic representation reads as follows: the primary opposition is between hypothetical bush people and river people which reflects Iatmul thought patterns in which the contradistinction between bush and river people is clearly discernible. The pattern is also reflected in the opposition between fish and sago. The mediating element is represented by the market where fish and sago are exchanged in a barter transaction. The balanced exchange is upset when one woman wishes to trade in a large fish against a large basket of sago. In the course of events, the exchange of fish for sago is thwarted. The result of the disagreement between the women is that a river man carries his spear to the market – as an exchange equivalent for the fish, so to speak – where he puts it to use. In this setting (man, spear) any form of peaceful exchange is frustrated and turned into antagonistic exchange: an exchange of spears. The guardian of the market, Tshuiwogen, is killed in the action. His brother, Wo-

<sup>55</sup> I cannot enlarge upon the analysis of myth right here; I have more to say on this subject towards the end of the study.

linaui, also becomes a victim of the exchange of spears. Owing to the killing at the market place, (peaceful) exchange is no longer possible. The lamenting mother tries to mediate in the conflict between the two villages. A river man offers her prepared food (marking willingness to end the conflict). By accepting the food, the woman agrees to the peace agreement. The river man takes the mourning woman down to the stream to wash. – Here the following is worth noting: a woman who has lost her husband or a child does not wash until the strictly observed five-day mourning period is over. Although the woman has accepted food and washed her body, she continues to mourn the death of her two sons after the river man has taken her to his house. After the “peace agreement” has been concluded at the individual level (river man – mourning mother), the other river men become involved and reverse the positive individual relationship by killing the mother. The killing severs the market relationship between the river people and the bush people for good: instead of remaining exchange partners, they become enemies.

Explained in nutshell, the myth recounts the destruction of a market relationship.

*Comparison of historical conflict between Kararau and Gaikorobi and the conflict recounted in the myth*

Kararau – Gaikorobi	river people – bush people
1. Existing market relationship	1. Existing market relationship
2. Quarrel between men, owing to action of river man	2. Quarrel between women, owing to action of river woman
3. Fistfight between men at market place	3. Killing of two bush men
4. Cessation of market relationship	4. Cessation of market relationship
5. Full of remorse a group of bush men visit the river people.	5. Lamenting mother visits the river people.
6. <i>Paitim tanget</i> , handover of sago to river people	6. Man offers a woman food
7. River people give fish to bush people	7. Woman accepts food, washes and goes to stay in house of river man
8. A new market is scheduled	8. Mother continues to mourn her sons
9. Ceremonial market event	9. Woman is killed
10. Reinstitution of market relationship	10. Beginning of sworn enmity

The juxtaposition of real events with the description of a conflict in a myth renders a surprising result, which, however, should not be overestimated. In the myth it is women who trigger the conflict, in the historical event it is men. In both cases it is the men who carry through with the conflict. In the myth, the role of mediator is assumed by a woman, in the historical event this task falls to the men. Notably,

in both cases the first step towards resolution is taken by the bush people. In the historical event, the conflict is resolved by men; in the myth the irrevocable rupture is effected by the killing of the woman. While, in the myth, market relations are severed completely (dissociation) – and replaced by enmity – relationships in the historical episode are finally resumed (association).

To draw any definite conclusions from this juxtaposition on the basis of this one example, and considering that we are dealing with one single variant of the myth, would be ill advised. The two accounts come from the same source (Mindsh, clan: Mairambu) even though they were collected independently and roughly four months apart. Still, the fact that the two accounts are similar in terms of structure and storyline could be due to this circumstance. In formal terms there appears to exist a link between the two narratives, however, it is worth noting that the Iatmul do not principally distinguish between historical narratives and mythological accounts, in fact there is no clear-cut distinction between the two in Iatmul culture. When recounting the Timbunke myth, Mindsh did point out that he was telling a *stori*, as distinguished from the historical conflict between Kararau and Gaikorobi which occurred during his lifetime, although he was still only a child when it happened. What made the difference for the narrator was that one event belonged to his trove of personal experience, while the other he knew only from oral tradition. The question of whether the *stori* we were told was a myth in the true sense of the term must remain open, not least because very little is known about how myths “originate” and whether they are based on actual historical events as we understand them, however long ago these might have occurred.

The myth concerning the disruption of the market peace is certainly also known in Gaikorobi.<sup>56</sup> The task now would be to ascertain to what extent such a myth, implying irrevocable dissociation, impacts on reality in its capacity as a subconscious regulatory force. In other words, to what extent the myth helped Kararau and Gaikorobi to avoid severing their market relationship on the occasion of that historical event. The question has to remain unanswered, of course, but I believe it is quite likely that myths actually do serve such purposes.

As mentioned above, the Brandandange stream is imbued with special significance. The names Singanoli and Branganoli figure as secret names (Tok Pisin: *nem hait*) of the Brandandange *baret*. When, in the early days of research, we inquired about the market near Gaikorobi, we customarily received the answer that Moiem, a male mythical figure, had created and established the market. In the course of research, I was able to collect three versions of the Moiem myth.<sup>57</sup> The shortest version

<sup>56</sup> One encounters the same myths and stories in different variations across the entire Middle Sepik area; the variations usually concern the names of the acting figures.

<sup>57</sup> See also the myth of Meimnongru in Schuster (1973: 485-487). It complies with the versions presented here in all key aspects, with exception of the location of the market, which was adapted to local circumstances (village of Sotmeli). Bateson (1958: 192) also refers to the myth of “Mwaimnangur”.

(told by Kabuseli, clan: Yagum) was referred to as *wundumbu nyanget*, as a “story of no significance”, a “fairy tale”. Mindsh (Yamandane lineage of the Mairambu clan) was not a member of the Nangusime clan, which actually “owned” the Moiem myth. It took quite some time and coaxing until he agreed to tell us the story. He himself had been told the myth by his mother who was from the Nangusime clan. Whilst recounting the story (he kept his voice to a whisper throughout) he frequently paused and peered out into the night to make sure that he had not been followed. We had to give him our promise that the myth would not return to the Sepik since he actually was not authorized to tell us the story.<sup>58</sup> Koliuan, a member of one of the Nangusime lineages, told us the myth after repeated requests, but when he did he spoke openly:

“I am a man who calls Moiem one of his ancestors. There are two Moiem. We men of the family of Nangusime and Mbowi reckon Moiem among our ancestors. We Mbowi belong to Nau Moiem. The Nangusime belong to Wabi-Moiem. This is the story of Wabi-Moiem.

Once upon a time, this ancestor whom we call Kolimbange created the earth and the sky. He created everything, like God. His oldest child was Moiem. Across the entire world there was only water, no land, no solid ground. So it remained for a very long time. This big man, Kolimbange, also created time, and when his time was almost over, Moiem had grown big and strong and had acquired much knowledge. He, too, had now become a big man. He did not have a human shape, he looked like a bird, Wabi-Moiem. He could fly. He used to fly far away and then return. Kolimbange knew about this. He said: ‘Now you fly over the sea, and when you see a patch of sea where the water is about to break [Tok Pisin: *wanem hap long sea yu lukim sea i bruk*] or where the sea is churning and eddying, that is where land will arise.’ Wabi-Moiem set off and flew over the sea. He saw a place where the sea appeared to be breaking as if a new sandbank lay submerged and was about to rise, that’s what it looked like. Moiem saw this and descended.

He walked up and down [the sandbank], up to the knees in water, that’s how deep it was. He exclaimed: ‘you’re mine.’ That was his mark [Tok Pisin: *em olosem mak bilong em*]. After setting his mark he rose again into the sky and flew on until he found a next patch of land. Again he landed and set his mark; then he flew on, looking for a new patch of land. Again he landed and set his mark. That’s what he continued to do.

<sup>58</sup> Contrary to our promise I have published this myth in the German version of this book all the same because it represents a significant cultural testimony, not least with a view to the descendants of the present-day Iatmul people. In 2017, I met descendants from Kararau’s Nangusime clan; although they had heard the name of this founding ancestor, Moiem, they did not know much about him and asked us to retell the story the way we had heard it 45 years ago. They were looking forward to reading the story in English.

Then he returned to his father, Kolimbange, where he stayed. The land slowly began to rise. It was real land. The same happened in another place, too. The land rose to the surface. Mountains arose; this is what happened everywhere. Now there was land everywhere.

All the other ancestors came after Moiem. They lived in Mebinbit, yes, they lived in Mebinbit. Then the *tumbuna* [Tok Pisin: ancestor] set out, travelling to different places. When a *tumbuna* arrived at a new place, he stepped on the ground and said: 'This ground is mine.' He gave it a name. A different *tumbuna* would go to another place, tread on the ground and give it a name. That's how they did it, all of them. But Moiem was the first. He is the father of all the land. He was the first, he's my ancestor. Moiem flew around, only afterwards did the other ancestors set out. They saw Moiem's mark; Moiem marked all the lands. After Moiem came many ancestors who claimed pieces of land for themselves. The ground had become solid. There was a lot of work to do. The people multiplied; many families [clans] emerged. There were many men and women on this land. Kolimbange said [to Moiem]: 'Look, there are many people now. What are you going to do? The people who do not live in Mebinbit have no sago. Actually, they have not a thing [to eat]. There is sago in Mebinbit along with other edible things, many pigs, all kinds of animals. I want you to establish a market.'

So it came to pass that Moiem established a market, the first market. He did this at Kwatnaragui. This is a place near Mebinbit. Today they call this place Gaikorobi. That's where he established the market, at this place called Kwatnaragui. It was Moiem who established this market. All the women went to fetch sago there, at Kwatnaragui.

Moiem created sago [Tok Pisin: *em i save kamapim saksak*!] The women went to the market. The women we call *yuikitnya-ragwa* [women with pubic hair], the women with pubic hair, went to stand on Moiem's left, the women without pubic hair, *barakitnya-ragwa*, to Moiem's right. Moiem picked up a spear-thrower and a small piece of a spear with a pig's bone (cervical vertebra?). We call this small piece of spear *maban* and *nebegeno*. He placed the small spear on his spear-thrower, on his *wenden*. With his small spear he parted the women's grass skirts and inspected their genitalia. This he did with all women until he had reached the end of the row. Then he went to the opposite row and did the same thing, until he had seen them all.

All the women took sago, and that was the end of the market. They all went back to where they had come from.

All of them repeated Moiem's law many times. Moiem had no wife, he lived with his sisters, Grenggreng and Kowat. They [the sisters] looked after him.

It was then that the men of Mebinbit rose up, exclaiming: ‘This has to be, we will kill this man. We will put an end to his doings. No man is allowed to do the things Moiem is doing.’ One day they killed Moiem, and Moiem died. He was dead. He fell into the water, and nobody knew where his body was. We do not know where he went. We just don’t know. His shadow [Tok Pisin: *piksa bilong em*] is a bird we call *kanai*. Now this bird lives at sea. We call it Moiem, this bird. It has a long neck and beautiful wings. It flies across the sea. It is Moiem.

Moiem’s sisters saw what had happened. They were angry [Tok Pisin: *tingting nongut*]. They mourned him, wept for him. All the men of Nyau and Nyamei had watched Moiem at the market. They had watched Moiem, now they knew [the origin of the sago].

All of them had killed Moiem, and now Moiem was dead. Now there was no more sago. They didn’t know from which palm tree the sago came. There are seven types of *limbum* palms.

They felled a first *limbum* palm, removed the bark, began breaking up the pith and washing it, but it produced no sago. They washed out the pith, but the canoe remained empty, filled only with water. Then they cut down a sago palm. After washing out the pith they saw that the water also held sago. They washed out the pith and saw that sago had settled on the floor of the canoe. Tipseaman is the big brother, but he has nothing inside one could eat. Nobano is the small brother. Tipseaman belongs to the Nyamei, Nobano to the Nyau. Moiem had shown them all. He died, and all of them did it wrongly [when trying to produce sago]. They tried it with all the *limbum* palms, they tested all seven kinds. But they found that only Nobano had sago. Nau-Moiem and Wabi-Moiem are in the sago we eat. It is his flesh, it is the flesh of Nau-Moiem, of Wabi-Moiem [that we eat]. That’s his story.”

Mindsh told the myth of Moiem as follows:

“Nau-Moiem is the father; Wabi-Moiem is his son. Once upon a time, after the creation [Tok Pisin: *kriesan*] had been completed and the land had been made, we lived in Mebinbragui, the place of origin of us all. We had nothing good to eat. We only had bad food. Our tummies were never quiet, we suffered great hunger. The first sago palm, which belonged to us Nyamei, or Mairambu, we call Wambeno and Yamano, but this kind has nothing that is edible. They cut out the pith after having felled the tree and tried to wash it out, but it had nothing that was edible. It was the women – we call them Tshosholi and Dimasholi, they are no longer around [Tok Pisin: *ol i aut nau*], we also call them *Wolinyan* and *Woliragwa* – it was these women who first tried to produce sago. But they failed. They all lived without [sago]; they were hungry. They just sat on the ground, staring into nothing. They didn’t speak, they didn’t laugh, they just sat there, putting on faces like angry women.



This one man whom we call Nau-Moiem lived at his place, Wabidshambe, Moiemdshambe and Wabidshambe, that was the name of his place. He sat there. He saw the women and felt sorry for them. He went up to them and asked: 'Hey, what are you doing?' He asked them and the women answered: 'You ask us what we're doing? Do you see our fallen-in bellies [Tok Pisin: *bel bilong mipela i go insait*]? We have nothing and would like to have something to eat. We cut down the palm trees called Wambe and Yaman.' Moiem answered: 'There's no food in it. Look, this pith is hard. I feel sorry for you. Listen to what I have to say, I'll show you something.' That's what he said to them. 'This one here [palm tree] is called Nobano and this one here is Tipmeaman. The two are brothers.' The two grow on the *Waak* mound of the men's house Muintshembit. They stand at the centre of the *Waak* mound, next to one another. They are brothers.

Moiem went up to them and said: 'This one has no food, this elder brother Tipmeaman. This one, Nobano, does. This is the one you should fell. Then you must cut off a piece, about three foot long.' This is the gauge we call *tamba-libra*.<sup>59</sup> The women did as they were told. They felled the palm tree and cut off a small piece. They broke up the pith and washed it. A bag of pith produced a bag of sago. They kept on washing out the pith and got sago in return, until the whole piece of the tree was finished. Now all the women had plenty of sago.

Then Moiem named the third day and said: 'On this day I will sleep without food [Tok Pisin: *mi slip nating*] in my village. I will ready something. Then I will come to you and inspect your work. I will check whether you produced the sago the way I told you.' That's what he said to the women. The women did what Moiem had told them. When the third day had passed, Moiem came. The women had finished their work. They waited for him on the appointed day. They were all sitting on the ground, all *yukitnya* and *barakitnya*, the former being the women with pubic hair, the latter women without pubic hair. The women with pubic hair were sitting on the right, the women without on the left. All the women were seated and waiting to hear what Moiem had to tell them.

He came with his spear and his spear thrower, which we call *wabine-ro* [?]. He used it to part open the grass skirt of every woman, with his spear thrower. He began with the first row of women, and, having inspected all of them, he turned to the second row of women. Then they all got up and began laughing together, calling out: 'Weeehhh! They flattered him [Tok Pisin: *ol i mekim plis long en*].' The sago was as he had foretold. Moiem looked at all the women.

That's Moiem's law, the laughter is part of it.

<sup>59</sup> Meaning the length from the elbow to the tip of the fingers.

Then he told them: 'Take a little sago and give some of it to each clan in Mebinbragui. Take sago seeds and give one to each clan in Mebinbragui, along with some sago. The people can bake and eat it or make sago dumplings and eat them. All the people will like it. Make sure that they plant each seed in good ground only, not just anywhere lest the seed die. Because then the [careless] clan would have no sago.' This is what he told Tshosholi and Dimasholi. They took a little sago and some seeds, divided it up and gave all the people of Mebinbragui a little bit of both. They all ate it [the sago]. Some ate it after baking, baking the sago on hot stones.

In those days they had no clay baking dishes as we do today. They only had stones on which they baked the sago. Others made sago pudding, again using stones. They heated the stones in the fire and then placed them in a vessel filled with water. That's the way they prepared their food. They all liked it. They no longer went hungry all day. They ate well and didn't have to sleep on an empty belly [Tok Pisin: *slip nating*]. The next day they were hungry again and commented: 'These women have done a good job, they have really helped us.' 'From where did you get the sago?' they [the men] asked. The women answered: 'No, we can't tell you. That is our power [Tok Pisin: *em i strong bilong mipela*]. We found it. You men can't come [with us]. Only we women, we go there again tomorrow.'

So the women went back to work. Moiem had made an appointment with them, again on the third day.

The same happened as the first time.

Again they came back laden with sago.

The third time the men of Mebinbragui got together and asked themselves: 'Oh, what kind of work are these women doing that they come and give us sago? We must hide and watch them secretly.' So the men plotted.

The women did not live in the same place as the men of Mebinbragui, no, they lived in another village. They didn't hear the men talking. The men were plotting to hide and secretly watch [the women]. The women didn't hear this and went to work. On the fourth day they did it the same way again. The men of Mebinbragui were hiding and watching.

Nau-Moiem came with his son, Wabi-Moiem. He did it the same way as the first time: he inspected all the women. Upon this, the men of Mebinbragui returned home. The women, too, left. They brought the men a little sago. The men sat down and ate. They said: 'Oh, this man does this every time and then goes on to give the women sago. That's not good. If we don't do anything about it, he will keep on doing this to the women. It's not good having him look at all our women. I think we have to shoot him. What he has taught the women is okay [Tok Pisin: *dispela law i lainim ol dispela ol meri i orait*]. But we have to get rid of him, otherwise he will keep on treating the women in this way.

On the fifth occasion they prepared themselves. They carved spears, made spear throwers, and got ready. On this fifth occasion he [Moiem] did what he always did. The men returned home. On the sixth occasion the men of Mebinbragui hid behind the two rows of women. Some of the men hid behind the row on one side, the others behind the row on the other side. They hid behind the Tshosholi and Dimasholi.

The women didn't see them because the men had already taken up position during the night. When the women arrived at the market, the men were already lying in wait. The women washed the sago and waited for Moiem to arrive at the market; we call him Moiem-Nangure. Moiem appeared for the sixth time, and he did as he always did: he inspected the women of the first row and then those of the second row. He looked them over, one after the other. When he had finished, they all laughed again: 'Weeeehhh!'. At this moment the men of Mebinbragui rushed from their hiding and killed him, Nau-Moiem, the father of Wabi-Moiem, they killed him. He fell into a canoe; they also killed Nau-Moiem's child, Wabi-Moiem. He fell into the water. We call him Mandigumban and Mebimgumban; the Kondshi, Naua, and Sameanguat, all these clans now watch over Wabi-Moiem. They guard his story. The Nangusime guard the story of Nau-Moiem.

The father fell into the canoe, the son into the water. In this way the men of Mebinbragui killed the two. The men returned. A woman got up and wanted to sing a *sagi* [here: a dirge]. She said: 'Let us sing this *sagi*.' But the Tshosholi and Dimasholi exclaimed: 'No, wait until we have fetched his body from the water. We'll take small pieces of his flesh, from his *derti* [Tok Pisin for English dirty, meaning person-containing bodily substance]. We'll take it with us, then we can get out of here, lest the men of Mebinbragui look into our faces. They have killed our man und brother. We cared for them all. We passed on our knowledge. Everybody now knows how to make sago. All people eat it. They [the men] didn't think of this law. They have ruined us [Tok Pisin: *bagerap*), we forbade them but they came to spy on us. They killed him. We can't go back and do as if nothing has happened.' Thus the women spoke. They carried the body up on to the land where the men had killed him, on to the market place which we call Tibwa-Tarag[w]a. They carried him up there, where they cut off his ears. They took a little bit of flesh from his body. Others took the bone of his penis [Tok Pisin: *bun bilong kok*]; this penis bone is now in Gaikorobi.<sup>60</sup> The Nangusime guard it. All the women took some flesh from his body; then they started to sing.

<sup>60</sup> In actual fact, there is a piece of wood or stone in Gaikorobi that is said to represent Moiem's penis. In one of the myths told in Gaikorobi, Moiem has his head and penis cut off. The head is said to be kept in Kararau (with the Nangusime clan, that is, the sago clan) while the penis is kept in Gaikorobi (Schindlbeck 1980: 221). In fact, the Nangusime clan in Kararau once held a large *tumbuan* mask which was said to represent Moiem. The mask was sold to Alfred Bühler and is now in the Museum der Kulturen Basel. Schindlbeck was shown Moiem's stone penis,

Some women cried. They wanted to wipe away their tears with their hands; but they only got as far as their mouths. They now had long beaks. We call these birds Grengreng. All the women who touched their hair with their hands grew long hair; these birds we call Kowat. The women with pubic hair turned into Kowat; this bird has many feathers. The women without pubic hair became Grengreng; this bird has only a few brown feathers. These birds now belong to these clans [totemic birds, Tok Pisin: *dispela pisin ol i pas long dispela ol famili*. These birds still exist today. We don't kill these birds.

All are gone now. The women we call *Wolinyan-Woliragwa* – they have long hair – went there where the sun rises. Others went to the place where the sun sets. We don't know where they all went. This child of his, Wabi-Moiem, and the father Nau-Moiem, prepared something [Tok Pisin: *em i redi dispela samting*] [for the humans], but he did not give it, for time was too short. He had arranged with the women to give it at the tenth market. He wanted his child to go to another area and bring them this law so that these people, too, would have sago. He wanted to send his child to Kambiambragui as we call this area [towards the southwest]. We live in Mebinbragui [the northeast], at the place of origin. This place of origin was the first to emerge, what happened then and where these [places] are, we don't know.

I know a bit of this story because I was told by my mother. Now I have passed it on in secret.”

Kabuseli's version is as follows:

“When the earth Mebinbit and we humans were created, there was no sago. We lived without sago. This man, Kolimbange, the father of all things, the Australians call him God, this man made sago. From then on we had sago. The humans tried again and again to make sago. Two women went to give it a try. They felled a *limbum* palm, washed out the pith, but got no sago. They tried again and again, but to no avail.

This man, Kolimbange, was hiding when the women tried to wash out the pith of the *limbum* palm. He [Kolimbange] cut down a sago palm; the right type of palm. The two [women] began working on it. They cut out the pith, this is how they did it. The younger sister pounded the sago pith, the elder sister washed it. Kolimbange came out [of his hideout] and said: ‘I want to have intercourse with you.’ So he had intercourse with them. Then he exclaimed: ‘Now you can wash the sago.’ They washed the pith and got sago. Then he said: ‘Now take the sago and try it.’ They ate the sago as we do today. That is what the father of all us Nyau and Nyamei achieved. He was the man who created everything. So we live today and eat this sago.

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which was kept in a dwelling house in Gaikorobi together with two richly decorated paddles said to have belonged to Moiem, too (1980: illustrations 95-97).

That is the story of Moiem. Now he is called Moiem. We say Moiemnangru [the market place of Moiem]. That's its story."

*The three myth versions in comparison*

Koluian	Mindshendimi	Kabuseli
Kolimbange creates the world and time. Kolimbange' child: Moiem. There is a Nau-Moiem and a Wabi-Moiem. Wabi-Moiem creates land from the water. The land carries his mark. Migration of human ancestors. They take possession of the land.	Nau-Moiem is the father, Wabi-Moiem his child.	Kolimbange created the world and sago.
Uneven distribution of sago. Sago only grows in Mebinbit.	The people in Mebinbragui are hungry because they have no sago. Futile attempt to produce sago.	Humans try to produce sago, but they fail.
Kolimbange orders Moiem to establish a market.	Moiem has pity on the women who fail to produce sago. Moiem shows them the sago palm Nobeno. Women learn how to make sago.	Kolimbange shows two women which palm tree sago comes from.
Market at Kwatnaragui. Moiem separates the women with pubic hair from those without pubic hair.	Moiem determines the time of the first market. He separates the women with pubic hair from those without pubic hair.	
Using a spear thrower and small spears, Moiem parts open the women's grass skirts.	Using a spear thrower and spears, Moiem parts open the women's grass skirts.	Kolimbange has intercourse with the two sisters.

The women receive sago	Moiem distributes sago and shows the women how to prepare it.	Kolimbange gives them sago to eat.
Moiem has no wife; he lives with his sisters, the Kowat and Grengreng (birds)		
	The men ask the women from where they got the sago. The women don't tell them. The men discover the women's secret.	
The men kill Moiem. He falls into the water. His "spirit" turns into a seagull	At the sixth market the men kill Nau-Moiem and his son Wabi-Moiem at the market of Moi-em-Nangure. Nau-Moiem falls into a canoe; Wabi-Moiem is now called Mandigumban and Mebimbungan.	
The women strike up a dirge.	The women take flesh from the corpse. They strike up a dirge. The women turn into birds, those with pubic hair into Kowat, those without into Grengreng.	
Nobody remembers how to produce sago. They try out all kinds of <i>limbum</i> palms until they discover that the sago palm, Nobano, contains sago.		
Nau-Moiem and Wabi-Moiem become sago. The sago is the flesh of Moiem.		This is the story of Moiem. We say "Moiemnangru"

	Nau-Moiem and Wabi-Moiem wanted to pass on their knowledge at the tenth market, but they were killed. Now not all areas have sago.	
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### Comments

The myth explains the origins and emergence of sago production. In the myth as well as in social reality, sago serves as a medium of exchange. Sago is swapped for an equivalent. In the myth this equivalent is sexual intercourse,<sup>61</sup> in everyday reality smoked fish.<sup>62</sup> While, in the myth, we are dealing with exchange partners of different gender, in reality it is the women who barter. The women who learn how to produce sago in the myth and the women who bring the sago as an object of barter to the market, in reality both take on a passive role in the events. In both the myth and reality, the market assumes a mediating role, for one thing as a geographical space (between two different locations and even regions, and thus between two different social units) and, for the other, as the site where basic staples are exchanged.

In the myth, the secret presence of men leads to the killing of Moiem. In earlier times, men would occasionally accompany the women to the market for safety reasons, but the actual bartering was left up to the women. When men did become involved in the business of trading it often led to trouble and the disruption of the market peace. From this we may deduce that, according to Iatmul thinking, the market and market place clearly represent a female sphere in which men have no place and say.

## 3.6 Kararau's further trade relations

### The Aibom pottery market

Kararau obtains its pottery goods from Aibom. The market place Tingailies is half-way between the two villages on a *baret* called Kumalio, which marks the boundary between the two settlement territories.<sup>63</sup> The women of Kamenimbit purchase their earthenware from the same source. Since Aibom has easy access to the river and the

<sup>61</sup> Schuster 1973: 487 arrives at the same conclusions.

<sup>62</sup> In this context, allow me to refer to the following: when, today, a woman goes to live with the man she is about to marry, the bridegroom gives the bride's family a bag of sago. This exchange occurs when the woman leaves the parental home with all her belongings. Nowadays, the exchange of bridewealth is postponed to a later date.

<sup>63</sup> The Kumalio makes a bend at this spot. It is said to be the abode of a water spirit.

people procure their own fish, the women of Kararau trade sago for pottery. Markets are held at irregular intervals every few months. The sago the Kararau women rely on is usually sago previously traded in for fish from the women of Gaikorobi, occasionally sago they have produced themselves. Tobacco leaves also serve as exchange goods.

I had the opportunity to witness a barter market between Kararau and Aibom on 4 November 1972.

The Aibom women arrive at the market place in seven canoes, on average three women apiece.

Each woman unloads her own ware, spreads it out on the floor and takes a seat next to her goods. The women of Kararau – five canoes, two women apiece – also unload their ware. Hardly any words are spoken between the two village groups. Each Kararau woman picks up one or two bundles of sago and ambles over to the Aibom women, moving from one to the next and inspecting the presented pots. They do not comment on the quality of the earthenware spread out before them, but clearly assess them before selecting an item. I was unable to ascertain according to what criteria exactly the women make their selection, for example, aesthetic quality, but I got the impression that aspects such as stability and durability were more important.

As soon as a woman has made her choice, she places a bundle of sago weighing approx. three kilos in front of the respective owner and receives for it in exchange a small to medium-sized fire bowl. The exchange value of a sago-baking dish is roughly one and half kilos of sago.

The exchange rates are fixed so that there is never any bargaining. After roughly an hour the trade is over and both groups of women start loading their canoes again. No sago storage vessels or soup bowls were procured on this occasion, leaving the Aibom women to return home with approximately half of the goods they had brought to the market.

### Kapaimari, an example of a modern market

For several years now, a market has been held every Saturday during the dry season at the Catholic mission station of Kapaimari. Unlike traditional markets, this format is more of a “social” event to which men and women flock from across the entire Middle Sepik area. Here, too, doing business is up to the women but men from all around make use of the occasion to socialize, smoke, chew betel and exchange news with others or purchase items from the mission store. The merchandise (pineapple, melon, tobacco, betel nut, sago grubs, taro, sweet potato, yam, eggs, mayflies, beans, smoked fish and, as the case may be, the odd opossum, sugar cane, or newspaper for





*Fig. 37: Market with Aibom where women from Kararau exchange sago for pottery (1972).*

rolling cigarettes) is sold for money. The vendors form two rows through which the people can saunter and inspect the goods on offer. The Kapaimari market is a bit like the big market in Wewak in the sense that selling goods and doing business – according to Western understanding – is only one aspect of the event; the social dimension, that is, being present and actively taking part, is equally important.

The market in Kapaimari (and also the big market in Wewak) is definitely different to the barter market of Gaikorobi. The Iatmul actually never compare the two; for them they are quite different entities.

One finds a similar change of intrinsic quality in connection with bride wealth. In earlier times, the bride wealth was made up of shell money before being replaced by money in the 1950s. The act of transferring the bride wealth constituted the beginning of new social relationships; the introduction of money has curtailed this, since, owing to the nature of money, the event is now regarded more as a transaction (see p. 125).

### Tourist art

The women of the Middle Sepik district now also produce necklaces and small bags made of plant seeds, which are then sold, along with carvings, to tourists in the hotels of Wewak. Even though tourists do occasionally visit one or the other village on the river, the task of selling tourist art in Wewak, usually poorly made carvings, is assumed by men. When doing so, the men adopt a completely different stance than when dealing with an exchange partner at home. Gone is their traditional pride, instead they cajole the tourists and are even willing to bargain over the price. Three examples may illustrate this:

One evening three backpackers arrived in Kararau. They had no motor canoe of their own and had paid some locals to bring them to the village where they soon made their presence felt, but in a rather unpleasant way. Three of our local interlocutors, otherwise proud and at times even condescending individuals, took up position in front of the house where the tourists were staying. They had brought

with them a selection of necklaces and carvings. They chatted and laughed with the foreigners, brought them coconut and fish – all in the hope of coaxing them into buying one or the other artefact.

The next day the tourists planned to travel on to Pagui, and Mindsh, who owned a motor canoe, saw the chance of doing good business. He demanded thirty-six Australian dollars for the two-and-half-hour trip for which, in effect, half the amount would have been a fair price. However, the visitors were not prepared to pay the price. Mindsh remained seated in front of their house and tried to persuade them with all the charm he could muster. He had told others in the village that the deal was sealed. In the end, however, he went away empty handed after another man underbid his offer.

On a visit to Tambunum men offered us carvings for sale. Bargaining for the (overpriced) artefacts was easy. As for the artefacts produced by women, the men had to first consult the women but, unlike the men, the latter insisted on the price they had named. When we tried to bargain, they simply packed up their things and left. – It was no different in Timbunke.

On a different occasion I bought a necklace off a woman. She herself was wearing a similar ornament. It would have been easy for her to make a new one but even though I offered her double the price she was not willing to part with her personal necklace. “This one’s mine”, she said resolutely, and that was the end of it.

These different mentalities were astonishing. The men’s attitude is probably one of the reasons why, shortly after making first contact with Westerners, the old carvings, which had been used in rituals and ceremonies, had largely disappeared from the villages, in other words, they had been sold off to traders and dealers.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.7 Cultivation

#### Crops, gardens and ownership

The reason why, up to now, we have been talking almost exclusively about sago and fish is because these two staples – supplemented by coconuts – constitute the people’s nutritional basis. Especially during the wet season, when wide stretches of land are under water, the people have no other option than to rely on fish and sago.

Still, the role of cultivation should not be underestimated. The main crops include yam, taro, and sweet potato; of each one there are different varieties. The various tubers are regarded as welcome complements to the staple diet but not as surrogates for fish and sago. They are usually consumed in the form of soup together with fish and greens. Children prefer yam and taro roasted on the fire.

The people also grow banana, papaya, and – albeit less often – sugar cane. In modest quantities they also grow beans and maize although the latter often falls prey to wild

<sup>64</sup> Even early travellers such as Neuhauss and Behrmann report that they were offered large quantities of carvings as soon as the locals realized that the Whites had an eye on these items.

pigs. The people recount that, in earlier days, they built fences around their gardens to prevent wild pigs from marauding the crops but in view of the time and effort spent on building and maintaining the fences, this was given up some time ago.

Maize is only consumed when completely ripe, and then only fried and never raw. If the kernels are still milky-white – for example, when children accidentally break off an ear – they are discarded immediately.

Cucumbers and watermelons are grown only occasionally. They are consumed above all by men and women under the age of fifty. Some of older people refused to eat them for the simple reason that they had not known such things when they were young; moreover, they didn't really like the taste of them.

The gardens are located on both banks of the Sepik, most of them, however, on the left bank. They are lined in a row along the bank and are not set apart by distinctive boundary markers. They vary between forty and eighty metres in length and are roughly thirty metres wide.

With very few exceptions the gardens are owned by men. The gardens of real and classificatory brothers often lie adjacent to one another but land ownership does not appear to be strictly assigned, for instance, according to clans. Although the men own the individual plots of land, one often receives the names of women when asked who is cultivating a specific plot at the time. In this case, however, the woman only holds usufructuary rights. If a man has several wives, he distributes his land among them, usually granting his first wife a larger plot than her co-wives. It is only very rarely that a woman ranks as the owner of a plot or of several plots; a woman may hold land but after her death it is returned to her father's clan (in case she was an only child) or to that of her deceased husband.

Since every man owns more than one garden, often located on both banks of the river, he is able to plant different crops. Frequently gardens are left fallow for several years. A plot is cultivated for three consecutive years at most. In the first year, yam, taro or sweet potatoes are grown, occasionally tobacco, but then instead of and not jointly with the tubers. In the second year the crops are replaced with sugar cane and bananas. Sometimes this is repeated for a third year. After that the plot remains fallow for at least two years. Tubers and tobacco are never planted in the same plot in consecutive years as this is said to have a negative influence on the yields.

When the water recedes towards the end of the rainy season and the Sepik returns to its normal course, the men and women set out to clear the gardens of the bush that has grown back. The hard work of digging over the ground is men's work. The planting of yam and taro is done by men, only to a lesser extent by women.<sup>65</sup> For this purpose the tubers, which have been stored on special frameworks in the dwelling houses during the rainy season, are sliced into small pieces and then planted in the ground. Beginning in April or May – all depending on how long the flooding continues – and going on for six to eight months (that is, until flooding sets in

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<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately our research stay did not cover the period of clearing and planting, so that this section is based entirely on information acquired by questioning.

again) the men and women invest a considerable amount of time and effort in their gardens. In Kararau it is the women who tend to the gardens. In other villages on the Middle Sepik, most of this work is done by the men.

### Tobacco, cultivation and harvest

In Kararau, most of the time and effort invested in the gardens goes on nursing and harvesting tobacco. Kararau is probably the village with the highest tobacco yield in the Middle Sepik area. It actually produces far more than required for home consumption so that most of it flows into trade. The people distinguish between four types of tobacco: Moiemyagi (*yagi* = tobacco, Moiemyagi = tobacco of Moiem), Windshimbuyagi (bush spirit tobacco), Ngagweimangeyagi (Ngagweimange = female name) and Dshangwingwatyagi (?). The two former are said to be male, the latter two female. Moiemyagi is the most popular and widespread variety.

The tobacco seeds are stored at home during the wet season. In early summer the men sow them in the gardens in a seemingly random fashion, at least to Western eyes. Since the seeds of the different varieties are not stored separately they are also sowed together. However, this is not a problem since the people are able to recognize the different shrubs immediately – a feat my husband and I never achieved. Every week on a specified day (for example, on Monday or Tuesday) the women – that is, co-wives or the wives of men from the same clan – go to the gardens to do some weeding or harvest the first tobacco leaves. If a woman prefers not to go she will instead go fishing or bake sago cakes for the others.

On one of the weekly garden work days, the three wives of Kamangali and the wife of Kamangali's half-brother (the two men, together with their wives, inhabit the same house, see p. 161, Fig. 48) had arranged that the third wife, Labu, should stay in the village and prepare a meal for the whole family for when they returned. Kwapmei, the senior wife and by then already an old woman, did little garden work. She retired to the little garden hut with the two other women's children, later joined by her daughter-in-law's (Sapingen) children who had only arrived in the garden around midday. In the hut Kwapmei looked after the children and roasted maize over the fire for them. Meanwhile, the teenage daughter of Karabindsha, Kamangali's second wife, had gone fishing. The three women who remained in the garden attended to all five garden plots, with Sapingen caring mainly for her own plot.

From September on, tobacco leaves are harvested on a weekly basis, to a large extent by women. The leaves of the different varieties are collected separately. The women distinguish between four stages of a full-grown shrub based on quality features. The lowest leaves are referred to as *kipmaganga* (*kipma* = ground, *ganga* = leaf) and regarded as inferior quality. The leaves above *kipmaganga* are called *yindesai*, those above the *yindesai* are referred to as *nyambryagi*; the uppermost leaves, *moiyagi*, rank as the best and strongest quality. When trading, the price for tobacco follows the distinction between the four qualities.

During harvest the tobacco leaves are not sorted according to grade, in other words, quality. The women break off the leaves of a specific variety and place them on spread-out banana leaves or palm sheaths pinned between upright sticks to prevent the tobacco leaves, when heaped-up, from slipping to the ground. When a heap has reached a weight of approximately ten to fifteen kilos, a top layer of bananas leaves is added and the whole pile tied into a bundle. If there are not enough leaves from the same variety to fill a heap, a banana leaf is inserted to separate the bottom layers from the new variety to be added on top.

Depending on the size of the garden, harvesting takes anything between four and six hours. The women start early in the morning, between six and eight, and finish by early afternoon after which they return to the village, with their canoes fully loaded. During one such harvest morning three women (working for four hours) collected fourteen bundles of tobacco, each weighing roughly ten kilos. In another garden, two women produced twelve bundles in five hours.

Back home, after a break lasting up to an hour or so during which they share a meal, the women begin stringing the tobacco leaves to strips of rattan. This *ropim brus*, as the work is referred to in Tok Pisin (Iatmul: *yagi wigitanan*), is always done on the ground under a dwelling house and performed by women who stand in a close relationship with one another (daughters-in-law/mothers-in-law, wives of brothers, etc.). In the process, strips of rattan are passed through the stems of the tobacco leaves, this time according to type and quality. As far as the *moiyagi* quality is concerned only three leaves are mounted to a rattan strip after which the ends of the strip are tied into a knot. In the case of *nyambryagi* and *yindesai* it is five leaves, in the case of *kipmaganga* six to eight leaves. In trade the different-sized bundles sell at 10 cents apiece. During these afternoon *brus* (tobacco) sessions men are hardly ever present, giving the women the opportunity to tell stories (myths and other tales) but also a chance to share gossip and the latest rumours.<sup>66</sup>



Fig. 38: Karabindsha threading tobacco leaves (1972).

<sup>66</sup> One day a rumour spread claiming that war had broken out in the upper part of the Middle Sepik (Nyaula group) and that two former enemy villages had been fighting each other, causing many casualties. It was said that Jürg Wassmann, who was working in Kandinge at the time, had just managed to escape the fracas in a speedboat that belonged to another masta (whiteman). – The news, which had come from Tigowi, remained the subject of lively discussion among the men and women of Kararau for several days. As it turned out later, there was not a grain of truth to the story.

The bundles of leaves are then tied to long poles and carried indoors where they are fastened to the house's roof beams. There the tobacco is left to cure until the leaves have dried in the smoke rising from the fireplaces. This takes approximately six to eight weeks. Then the men remove the bundles from the poles and sew them into prepared palm sheaths. For this purpose, they first take a banana leaf and hold it over the fire until it is smooth and flexible. The leaf is then placed on a spread-out palm sheath and the tobacco bundles stacked on top, making sure that there are no cavities between the leaves in order to avoid insect infestation. The leaf bundles (up to a hundred) are pressed flat and wrapped tightly in the palm sheath until its two sides meet. The sheath is then sewn together with strips of rattan using a needle made from a tin can, and tied up with a rattan cord into which knots are tied, indicating the number of bundles the package contains (1 knot for twenty bundles). The packets of tobacco, which can be quite heavy, are then left outside in the sun for a few days before being transferred to the house and placed over the smoke rack. It is said that tobacco stored in this manner can keep for up to two years.

While the women jointly harvest, stack, and string the leaves on rattan strips, the tobacco is distributed among the wives as soon as it has been transferred to the palm-sheath packets. Normally a principal wife receives a larger share than her co-wives. In one case, the first wife owned tobacco worth 146 dollars at the end of the harvest season, the second wife an amount worth 72 dollars. In another case it was 64 dollars for the principal wife, and 16 dollars for the second spouse.

However, to what extent a woman had the right to dispose of her own tobacco was difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain, despite frequent questioning. Some people told us that the husband also had the right to sell the tobacco (for example, on sales trips up the Korewori River, to Chambri and Timbunmeli, or to Wewak); in this case he would keep the proceeds, while the money women earned from selling tobacco in Gaikorobi or Kapaimari was theirs to keep. However, others told us that, in the end, it was the men who managed the money.

Often, packets of tobacco are also given away as "presents".

Gimbun gave his wife's mother a large packet of tobacco (although Kwapmei owned several packets herself), and a further packet to a woman in Tigowi who had just given birth and granted Gimbun the right to adopt the child.

A tobacco survey carried out at the end of the harvest season (end of December) showed that tobacco worth a total of 2,200 dollars was being stored in twenty-six houses in Kararau.

Only three house owners had not grown tobacco. One was an absentee who only came back to the village for a few weeks every year; the other two were widowers who had no wives to look after the tobacco during maturation. One old couple had only harvested four dollars worth of tobacco. On average, the potential yield per house (I say potential because it was impossible to ascertain the effective yield) was between 16 and 202 dollars.

### Coconut groves

Today coconut palms are grown exclusively within the village, after a tremendous flood had destroyed a coconut plantation comprising about 125 palm trees, which the villagers had established upon recommendation by the Australian colonial authorities in the 1960s.<sup>67</sup> Long before that the German colonial authorities had strongly urged the locals to grow coconut palms in connection with the copra business. In fact, the people in the village had been asked to plant ten coconut palms per child.<sup>68</sup>

Since the people are in no way adverse to doing business (as the cultivation of tobacco indicates), the village leased from the government a stretch of land near Angoram (apparently for two dollars rent per year). The men of Kararau cleared the land and then planted germinating coconuts with the intention of entering the copra business.

## 3.8 Hunting and animal husbandry

The people's diet is rather poor in terms of meat, and the moments of enjoying a good piece of meat are usually few and far between. One of the reasons for this is that the time for hunting feral pigs, crocodiles, and possums is restricted to the months of December and January when the water levels rise and the pigs and possums' habitats gradually shrink. Hunting pigs is the men's job and emotionally very loaded. Men rarely hunt pigs alone; it is done collectively, usually by a group of men from the same men's house. In contrast, crocodiles are mostly caught by lone men, as hunts are rarely carried out on a collective basis. Crocodiles are caught with the help of line and hook and a piece of rotting eel as bait. Under normal circumstances a single man is capable of hauling in the animal as soon as it has swallowed the bait.

During the few days and weeks when the river threatens to flood even the last dry patch of land, roaming children and teenagers sometimes report having discovered the tracks of a wild pig near the village. During this time the men usually hold ready their pig-hunting spears, which often display notches indicating the number of pigs killed. It is not rare to hear excited shouts ringing out through the village several times a day upon which the men quickly gather at the men's house and the rush off into the bush carrying their spears, only to return hours later empty-handed.

On a rainy day the men were sitting glumly in the men's house, passing the time with smoking and chewing betel nut. The time of feasting was over, now that the rising water prohibited the staging of large ceremonial feasts. Ahead of them lay weeks and months during which they would be unable to use the ground-level men's house (in earlier days, the men's houses had an upper floor to which they could retire if necessary), forcing them to spend most of their

<sup>67</sup> Noted in the Village Book of 30 August 1965 by an Australian patrol officer (Kerr).

<sup>68</sup> Noted in a Patrol Report of 1959/60 (H. R. Dickinson).

time at home in their houses. They had been sitting around all morning and well into the afternoon. Heavy rain prevented them from going on a canoe trip. Suddenly, a few youngsters shouted something to the senior men, upon which a group of sixteen to eighteen-year-old lads grabbed their spears and dashed off into the nearby betel palm forest. The senior men remained seated. Roughly half an hour later the boys returned from the bush, excited and all talking at once. They pointed to behind the village, indicating that the pig had now left the betel palm forest and was hiding in the area at the back of the village. They urged the men to come and help surround the animal before it escaped back to the dense forest. They said it was a huge pig – indicating the size of it with their arms.

Upon this the previously gloomy group of senior men began to stir. Although heavy rain had set in again, they grabbed their spears and set off for the indicated patch, outpacing the youngsters by lengths. It was astonishing to see even old men, whom one otherwise saw limping through the village and who no longer took part in any of the men's communal work (supposedly due to a bad leg), following the group with stunning speed and agility.

Approximately a half an hour later the men reappeared. By following their loud calls, we had been able to trace their whereabouts in the bush. Upon returning the men had reverted back to their usual measured step but it was clear that they were still very excited. After depositing their hunting spears in the roof of the men's house they went on to discuss the failed hunt for a considerable length of time: they'd almost completely surrounded the pig, it would have only needed one precise throw and the pig would have been dead. But, unfortunately, a *manki* (Tok Pisin for young boy) had stood closest to the pig and had taken fright at the last moment, failing to throw his spear thus allowing the pig to get away. It confirmed them in their belief that one should never take young boys on a hunt; they were simply useless. – The men went on discussing the event for about an hour, explaining how a pig hunt was done properly. One or two really old men got carried away and began describing with grand gestures how they would have killed the animal had they been given a chance.

When the men do succeed in shooting a pig they never consume its meat themselves. The only people allowed to eat of it are the men belonging to the men's house group that did not partake in the kill (and, later at home, the women and children of those men). Preparing and cooking the meat is exclusively the men's job. By accepting the "present" the receivers are obliged to reciprocate in the near future with a pig of approximately equal size.



With crocodiles it is different. The man who kills one can do with it what he likes. Besides eating from it himself, he usually distributes pieces to his next of kin and other relatives.

A wild pig is not appreciated as much as a pig born and reared in the village. It would be out of the question to use a wild pig as a prestation in a ceremonial event, such as a wedding or a ritual to appease the ancestors. A feast is considered a success above all if it involves a large pig raised in a village other than Kararau which is then purchased and killed by Kararau men. The same distinction is made between wild ducks and village-raised *pato* (Tok Pisin term for duck).

*Pato* and pigs are raised by women in the village. At the time of research there were only three domesticated pigs in Kararau – two of them had been purchased with money collected by all the women in village – which were cared for by the women almost lovingly. They cooked sago pudding and greens and fed them three times a day. When such a domesticated pig is to be sold, women have an important say in the transaction, which is brokered by the men. When the deal is finally done and the pig is about to be killed, the woman who raised it often breaks out in tears.<sup>69</sup>



*Fig. 39: Preparing and cooking the meat (here of a pig) is exclusively the men's job (1972).*

<sup>69</sup> Documented for Aibom and Gaikorobi.



*Part Two*  
*Women in Love and Marriage*



## 4 Getting Married

### 4.1 Run-up to marriage

Young girls between the age of fifteen and eighteen lead quite carefree lives.<sup>70</sup> They help their mothers from time to time although they are not really obliged to do so. In Kararau girls marry at approximately the age of eighteen, while their peers in Gaikorobi bond immediately after their menarche ritual, that is, around the age of fourteen.<sup>71</sup>

The most unobtrusive way of initiating a marriage is for a young woman to give betel nut to the sister of the man for whom she has a liking. The sister passes on the present to her brother. If he accepts, it is taken as a sign that he agrees to the marriage.<sup>72</sup> Later, he reciprocates with betel nut, relying on the same intermediary. Following this, the two select a day, again with the help of the go-between, to discuss the up-coming marriage. The first rendezvous is followed by a second date. On the appointed day, the young woman packs her belongings in a string bag and waits for the groom under her parent's house at night for him to come and take her home with him.

Nowadays, the move of the bride-to-be to the parental home of her future husband also implies the beginning of sexual relations. According to various interlocutors, premarital intercourse was strictly forbidden, especially for young non-initiat-

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<sup>70</sup> The following terms are used in Kararau for girls and women, respectively: *tagwanyan* – girl without breasts; *maat munyanya* – young girl with yet small breasts; *munyawya* – nubile girl with firm breasts; *numbaragwa* – unmarried woman with sagging breasts; *tagwa* – wife; *abit ragwa* – old woman.

<sup>71</sup> Information from Gaikorobi provided by M. Schindlbeck.

<sup>72</sup> The transfer may also occur in the opposite direction, coming from the man.

ed men. There has been no initiation in Kararau since the end of the Second World War, and since then it has become quite common for a woman to move in with her fiancé even before the exchange of bridewealth and live in marital union. Quite often a woman has already given birth to more than one child before the marriage is confirmed officially by the transfer of bridewealth.

If a woman decides to move in with her husband to-be, she usually does not tell her parents beforehand, leaving them to come to terms with the fact on their own. If they are not in favour, this may lead to a dispute in the men's house, and if the woman's father is not able to prevent the union he will at least try to get a favourable deal on the bridewealth.

Another way of initiating marriage is by means of an assembly of village men. In the course of the meeting, the marriageable girls are called to name the man they wish to marry. The chosen man is questioned and if he consents, the matter is regarded as a done deal. In recent years, the village councillor occasionally acts as a marriage broker but, otherwise, it is not uncommon for a woman, especially if she has been married before, just to visit the man at home and inform him about her intentions in outspoken terms.<sup>73</sup>

During our stay in the village, a young woman from a Nyaula village once came to Kararau on a short visit. The day before, she had left her village by canoe with all her belongings with the intention of persuading a certain Kararau man to marry her. When she arrived she was told that the man had left the village and was now working as a teacher in Timboli. She returned to her canoe and set off to find him in Timboli. In the course of the weeks and months to come she did not return, so one may assume she achieved her goal.

Men often feel a little overwhelmed by this method of women's wooing, prompting some to leave the village for a while to get away from a woman's bold advances. Among the Iatmul, sexuality is a field ascribed above all to women. Women embody sexuality, so to speak, while men rather try not to get overrun by it. Thus, sexuality and desire are matters considered dangerous to the world of men. An adult woman takes on the active role when it comes to initiating a new sexual relationship. Girls who have just reached puberty, however, by and large remain passive. It is only when a group of sixteen to eighteen year-old girls are together and a young man passes by that you might hear one or the other remark implying interest.

A group of young girls was standing in front of our house, when the village "beau" ambled by. The girls said something to him in a low voice, clearly making him feel embarrassed. Evidently he felt uncomfortable having attracted their attention, and he left as quickly as possible, looking slightly ashamed and rueful.

<sup>73</sup> See also the description in the life history of Yaknabi, p. 265.

Possibly the anxiety, or at least the restraint, shown by men towards women has to do with their fear that sexual intercourse, even only being close to women, could sap their physical strength and even their *waken*, or “soul” (see also Newton 1964/65). In a way, the emotionality ascribed to women, especially as far as the rapport between men and women is concerned, appears to repel or intimidate men.

The statement “A liked B which is why A would have married B”, is a sentence used almost exclusively by women. The term *wowia kugwa* (Bateson, 1958: 253), or in the parlance of Kararau, *ndugat wobia-ku-tigare* – to be in love with a man – are words predominantly heard from the mouth of a woman. Nevertheless, the opposite does exist: *tagwagat wobia-tu-kigare* – to be in love with a woman – but I only ever heard it once, namely on the occasion when a woman was describing a love affair. When I asked her whether the man had also felt affection, she answered with the above words.

Sabwandshan, one of my principal interlocutors (see Fig. 26, p. 52), commented almost commiseratively: “The whites only marry when they are in love with each other. From then on men and women live peacefully together as brothers and sisters do here. The law of our ancestors says nothing about love marriages which is why we have so many marital disputes.”

Men often use magic charms to gain and sustain a woman’s affection. I never heard of women doing anything similar. The fact that men rely on magic charms to attract a woman’s attention must be viewed in a wider context which I can merely allude to here (see below): for a Iatmul man it is extremely difficult to establish direct and easy contact with a woman (which cannot be said of the opposite) so that he has to rely on a range of “auxiliary agents”.

Apart from the above-mentioned ways or rules of choosing a partner there is a third method which, however, is only rarely applied these days: when a group of young and nubile girls was out in the bush playing, it was not uncommon for the unmarried men to stage an attack on them. They would surround the girls and any man looking for a wife would chase one of the girls and rape her.<sup>74</sup> Occasionally this was done with the girl’s brother’s consent, in most cases however he probably knew nothing about what was going on. The rape was usually followed – often against the woman’s true will – by marriage.

Based on data collected in Western societies, the psychologist Ruth Herschberger (1969: 124-129) has the following to say on the subject of rape:

“With the leverage provided by the two words, *act* and *relationship*, the dichotomy of male and female sexuality is established in the following description of rape: ‘No woman can force a man into the sex act [writes Amram

<sup>74</sup> Bateson (1932: 281) mentions a similar mode of procedure: “Besides such marriages peacefully arranged, it is common for the initial taking of the wife to the husband’s house to be a definite abduction, carried out by the man with more or less violence.”

Scheinfeld] for his participation in it requires a physical preparation which can come only with some degree of desire and willingness ... This is not so with a woman, for she can be forced into a sexual *relationship* without the least desire or preparedness.’

Act implies something done, the exercise of power, the accomplishment of a deed ... A relationship on the other hand, is a condition or state of being ... An act is more impersonal than a relationship; it has fewer psychological complications. In a sexual relationship, a woman responds to the experience as a whole, and does not consider completion ... Woman may resist, she may struggle, ... but she is still forced to enter into a sexual relationship, provided her assailant is equipped with natural physical superiority – or a blackjack ... She must enter into a sexual relationship with her aggressor; an intimacy with him is established for all time. Lonely men, unrequited men, man who find tv and sex difficult turn to the myth of rape in the belief that love, if it cannot be evoked, can at least be bullied into putting in an appearance.”

What Herschberger has to say about male sexual violence as a means of initiating a more encompassing relationship in general also applies – as far as I can judge – to the Iatmul, not least because Iatmul men seem to have problems with the kind of emotional relationship Iatmul women are seeking. The fact that rape appears to be one form of initiating a marital relationship does not mean that rape as such is condoned in Iatmul society. If a man violates the wife of another man, the act is considered a serious crime against the husband. In earlier days this could have led to the killing of the offender. When seeking revenge, either in the form of a killing or the payment of compensation, the aim is not to restore the “honour” of the victim, that is, the wife’s honour, but that of her husband.

Apart from the acquisition of women from one’s own village by force, Iatmul men also raided other villages with the aim of abducting women and bringing them back to their own village. In Timbunke, District Officer John Walstab once heard that the men of Kararau had abducted ten women from Timbunke and taken them to their village, upon which he decided to take the women’s male relatives with him on a punitive expedition to Kararau (Kararau had previously undertaken a head-hunting raid on Mindimbit, despite the ban on the practice issued by the Australian authorities). “I told these relatives that whilst the raid was in progress they could call out for their woman to come to them, but (it might be as well to add here) during the raid they made no attempt to even get into conversation with these women.”<sup>75</sup> In Aibom, too, women captured on raids were married to local men and integrated into the village.<sup>76</sup>

While women rarely enter into multiple sexual relationships before their (first) marriage, they become more active in this sense after the first few years of marriage. They are not in search for a serious love affair, the aim is casual sexual intercourse.

<sup>75</sup> Sepik-Expedition 1924 (John Walstab Report).

<sup>76</sup> Personal communication, G. Schuster in Aibom.



But this does not mean that a woman looks for sex with just any man, no, she chooses her partners carefully on the basis of personal liking and preference. Asked on what criteria they chose men for such adventures, the women simply giggled and asked me in return why I had chosen to marry my husband since – as I had told them – our marriage had not been prearranged by our parents.

Not every woman seeks extra-marital partners for sex. It appears that the more women (and men) had chosen their husband (wife) themselves, the more faithful they were to their partners. Extra-marital sexual relations seem to be relative to the pressure the older generation exerted on the marriage between a man and a woman.

According to the Iatmul, occasional intercourse does not lead to pregnancy since procreation requires an intensive and long-term relationship in the course of which a sufficient amount of sperm is allowed to mingle with a woman's blood.

During our stay in the village, a girl from Kamenimbit became pregnant. It was said that she had numerous lovers in the villages across the Middle Sepik. The men said of this girl that she was a bad woman (Tok Pisin: *meri nongut*). I asked several women the same question upon which they answered indignantly: no, that's not true, she's a good woman. A woman who neglects her child is a bad woman. – The young woman named the man responsible for her pregnancy but he categorically rejected the allegations, claiming that he had only once had intercourse with the girl, in other words, it was physically impossible that he had fathered the child. – Upon this the father of the unmarried girl gave the child a name from his own clan.

As a matter of fact, it is quite rare for an unmarried woman, that is, a girl not living with her groom-to-be, to become pregnant. I was not able to ascertain the reason for this. According to own statement, women do not rely on abortion methods in the Western sense of the term. However, there is one method they practise but little is known about its efficacy (in bio-medical terms): the pregnant woman goes out into the bush, splits a piece of wild rattan (*mbai*) in two and drinks the sap. Having done this she must leave the forest at once, without looking back. This is said to make the blood (menstrual blood) flow again. Another woman told me that a mere cut to the vine was sufficient; the effluent sap was enough to make the menstrual blood flow again.

Questioned about what the qualities a future husband should have, various women said that he had to be a good canoe builder, that he had to know how to cultivate a garden, and that he had to be able to care for his family (Tok Pisin: *em i save bossim pamili*). Conversely men expected their women to be hard workers and capable of looking after the children.

The more I spoke with the women, the more I got the impression that they wished for a harmonious marriage, a union based on common understanding, even affection. Among the men I found little evidence of such an attitude; they

valued the community of men higher than they did their marital relationship.<sup>77</sup> Considering that no initiations had been carried out over the last twenty-five years – a ritual procedure specifically meant to emphasize and enhance male solidarity – this was quite significant.

### Social insecurity of women who are not officially married yet

As mentioned above, a woman usually moves in with her husband before the transfer of bridewealth. Her status thus remains rather undefined at this point.

Sone was a twice-widowed man. At the age of roughly forty, he decided to get himself a third, younger wife. The woman was deaf and dumb but generally considered a normal village woman. She was caring and loving towards her children. Sone had been living with this woman, who had no biological brother, already for several years. She had given him two children. A classificatory brother once mentioned to Sone that it was time to pay bridewealth upon which the latter became very angry and stated that he had no intention of doing so; he went on to state that he did not wish to keep this woman (who, notably, had done all the fishing and sago trading for him ever since she went to live with him). At the time the bridewealth issue arose, Sone was staying in a different village with his wife and her children. He turned the woman out of his house and told the bearer of the message to take the woman back home with him, since he no longer wished to keep her. However, the messenger refused, afraid of the conflict that might arise and not wishing to be part of it.

This incident happened shortly before we left the village and I do not know how the story ended. But it confirms that people do not feel comfortable when a groom refuses to pay bridewealth.<sup>78</sup>

## 4.2 Ideal marriage relationships

A marriage is only good, the people say, if it joins together members of the two opposite moieties. There are indications that a clan that describes itself as half Nyau and half Nyamei will claim membership in the opposite moiety should a person marry someone from his or her own section, just in order to uphold the notion of cross-moiety marriage. This appears to have been the case in the Yagum clan, albeit my interlocutors did not describe the case in such theoretical terms. Today, marriage

<sup>77</sup> An exception here was Gimbum who, however, was regarded as a bit of an outsider.

<sup>78</sup> In a 1960/61 Patrol Report, C. D. Waite wrote: “The interpretation of Roman Catholic Law relating to marriage gave rise to two cases of conflict with native customs, but they were settled without difficulty.”

within the same moiety is not uncommon although the practice is generally not condoned. However, people still strongly condemn marriages within the same clan.

An ideal marriage is when a man and woman stand to one another in a *yai-yanan* relationship.<sup>79</sup> How often this actually occurred in the past I was unable to ascertain but the model where a man marries his *yai* and a woman her *yanan* is still deeply engrained in the people's consciousness. Occasionally, but distinctly less often, I heard that it was also good for a man to marry his *na* (patrilateral cross cousin) (Bateson 1958: 89). This was referred to as a woman returning to the *bed bilong mama* (Tok Pisin for "her mother's bed") for the purpose of strengthening her mother's clan, or to be more specific, her mother's brother's clan. In this case, the *na's* mother would call her own daughter's children *nyan* (i.e. children) to the effect that, at least as far as terminology is concerned, mother and daughter become identical. The kin term also insinuates that the *na* cannot really be counted as a member of her paternal clan.

Apart from these marriage rules<sup>80</sup> – with the *yai-yanan* option overriding, at least conceptually – the people also mentioned sister exchange marriage, actually more frequently than they did *na-ababu* marriage (Bateson 1932: 264, 280-281; 1958: 89: 90). With regard to the first two marriage rules, the future spouses were already betrothed as children by their parents, with the young girl often moving to the home of her future husband before marriage. During this intermediate period, that is, until bridewealth had been paid, the couple refrained from sexual intercourse, at least theoretically.

John Walstab also mentions a child betrothal: "Whilst at Mindimbit a little girl of about thirteen arrived from (the) Kararau tribe. She was the child widow of one of the natives we had killed and was a native of Mindimbit."<sup>81</sup> After her husband-to-be had been killed she returned home to her parents. "Love" in our sense of the term is not a prerequisite of marriage; in fact, affection for individuals other than the predestined partner was curtailed, even suppressed, by the threat of *sanguma* sorcery. – These days, pressure on the younger generation is only rarely exerted as far as choice of partner is concerned. Whether for this reason the marriage rules are hardly any longer followed or whether they only ever acted as conceptual guidelines is difficult to say.

<sup>79</sup> For more on *yai* marriage see Bateson 1932: 263; 1958: 88.

<sup>80</sup> Bateson (1958: 89) mentions this union in terminological terms as *yai* and *na*. This does not seem to appertain to Kararau.

<sup>81</sup> John Walstab, in "Charge Sepik Expeditionary Police Force: Final Report on the Sepik Expedition 1924" to the Government Secretary, Rabaul.

### 4.3 Marriage rules and actual marital relations in comparison

A village survey on the kin relationship of spouses prior to marriage revealed the following pattern:<sup>82</sup>

Name of husband	Kin relationship to wife bef. marriage	Approx. year of marriage	Amount of bridewealth	Comments
Uanoli	<i>nyangei</i>	1940	<i>talimbus</i> <sup>83</sup>	Wife only moved in with Uanoli after payment of bride-wealth.
Sari	<i>nyangei</i>	1949	100 AUD	Bride contributed dowry in form of shell money. She was adorned in the trad. fashion.
Mairambundini	<i>nyangei</i>	1965	200 AUD	
Dinga	<i>laua</i>	1948	10 AUD and <i>talimbus</i>	Dowry consisted of <i>talimbus</i> only.
Aundimi	<i>nyangei</i>	1940	<i>talimbus</i>	
Kabe	?	1948	10 AUD and 20 <i>talimbus</i>	Dowry in <i>talimbus</i> only.
Wundambi	<i>nyangei</i>	1968	200 AUD and 1 pig	A pig had also been offered to the bride's mother at her marriage; thus, the daughter had to "return" the pig.
Yalabush	<i>nyangei</i>	1960	140 AUD	

<sup>82</sup> The survey suffers from a flaw which I could not rectify, owing to my limited stay in the village: the survey was carried out before I had done any research on the stability and duration of single marriage arrangements. Since, in fact, many men and women had married more than once and I only asked about present unions, the picture I gained is probably rather skewed. Nonetheless, since, according to my interlocutors, *yai-yanan* and *na-ababu* marriages are not dissolvable, my findings still may have some degree of explanatory power.

<sup>83</sup> *Talimbus* is a Tok Pisin term and denotes an artefact of great value consisting of a trimmed and decorated snail shell.

Mainge	<i>na</i>	?	-	The wife was his elder brother's widow. He therefore had no bridewealth to pay.
Waani	<i>laua</i>	1961	100 AUD	Waani wanted no dowry but his wife to bear children.
Kama	<i>nyangei</i>	1930	<i>talimum</i>	
Kandshingau	<i>yanan</i>	1945	<i>talimum</i>	
Nimbukua	<i>nyamei</i>	1960	110 AUD	
Wulingowi	<i>nyan</i>	1935	<i>talimum</i>	
Slabui	First wife <i>nyamei</i> Second wife <i>nyan</i>	1950 1955	50 AUD 120 AUD	
Kolindshimbu	<i>nyangei</i>	1948	<i>talimum</i> and 1 pig	
Yaknabi	First wife ?  Second wife ?	1935	"a lot" of <i>talimum</i> "only very little" <i>talimum</i>	Yaknabi had forgotten his prior kin relationship to his first wife. It was certainly a "wrong" marriage since his <i>yai</i> was living in Timbunke. His second wife is the widow of his elder brother.
Wanyo	<i>kasragwa</i>	1963	200 AUD	
Dshoimban	<i>yairagwa</i>	1950	250 AUD	
Kindsheran	<i>yairagwa</i>	1965	300 AUD	
Kamangali	<i>yairagwa</i> wife from a different village wife <i>nyangei</i>	1940  1945 ?	<i>talimum</i>  <i>talimum</i> 12 AUD	
Kambakimbi	<i>kasragwa</i>	1960	200 AUD	
Pampandaun	?	1950	140 AUD + 1 pig + 1 dog	Had forgotten his prior kin relationship to his wife.

Kubeli	<i>kasragwa/laua</i>	1947	<i>talimum</i>	His wife indicated that, reckoning through her father's lineage, she would call her husband <i>kasndu</i> , through her mother's line, <i>wau</i> .
Mindsh	<i>nyamei</i>	1950	80 AUD	
Gimbun	<i>nyangei</i>	1948	290 AUD	
Sangrue	<i>yairagwa</i>	1960	100 AUD	
Asenau	<i>nyamei</i>	1955	140 AUD + 1 pig	
Tshui	<i>kasragwa</i>	1967	200 AUD	
Wosange	<i>yairagwa</i>	1958	180 AUD	Wife brought no dowry because in Timbunke (where she was from) this was not practice.
Tibuantshan	<i>yairagwa</i>	1963	80 AUD	Again, wife brought no dowry.
Wutnawgan	<i>suambunyanagei</i>	1973	300 AUD	
Saun	<i>nyan</i>	?	<i>talimum</i>	Saun had to pay bridewealth in <i>talimum</i> although money was the common form. His wife was a widow. The bride-wealth went to the family of the wife's first husband since he had paid in <i>talimum</i> .
Koliuan	<i>yanan</i>	1958	100 AUD	
Tshishendimi	<i>kasragwa</i>	1971	300 AUD	

Kisaman	<i>suambunyanjei</i>	1960	30 AUD	His wife brought no dowry to the marriage because in Timbunke (where she was from) this was not practice. Wife about her kin relationship to Kisanan: via her mother's lineage she called him <i>nyamun</i> ; via her father's line, <i>kanget</i> .
Kabuseli	First wife <i>laua</i>	1955	500 AUD + 1 pig	He indicated that his 1. wife was his real <i>laua</i> , which is why he had to pay such a lot of money. Others disputed this kin status and also the extremely high bride-wealth.
	Second wife <i>yairawga</i>	1965	60 AUD	
Kugua	<i>nyan</i>	1969	200 AUD	
Gowi	First wife <i>na</i>	1935	<i>talimum</i>	He does not recall the amount of bride-wealth he paid for his 2nd, 3rd and 4th wives (all deceased), only his 5th wife is still alive. Only his 1st and 5th wives were "real" wives, he claimed.
	Fifth wife <i>yairagwa</i>	1965	12 AUD + 1 pig	

The original aim of the survey was to record all married couples in the village (Kwedndshange included); however, two or three of them were not around at the time. But I doubt their absence has had any effect on the overall result.

Of the forty-five recorded marriages the distribution by the spouses' kinship statuses is as follows:

12	men married their <i>nyangei</i>
8	men married their <i>yairagwa</i>
5 (4)*	men married their <i>kasragwa</i>
4	men married their <i>nyan</i>
4	men married their <i>nyamei</i>
3 (4)*	men married their <i>laua</i>
2	men married their <i>yanan</i>
2	men married their <i>na</i>
5	marriage relationships remain unclear
Total	
45	marriages
*	Kubeli gave two terms for his wife, <i>kasragwa</i> and <i>laua</i>

As the distribution reveals, sister exchange marriage is the most frequently mentioned arrangement, making up a quarter of all recorded marriages. Second comes the *yai-yanan* relationship. Although said to be the best and most preferred marriage arrangement, in actual fact it only accounts for a fifth of the recorded marriages. Even if one adds the two marriages where the husband was *yai* and the wife *yanan*, one still does not reach the percentage of sister exchange marriages.<sup>84</sup> The marriage rule according to which a man should marry his *na* was confirmed only in two cases. In third position – judging by frequency – we have the so-called *kas-kas* marriage. The term *kas* refers to a reciprocal kin relationship, that is, a woman who refers to her husband as *kasndu* will be referred to by him as *kasragwa*. The rapport between individuals in a *kas-kas* relationship seems to be one of balanced power (speaking in terms of the kinship system) in which none of the two is in a superior or stronger (or, respectively, weaker and inferior) position in terms of kinship reckoning (Bateson 1932: 265-266).

Worth mentioning is that all men and women who did not marry according to the prevailing marriage rules and conventions stated without hesitation that they had married “wrongly” / “crazily” (Tok Pisin: *kranki*). All the people were familiar with the ideal *yai-yanan* form of marriage. Marrying a “mother” (*nyamei*) was

<sup>84</sup> Some interlocutors claimed that the woman always had to be *yai*, and the husband *yanan*; others (albeit a minority) said that it was irrelevant and that either husband or wife could be *yai* and *yanan*, respectively.



deemed particularly wrong but, on the other hand, as long as it did not involve one's birth mother, it was not all that bad. However, it was said that the ancestors did not like to see people marrying "wrongly".

What the above figures do not reveal is how many marriages were effectively based on the sister exchange principle. I came to the conclusion that this kind of liaison was regularly preferred when there was no marriageable *yai* or *na* available yet the aim was to get married "conform to the system". However, sister exchange marriage also exists in an extended form: if a man wishes to get married but has no full sister in a marriageable age, he has the option to "give away" at a later point in time any female relative from his own clan to the clan of his wife's brother in substitution for his own sister.

On a vertical axis, a *yai-yanan* marriage stabilizes the relations between at least three clans,<sup>85</sup> while a *na-abu* marriage does the same on a horizontal axis. In theory, at least, both marriage modes are marked by stability. In contrast, a sister exchange marriage represents an attempt to create a horizontal, reciprocal rapport but at the price of continuity. In the final analysis, the question why ideal marriage relationships are so rarely encountered in real life, although engrained as a model in the people's minds, must remain open. The element of cultural change is certainly of influence here, but does not explain everything.

#### 4.4 Bridewealth

The time for the transfer of bridewealth is determined by the husband and by the wife's brother and father.<sup>86</sup> As mentioned above, in earlier days the bridewealth came in the form of shell money<sup>87</sup> attached to a cord several metres long and placed in front of the bride family's house, tied to a fishing spear.<sup>88</sup> The bride herself was also adorned with shell ornaments, the most conspicuous item being a special headdress called *ambusap*. It consisted of a pleated headgear studded with small shells, reaching down to her back and terminating in a small crocodile head. In addition, the bride, who was anointed with an oily resin called *gwat* and painted red, was richly adorned with further ornaments such as tortoise-shell armlets.<sup>89</sup> The volume, and hence the value of the bridal adornment, stood in a specific relationship to the amount of bridewealth. Nowadays it is common that the bride's family contributes a dowry in the form of money and household items (cooking pots, clothes, paddles,

<sup>85</sup> "Vertical" in the sense of a timeline across the generations in the kinship system.

<sup>86</sup> The Iatmul have no term corresponding to our "bridewealth". But they do use the term *yua kwiriganan* for presenting shell money (*talimbum*).

<sup>87</sup> Since the term shell money has become common parlance, I shall also call it so.

<sup>88</sup> This applies only to the villages of the lower Sepik area; in the remaining area the shell money is tied to painted bark frames.

<sup>89</sup> The resin is obtained by the men. Before tapping a tree the men have to abstain from food and sexual intercourse for a few days.

etc.) amounting to roughly two thirds of the bridewealth's value. This does not seem to be the case in Timbunke and Mindimbit where the bride goes without the benefit of a monetary dowry.

The switch from shell money to Western currency occurred shortly after World War II, around 1950. The transitional period is reflected in the survey on pages . . . . It appears that for an extended period of time, the dowry came in the shape of shell money while the bridewealth was paid in cash.

Around 1948, Gimbun (second eldest brother from a Mairambu lineage) wished to marry the eldest daughter (Namui) of one of the most senior brothers of a Wuenguendshap lineage. One of Namui's brothers had no fancy for shell money. The reason he gave was that shell money would buy you nothing at the store.<sup>90</sup> The bridewealth for Namui was fixed at 290 AUD upon which Gimbun left the village to hire on as a plantation worker in order to earn the required sum. After a year he returned but with only 10 AUD in his pocket. Gau, Gimbun's elder brother, then began planting more tobacco, later taking the harvest to the Korewori district for sale. He also sold his six pigs, three ducks, and numerous chicken. At the time, Mindsh, Gimbun's younger brother, was working in Madang. He transferred all his money to help raise his brother's bridewealth. In the end, they scraped together the 290 AUD and the couple was able to get married.



*Fig. 40: An untypical pair: Gimbun and Namui making preparations for burning lime (1972).*

Today, Namui and Gimbun, who have no children of their own, are something over forty. They are the only younger Iatmul couple I got to know where one could speak of a kind of “truce” between the spouses, even of a certain degree of affection. – For Iatmul standards, Gimbun is quite a gentle man which probably also explains why he is dominated by his younger brother.

Today, bridewealth ranges between 200 and 700 AUD (see also the survey, pp. 120-123). The amount of bride-

<sup>90</sup> Over the course of the last 30 years or so, ideas about “cargo” have surfaced in Kararau time and again; most of them – at least in the last five years – trace back to members of the Wuenguendshap lineage. According to the Village Book 1947-1971 the Australian authorities investigated reported cargo movements in Kararau several times.

wealth depends on a variety of factors: it is highest when the eldest child of a man who ranks as the eldest brother of a clan's senior lineage is involved; for the second oldest daughter it is already distinctly less but still higher than for a daughter of a genealogically insignificant clansman. The volume also hinges on the amount of bridewealth that had previously gone into the marriage of the bride's mother. If this had been substantial, the daughter's marriage is regarded as a good chance to "get back" some of wealth formerly invested. Particularly *yai-yanan* marriages, but also marital unions with a *na*, involve the payment of smaller amounts of money, on the condition that the *yai* had not previously been married. In this case the *yanan* husband was expected repay the former husband the full amount of bridewealth (this holds true for various *yai-yanan* marriages listed in the survey). Still, one gets the impression that, under the growing impact of the monetary system, the bridewealth for *yai* women, too, has risen compared to the former payments in shell money. The reason people give for the comparatively low bridewealth in *yai-yanan* marriages is that this specific form of union consolidates an ongoing relationship between two clans, while other marriage arrangements merely generate discontinuous relationships. In addition, one must take into account that in a *yai* marriage no money or, at the most, only a tenth of the bridewealth, flows back in the form of a dowry.

In a sister exchange marriage, the bridewealth for the two sisters is equal in amount.<sup>91</sup> Based on material collected in Aibom, it shows that bridewealth is lowest when a bride-to-be has lost both parents. It confirms that bridewealth also represents an equivalent of, and appreciation for, the social relationships between two clans generated by marriage.

In Kararau the only such case I came across was that of Sabwandshan and Waani:

Both of Sabwandshan's birth parents had died; up to her marriage, she lived with her adoptive parents. Sabwandshan was an only child, which meant that, under normal circumstances, the bridewealth for her would have been quite substantial. When they got married Waani gave her adoptive parents 100 AUD which is not a lot. But since Sabwandshan was not expected to contribute a dowry (Waani: "Instead, I expect Sabwandshan to give me children."), the 100 dollars represent more than it seems.

In cases where a marriage is deemed inappropriate the amount of bridewealth is usually higher:

Thus, for instance, Kabuseli (clan: Yagum) stated that, already fifteen years ago, he had paid 500 dollars for his first wife to whom he stood in a *wau-laua* relationship.

<sup>91</sup> An example from Aibom (personal communication from G. Schuster): both men were asked to pay 100 *talibum*, 5 *kina* and 3 *skin torosel* (Tok Pisin term for turtle shells) for their wives.

In recent years there have been several marriages with women from other villages, mainly from Gaikorobi, Timbunke, Mindimbit, and Tigowi. Of thirty women, five came from outside villages. For all of them the men paid bridewealth. In earlier days, no bridewealth was paid for women abducted from other villages by force, in contrast to regular marriages concluded with women from outside.

In this context I believe it is significant to note that, in earlier times, villages entertained marriage relationships with certain other villages (as, for instance, in the case of Mindimbit, p. 119) with which they otherwise were linked through head-hunting raids.<sup>92</sup> An otherwise not very reliable interlocutor told me that Kararau and Kandinge once used to exchange women on a regular basis. Bateson (1958: 92) mentions that women were given to enemy villages as “peace offerings”. Based on the material I gathered, all I can say is that, in earlier days, relationships between villages were, in the sense of a principle, based on the exchange of women (marriage) and spears (warfare), with the two entities – women and raids – representing complementary aspects of the relationship.<sup>93</sup> However, to regard the exchange of women as a corollary of warfare would be misleading. Rather, one should view matters from the perspective of balance, detached from the question of cause and effect. This kind of dual relationship (spears and women) does not apply to all villages. Palimbe was an enemy village of Kararau but the two never exchanged women, unlike Timbunke and Mindimbit with whom Kararau was at war but exchanged women on a regular basis all the same. People of Kararau consider themselves as belonging to the same group of villages, called Woliagwi (Eastern Iatmul), as Timbunke, Mindimbit, and Tambunum. If I understood my interlocutors correctly, when on a headhunting raid, men of, for example, the Mairambu clan of Kararau would never personally kill a member of the same clan in one of these villages but, at the same time, would not stop others from doing it.<sup>94</sup> In some way, this practice is somewhat reminiscent of the rule of exogamy in marriage.

No bridewealth, or at least only a minimal amount, was paid in the case of intra-clan marriages, which occurred only under very special circumstances. Bateson (1958: 253) commented on one such incidence as follows: “‘She was a fine woman’

<sup>92</sup> Kararau’s traditional enemies were Palimbe, Kanganamun, Mindimbit and Timbunke.

<sup>93</sup> The saying “we marry the people we fight” (Meggitt 1964: 218) seems not only to apply to the Highlands although the Iatmul would probably not totally subscribe to the concept; marriages beyond the village were always less common than unions within the village.

<sup>94</sup> Members of the Mairambu clan killed a man of the Mandali clan in Mindimbit around 1920. They carried off his head to Kararau where they staged a large feast in celebration. Then a man from Mindimbit, he also a member of the Mairambu clan, appeared. He entered the Mairambu men’s house (men’s house Muintshembit), held up the dead man’s head by the hair and said: “I have clan brothers in Kararau, let’s celebrate the successful raid.” Although Mindimbit was one of Kararau’s traditional enemies, it would never have occurred to the Mairambu men to kill their clan brother from Mindimbit. This type of clan solidarity, however, apparently rarely posed a threat to the cohesion of village communities.

– so they married her inside the clan.”<sup>95</sup> In Kararau I came across a similar incident but in this case it involved a woman who occupied an important position in the genealogical system. In this context a woman “who has a lot” refers to the only child of a senior brother of a clan’s leading lineage.<sup>96</sup> If she should marry into a different clan it would mean that the clan’s landed property (gardens, small clan-owned sections of streams, forest, etc.) would pass on to her children who, however, would be members of their father’s clan. The same goes for the clan’s body of esoteric knowledge; it could pass into the property of a different clan, thus jeopardizing the conventional transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. To prevent this, a (insignificant) member of the same clan marries the woman “who has a lot”, thus warranting that the clan’s myths, land, and list of totemic names remain property of the clan.

Labuanda was the only child of an important Nangusime man. Shortly before his death he is said to have passed on to his daughter a number of spells and myths in addition to substantial tracts of land. Given her prominence, Labuanda should have been married to a Nangusime man but at the time there was no suitable Nangusime man available, so she was free to marry whom she wished. Her husband Wanyo (from Wuenguendshap clan) held no discretionary power over Labuanda’s land and gardens, but eventually the property would pass over to her children who, of course, belonged to their father’s clan.

A further case is Namui:

She was the eldest child of an important man of the Wuenguendshap clan. When she married she received as a gift a tract of land. But this “gift” is limited in time: Namui’s (adopted) children have the right to “eat” from their mother’s land, but when she dies, the land will fall back to the Wuenguendshap clan.

A further way of preserving the clan from decline (apart from adoption where men usually help out by giving away a child to a real or classificatory brother, while women do the same, usually for a childless sister) is for a man to pass on to his only (female) child his entire estate, normally with the provision that, should his daughter bear a son in the future, he be given a name from his mother’s father’s clan and not, as normally is the case, a name from his father’s clan. In this way the son guarantees the continued existence of his mother’s clan, along with the estate his mother brought into the marriage. I was unable to ascertain what influence this arrangement would have on the question of bridewealth, since no such case has occurred in recent years.

<sup>95</sup> In Aibom, people referred to a young heavy woman as a “*gudpela fatpela meri*” (Tok Pisin for good, fat woman). She was expected to give birth to many children, which was why she was betrothed within her natal clan (personal comm. Gisela Schuster).

<sup>96</sup> Normally such a man is the leading land owner and holder of ritual knowledge.

### Marriage without bridewealth

During our stay in the village we witnessed an exceptional marriage in which no bridewealth was paid.

Soni (clan: Emasa) had no children of his own but was given a little girl in adoption whom he raised as his own daughter. When she was old enough, he sent her to school at the mission in Timbunke. There the young woman got to know a young man from the grasslands south of the Sepik who was working there as a teacher. The two moved in together and the young woman soon gave birth to a child. This would have been the right time to legalize the marriage by paying bridewealth. Soni, who had no son of his own, decided to adopt the man into his own clan to avoid having to give away his only child. The official adoption took place in a ceremonial setting. Men of the Emasa clan planted a number of trees and shrubs on the village ground in the ward where the Emasa lived (Kraimbit). The main tree was a tree called “Waani”.<sup>97</sup> It was here that the actual adoption ritual took place. Soni, or to be more precise, Dshoimbange, a classificatory elder brother (?) of Soni, bestowed on the groom a name ending in *-aban*. Names with an *-aban* ending are usually reserved for a sister’s son (*laua*). When we later asked Dshoimbange about his choice, he was unable, or unwilling, to explain, simply maintaining that this was how it was done. A possible explanation is that if Soni had given the man a name in the way fathers usually give their sons a name, the young married couple – that is, his daughter and the adopted groom – would have stood, following the rules of kinship, in a brother-sister relationship. The discussion between the Emasa men and the adoptive son was conducted in Tok Pisin as neither of the parties spoke the other’s language. The groom was accompanied by his elder brother who stated that his own clan had no objections against the adoption since it still had enough young men at home, but added that he expected that, one day, the Emasa would return a child to his clan to compensate for the loss. However, Dshoimbange and Soni were not willing to discuss the matter, claiming it was too early for such a discussion but that, at the moment, it was out of the question. Then the councillor of Kararau and some senior men addressed the meeting. They told the young man that he would now have to adapt to the “ways of Kararau” and could not go back to the grasslands. He was now a man of Kararau and would have to learn the local idiom and live like the other villagers. The young man agreed to the terms.

The Emasa men went on to explain that he would not have to pay bridewealth because he was not taking the woman away to his own village, instead he was now a man of the Emasa clan. After the elders had had their say, the councillor asked the

<sup>97</sup> Waani is also the name of a mythical crocodile. Waani ranks as an Emasa ancestor.

village women whether any of them had anything to say. This was not the case. The meeting was followed by a large feast to which all villagers were invited.<sup>98</sup> Two pigs were killed for the purpose. Soni paid for the costs of the event.

### Transferring the bridewealth

Apart from the adoption described above, we witnessed three transfers of bridewealth, two of which I describe here. The first wedding was held in Kamenimbit on 31 October 1972.<sup>99</sup>

Mangen (groom, clan: Mairambu) and Garagunda (bride, clan: Bowi-Nangusime) had already been living together for one or two years. Up to then the marriage had produced no offspring. The bride's father had demanded from the groom and his relatives a sum of 700 AUD for his daughter. The reason for this considerable amount was that Garagunda was his eldest child. Moreover, Mangen had worked several years for a copper company in Bougainville and had been able to save 500 AUD. Besides, back then the father had paid a considerable amount for the bride's mother, now it was up to the daughter to "refund" her father's family. Since the marriage was designed to unite members of the two opposing moieties (Garagunda belonged to the Nyauai, Mangen to the Nyamei moiety), the wedding was staged according to ancestral law, at least that was how people explained why a traditional feast was required.

In the early hours of the scheduled day, the bridewealth slit gong sign (*yonmi*) was sounded in the groom's ward, informing everyone about how much money the groom was prepared to pay. Men gathered around a table in Mangen's father's house. Mangen's brother listed the names of the people willing to contribute to the missing two hundred dollars in a book. Most of the donors were from the Nyamei moiety but there were some Nyauai people among them, too: for instance, classificatory mothers, who themselves were Nyauai but had married Nyamei men, as well as children of originally Nyamei women who had married into the opposite moiety. The relatives raised the outstanding 200 AUD, with donations ranging from two to twenty dollars.

<sup>98</sup> As on all festive occasions involving the whole village, the food was first divided into two large portions, one for the men, the other for the women. The men's food was carried over to the side near the water (regarded as the superior side) while the women's food was carried to the opposite side (*hap bilong bush*), meaning the side facing the forest. Then both the men's as well as women's food was sub-divided into three portions representing the three parts of the village. After everybody had received their share of food, the women went to sit under a house where they shared the food with their children.

<sup>99</sup> Kamenimbit is actually only the name of a men's house, but here it refers to the village. The people of Kamenimbit feel they belong to Kararau. Kamenimbit is a comparatively new settlement founded by a break-away group from Kararau.

Since the evening before, the men had been singing Mairambu *sagi* and *sui* in the groom's house. They formed a circle and sung solemnly to the accompaniment of an hourglass drum. The singing continued without interruption on the appointed day. Now and again, women wearing traditional grass skirts and adorned with green leaves inserted in their pierced earlobes got up to dance. Later, the women retired to a different part of the house, while the men sat down to a meal. Now it was the women's turn to sing, again to the accompaniment of an hourglass drum (Tok Pisin: *kundu*). They too sang *sagi*, relying on the same texts as the men, but performing them in a different manner. While the male version was solemn and serious, the women's style was more cheerful. It didn't take long until one of the men got up and wanted to take the hourglass drum away from the women but when he saw that we were recording the singing, he returned the drum.

The groom's mother picked a woman and positioned herself in front of her. Knees slightly bent and occasionally slapping each other on the back, they began hopping to and fro and, with their hands held at belly level, thrusting their bodies back and forth, with the groom's mother uttering "sssst, sssst" sounds. It was all too evident that the two women were imitating the act of sexual intercourse (as confirmed by onlookers later on). Then the women let go of each other and burst out laughing. In the bride's house, roughly two miles away from the groom's residence, the men sang Nangusime *sagi*. The dowry had been readied and was shown to anybody wishing to see it. It consisted of 304 dollars; these were lying in a metal suitcase among a heap of new clothes, cigarettes, cloths, and numerous other items. Garagunda's father had contributed a hundred dollars, the rest had been raised by relatives. Again the donations were meticulously listed. Next to the suitcase were a bush knife, an axe, pots, pans and crockery, two radios, a sewing machine, and a large mosquito net – all items intended as part of the bride's trousseau. The traditional part of the dowry was laid out in front of the house: eighteen sago baking dishes, seven fire bowls, six sago cake string bags, fifteen fish traps, three small string bags, and three carved women's paddles. The objects were marked with two red lines made of earth pigments crossing at right angles (the sign made of red earth is referred to as *kipma*). In addition, a pig purchased for 60 AUD in a neighbouring village was being cooked.<sup>100</sup> At the bride's residence, too, the women danced, but they refrained from singing – unlike in the groom's house – leaving the men to do the singing and drum beating.

Shortly before midday, the groom's male relatives set up a table in front of the house close to the men's house where the *yonmi* had been sounded and

<sup>100</sup> The people of Kamenimbit do not keep pigs. Kararau slowly began rearing pigs again in 1972. For several years the SDA Mission had been active in the village; according to them, breeding pigs and eating pork are forbidden. Reference to similar incidents is to be found in a Patrol Report of 1956 (S. Yeaman) as well as in an undated report.



spread out the money for the bridewealth. Some senior men of the Mairambu clan invoked the mythical clan ancestors by calling their names. Then the groom picked up a gourd and sprinkled lime over the money, calling out: “You are free to go, you are no longer one of us”, followed again by the sounding of the *garamut* (Tok Pisin for slit gong). Next to the table were 35 fish traps and 20 baskets. Together with the table and the money, people carried the items to the bride’s residence. Here the money was spread out again meticulously. Some Nangusime men called out the names of their clan’s first ancestors before sprinkling lime over the money and gathering up the bills.<sup>101</sup>

After this the Mairambu left again; they were not allowed to wait for the bride who, in the meantime, had been adorned in European fashion. She was not wearing a wedding dress in the strict sense of the term, but she had been clothed in a new white dress with a white cloth over the shoulders and a pair of reflecting sunglasses covering her eyes. Instead of the traditional red, the bride had daubed her skin with white pigment (otherwise the colour of death and mourning). On her head she wore the feather of a *maan* bird, a symbol of great significance since the *maan* ranked as an ancestor of the Nangusime clan. After about an hour, the dowry was transported by canoe to the groom’s house, as soon as the Mairambu men had indicated by means of the *garamut* to their Nangusime counterparts that it was now time to come.

The bride came on foot, accompanied by her (classificatory) brother who was carrying a two-metre long staff adorned with *kowar* leaves belonging to the Nangusime clan.<sup>102</sup> Money, too, was attached to the stick. Apart from this, the brother was also carrying Gargunda’s string bag. A further classificatory brother was carrying on his shoulders a fire bowl which contained smouldering coconut shells. The fire had been taken from the bride’s house and was now being brought to her new home.

At the foot of the steps to the groom’s house, Mangan’s male *na* lay prostrate, bidding Garagunda to step over them (see cover picture). On the steps to the house she was welcomed not by Mangan’s (blind) father but by a classificatory brother of her spouse instead. The brother’s father had died some time ago, making the man move up a genealogical step to fill in his father’s position. He held in his hand a staff adorned with *kowar* of the Mairambu clan.<sup>103</sup> The staff had a crooked end with which he touched Garagunda on her shoulders, calling her *nyamei* upon which she replied *nyan*. The bride’s

<sup>101</sup> Garagunda’s mother’s sister (her birth mother had died) received 10 AUD and a new dress. It was told that she had often held young Garagunda on her lap and that the young girl had often soiled her clothes. The money and the dress were regarded as a kind of compensation. Such a gift is referred to as *yogula*.

<sup>102</sup> The Tok Pisin term *kowar* refers to different kinds of plants used for ritual and healing purposes. Each clan has its own set of plants (on the mythical background to these plants, see pp. 229-232). In Iatmul these “magic leaves” are called *kamuin* and *lagi*, respectively.

<sup>103</sup> These staffs are called *nguai* (the same term is used for a male Ego’s patrilineal grandfather).

brother, who was carrying the Nangusime staff, lifted it upward until the two staffs touched after which the two men exchanged tokens.<sup>104</sup> The young woman entered the house alone where she was welcomed by Mangen's sisters. They sang a song, dancing to it and using coconut shells as clappers. Now and again they uttered swishing and hissing sounds, "ssst, sssst". This women's *singsing* is called *noguanbo*; it was performed as soon as Garagunda crossed the threshold to the house. Then Mangen's sisters and mothers lay flat on the floor of the house, making Garagunda step over them. Following this, the sisters adopted a sitting position. The *kandshe* and *yau* (from Mangen's perspective) lifted up their skirts, turned towards the sitting women and slid, with their backsides facing them, from the face past the belly downward to their feet. This scene was repeated roughly twenty times in changing partnerships. Mangen's mothers were not involved in the scene. The bride was then asked to sit on the floor on a mat of coconut leaves; she sat there with closed and straight legs whilst some of the women repeated the act of sliding down her body. Having done this, the fire bowl was carried to the part of the house which Garagunda was to inhabit in future. The now merely glowing coconut shells were rekindled and wood added to the bowl so that there was a real fire. The women – above all Mangen's mother – continued to dance through the house for a while until the ceremony (if one could call it such) ended abruptly. The string bag was also hung up in the house and would remain there as long as Garagunda lived.



Fig. 41: Marriage ceremony in Kwedndshange: the bridewealth consisted not only of money but also of equipment women use for fishing and cooking (1973).



Fig. 42: Marriage ceremony in Kwedndshange: the dowry consists of fish traps, baskets, fire bowls, sago storage pots, and sago baking dishes. In the foreground a sprouting coconut symbolizes the bride's hoped-for fertility (1973).

<sup>104</sup> According to one source, the *nyan* (that is, her father-in-law) also received a *wau* name from the bride's brother.



*Fig. 43: Two women, the groom's mother, Uemanoli, and Maabma (the groom's father's elder sister) are dressed as men; they are looking and calling for the bride at her father's home (1973).*

The second marriage ceremony was held in Kwedndshange on 18 January 1973.

For some weeks before the ceremonial exchange, the female relatives of the bride, Betshiyimbunagui (clan: Yaat, moiety: half Nyauai, half Nyamei), had been busy producing as much sago as they could.<sup>105</sup> A small delegation of women then took the sago to the potter's village of Aibom where they exchanged it for four fire bowls, two sago storage pots, eight sago baking dishes, and a few other household items made of clay. Betshiyimbunagui had been living with her husband, Wutnagwan (Yamandane lineage, Mairambu clan), for about two years. While the Yaat resided in Kwedndshange, the "subsidiary part of Kararau", Wutnagwan lived in the main village. The couple had a roughly nine-month-old daughter.

The men sounded the bridewealth *garamut* for the first time on 17 January. The bridewealth had been fixed at 300 dollars, but the signal the men played on the slit gong referred to only 200 dollars. Since the house Wutnagwan and



*Fig. 44: In front of the entrance to the groom's house, Uemanoli and Maabma were the first to lie down; they were joined by further relatives of the groom. The bride (with baby) then stepped over them. Parts of the dowry (personal belongings in a suitcase) and the fire bowl containing a smouldering fire were also carried over the prostrate bodies by the bride's relatives (1973).*

<sup>105</sup> Different interlocutors confirmed unanimously, that the ancestors of the Yaat clan had once belonged to the Nyamei moiety but that the more recent forbears whom they still remembered had been Nyauai, which is why Yaat is half Nyamei and half Nyauai.



Fig. 45: As soon as the bride had entered the groom's house, the latter's female relatives performed *sora* (*naven*), consisting of imitating sexual intercourse with the bride and her female relatives and by beating them (1973).

his father Kandshingau were inhabiting was almost falling to pieces, they decided to move the ceremony to the house of a man from the same clan. Here the men sang *Mairambu sagi* in the night of 17 to 18 January. The next morning they began collecting the money for the bridewealth. The groom and his father contributed 80 dollars; the remaining 200 dollars came from close and distant kin,

including some female relatives. In the bride's house, too, they were busy collecting money for the dowry, listing all the contributions meticulously in a book. The dowry amounted to 100 dollars in cash, supplemented by a number of clothes, cloths, frying pans, clay pots, baskets, and fish traps as the bride's trousseau. While collecting the contributions in the groom's house, the men sang *sagi*. Actually, they were putting so much effort into their singing that one got the impression that the entire marriage enterprise depended on the correct rendition of the *sagi*. In the meantime, the women sang *mbai* – songs which also figure in other *naven* ceremonies – and later *mali*. *Mbai* and *sagi* are normally men's songs but women are allowed to sing them too, at least parts of them.

Similar to the wedding in Kamenimbit, the women's singing and dancing became ever more noisy and exuberant, with their shrieks and laughter increasingly drowning the men's dignified *sagi* singing. The men were clearly not happy about this and called to the women in Tok Pisin: "*Yupela giaman tasol!*", meaning "you're not doing it properly", or "you're merely faking it".

Wutnagwan's mother, Uemanoli, played a key role in the event. She wore a grass skirt, daubed her body with white earth pigments, and was adorned with leaves. Holding a stick in her hand, from time to time exchanging it for a short broom, she went in search of her *kandshe* (real and classificatory sisters of her husband as well as the wives of her brothers). Owing to the vagaries of the classificatory system, the *kandshe* category also included small girls. When she caught one of the *kandshe* – who desperately tried to evade her – she would hold her and beat her on the back, calling "*wuna kandshe, wuna*

*kandshe*" (my *kandshe*, my *kandshe*). Occasionally matters nearly got out of hand, especially when Uemanoli started throwing hefty kicks at the sisters of Kandshingau (her husband), but not without also being on the receiving end.

The explanation for this type of behaviour was always the same: it was said that the "*hap bilong papa*" (Tok pisin for father's side) was looking for the "*hap bilong mama*" (mother's side). When the "men" hit the "women" on the back, the latter would turn around crying and shout: "What have I done, why are you beating me?", upon which all the women would burst out laughing. The scene was repeated many times. Kerunda, who was married to a man of the Yamandane lineage of the Mairambu clan, took up position with her legs apart, holding a gourd in front of her like a penis and in the other hand a lime spatula like a dagger. She began waiving the dagger in front of some children's faces, kicking them at the same time, until they began crying. The "mothers" got up and formed a line, while the female *ababu* (matrilateral grandmothers) performed a dance around the money on the table.

In the afternoon the groom's affinal male relatives sounded an hourglass drum, marking the Tipmeaman fish, one of the Mairambu ancestors. The Tok Pisin explanation was as follows: *ol i sutim pis* – now they are spearing fish. Meanwhile the money had been spread out on a table in front of the house. Kama recited the names of the Mairambu ancestors after which Kandshingau sprinkled lime over the money and called: "Now you are free to go!" The Yamandane men carried the money to a property belonging to the bride's clan, the Yaat, along with thirty-two fish traps and several small baskets. In turn, Kabuseli recited the names of the Yaat ancestors and, once more, lime was sprinkled over the money before being handed over to the bride's father, Kabe. The bride was sent down to the stream to wash and dress in new clothes. She too was daubed with white earth. Then once more an hourglass drum rang out, this time indicating the Ledndima fish, one of the mythical Yaat ancestors, giving the same explanation as before: they are spearing fish.

Following this, food was carried across to the groom's house. In the main it consisted of a cooked dog (the bride's father had been unable to procure a pig). In the meantime, Uemanoli, the groom's mother, and Maabma, Kandshingau's elder sister, had donned men's clothes and now presented themselves as true braggarts. They imitated playing the guitar (an instrument exclusively reserved for men), showed off by smoking and speaking loudly, and strode majestically through the groom's house. They began pushing and bumping against other women until they finally picked on one woman, threw her to the ground and jumped on her, leaving no doubt that they were performing a sexual act. This was repeated several times. The "raped" women all belonged to the *mama lain* (that is, women married to men of the Yamande clan). Then they let off from their victims and turned their attention to others present, slapping them

in the face with their open hands. These brawls, too, usually ended in “sexual intercourse”. For the women this was nothing but great fun. During the scene no men were present in the house. Prior to it some men had looked in once and again and tried to put an end to the hubbub, telling the women to start reciting the names of the Mairambu ancestors instead. The women gathered around and tried – like the men – to recite the names in a dignified, even solemn manner. They tried but were unable to get the list of names right and, after about fifteen minutes, pandemonium broke loose again.

Subsequently the two women dressed as men (Uemanoli and Maabma) left the house and proceeded to the bride’s dwelling. Here they went to the back of the house, calling out for their “wife”, that is, the bride. They searched for her everywhere, behind each house post, but they did not enter the house. In the end they left again, empty-handed. Following this, the bride was accompanied to the groom’s house by her female relatives, together with the bridewealth. In front of the ladder to the house, the women, first and foremost Uemanoli and Maabma, still dressed as men, lay down on the ground, followed by the others. With the baby in her arm, the bride stepped over the prostrate bodies. A classificatory brother, Dshoimbange, was brandishing a pig spear to which *kowar* leaves of the Yaat clan were attached. One of Betshiyimbunagui’s other classificatory brothers carried a fire bowl containing smouldering coconut shells to the groom’s house. Yet another held a sprouting coconut. The belief was that if the shoot broke off, Betshiyimbunagui would bear no more children.<sup>106</sup> The pig spear with the *kowar* leaves was handed over to the groom upon which the bride began ascending the ladder to the house. At the top she was pulled into the house by one of the groom’s classificatory sisters. Here the women were already chanting the *noguanbo singsing*, using coconut shells cut in half as clappers.<sup>107</sup> Then, once more, they lay down on the floor and the bride stepped over their bodies before sitting down on spread-out green coconut leaves. Next, the two women dressed as men, Uemanoli and Maabma, both referred to as *yau*, pounced on the bride and, bending over her, simulated the act of sexual intercourse. The *nyangei* sat on the floor while the *yau* and *kandshe* slid down the body of the seated bride with their backs turned towards her (Tok Pisin: *ol i rabim as* – “rubbing their behinds”). The fire bowl was carried to a part of the house reserved for Betshiyimbunagui and lit. This marked the end of the bridewealth ceremony.

<sup>106</sup> The bride only received a coconut as a gift at her marriage if she had already given birth to a child. Other interlocutors disagreed, saying that any woman entering marriage received a sprouting coconut. At the marriage ceremony in Kamenimbit we had seen no such gift. Others confirmed our observation initially but then changed their mind so that nothing definite can be said about this practice.

<sup>107</sup> For the wording of the *noguanbo* see p. 145-146.

### Composition of the bridewealth

After the bride's father had received the bridewealth money, he immediately began paying back the donors the money they had contributed to the dowry, with each donor receiving double the amount he/she had originally contributed.<sup>108</sup> The 100 AUD of the dowry were also used to repay the donors (however, in this case, only the amount actually donated was refunded).

About a month after the marriage, I asked the groom's father for permission to inspect the book in which he had listed the single donations. Unfortunately, the list of donors was no longer complete because the 100 AUD dowry had been used to refund some of the contributions. These donations had never been entered into the book, and Kandshingau could not remember, or did not want to disclose, who at the time had contributed so much money.

As far as the remaining two hundred dollars are concerned, we got the following list:

Name	Clan	Kin reference (i.e. term donor uses for the groom)	Sum
Pampandaun	Korbmui	<i>tawontu</i>	10 AUD
James	Emasa	<i>suambu</i>	5 AUD
Uanoli	Mairambu	<i>laua</i>	10 AUD
Yangi (child of Kabuseli)	Yagum	<i>yanan</i>	2 AUD
Kabuseli	Yagum	<i>nyamun</i>	2 AUD
Wolimoe	Korbmui	<i>laua</i>	10 AUD
Maem	Emasa	<i>laua</i>	9 AUD
Nyauendima	Semai	<i>nyait</i>	2 AUD
Tshui	Wuenguendshap	<i>nyait</i>	10 AUD
Agrimbit	Emasa	<i>nyait</i>	5 AUD
Kama	Kandshene (Mairambu)	<i>nyamun</i>	10 AUD
Maabma	Yamandane (Mairambu)	<i>kanget</i>	10 AUD
Yamanabi	Mairambu	<i>nyamun</i>	4 AUD
Gusa	Yamandane	<i>kanget</i>	10 AUD
Angumali	Lenga	<i>nyamun</i>	4 AUD
Gimbun	Yamandane	<i>kasndu</i>	2 AUD
Gau	Yamandane	<i>kasndu</i>	2 AUD

<sup>108</sup> I did not observe this personally.

Gumba (child of Woli-ragwa)	Emasa	<i>nondu</i>	2 AUD
Kabusmali	Sameanguat	<i>nyamun</i>	2 AUD
Numbukua	Sameanguat	<i>nyait</i>	2 AUD
		Subtotal	113 AUD
Wutnagwan (groom)			60 AUD
Kandshingau (father of groom)			20 AUD
		Total	193 AUD

As regards the amount of the donations, it shows that the two women Maabma and Gusa played a prominent role (Gusa is a member of the SDA Mission; according to own statement this is the reason why she kept a low profile during the ceremony's more bawdy and dramatic scenes; however, it did not keep her from spurring on Maabma and Uemanoli). The various *laua* supported their *wau* substantially in raising money for the bridewealth, while in Tshui's case his special relationship with Wutnagwan also finds expression in the donated sum (Uemanoli was once the wife of Tshui's now deceased father, but she is not Tshui's mother). The comparatively high sum donated by Pampandaun is not really explainable in terms of clan membership or kin relationship. At least he does live in the same part of the village as Wutnagwan. Kama, the grand old man of Kararau, is head of the Mairambu clan. He was responsible for the feast's correct protocol; this might also explain his substantial contribution.

As far as the already refunded donations are concerned, I by and large have to rely on conjectures. I only know that Wanyo, the groom's only biological brother (same mother as Wutnagwan, but different fathers, *wanbel* in Tok Pisin), according to his own account, contributed 50 dollars and that this sum did not have to be refunded. Biet, whose house served as venue for most of the bridewealth feast and who belongs to the same clan as Wutnagwan, probably also contributed a substantial sum. I received no information as to the amount but I gathered that he had been refunded immediately after the feast.

When Kandshingau showed me the list of sponsors, I was rather surprised that three women, and not their husbands, had also contributed to covering the costs, not least because men had told me on various occasions that the business of "wife purchase" (in Tok Pisin one always refers to this as *baim meri* – buying a woman) was a men's affair. Moreover, I had been told, again by men, that women do not have the power of disposition over the monetary part of their dowry. A case in support of this view was Betshiyimbunagui's dowry which had been used to refund payments made earlier on. Later I found out that (see the life history of Kanabindshua), in



earlier days, when the bridewealth was paid in shell and not Western money, the women had considerably more to say as to how their dowry was put to use.<sup>109</sup> It was often used to fund the marriages of other men of the husband's clan. To what extent the women could decide on for whose marriage the dowry was to be used remains unclear. They certainly did have a say and made use of this right. But undoubtedly the switch from shell to cash money has come with a shift of the power of disposition in favour of the men. All large sums of money – as shown above in the context of tobacco cultivation – are managed by men. A further aspect worth taking into consideration here is that only men have the opportunity to earn money through paid labour (plantation work, at mission stations, in towns). This, too, might have an influence on why the dowry today is managed by the husbands and not the women themselves.

#### An interpretation of the bridewealth ceremony

As the descriptions of the two bridewealth ceremonies (in Kamenimbit and in Kwendndshange) go to show, the events do not match in all details. However, one striking fact is that both sides (that is, the groom's as well as the bride's clan) give each other fish traps, in other words, we are dealing with an act of direct exchange. Fish traps are not only devices produced and used exclusively used by women, they are also considered female. Bateson (1958: 21) sees in them a symbol of the vagina. Thus it comes as an even bigger surprise that the groom's side present the bride's clan with fish traps. Francis Korn (1971 and 1973) has pointed out that shell money is considered a male gift, while food is regarded as its female counterpart. On the whole, this equation also seems to apply in Kararau, although not necessarily down to the last detail. In other words, food and money are not equivalent gifts. One could interpret the exchange of fish traps – reciprocal gifts – as to mean that the wife-receiving clan is symbolically returning a wife to the givers in the form of fish traps or at least is committing itself to reciprocate with one of its own women at a later date. The fish traps which a woman takes with her to her new home (as part of the dowry) underline the fact that a woman is being ceded to a different clan. The exchange of fish traps stands for the concept of mutual give and take, a principle highly developed among the Iatmul, most prominently expressed in the case of a sister-exchange marriage. – However, my interlocutors themselves had no really meaningful explanation for this mutual exchange of fish traps.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>109</sup> With regard to Palimbe, Florence Weiss told me that in earlier days a young woman would use her dowry (in the form of shell money) to have another woman purchase sago for her at the market during her first pregnancy. How common and widespread this was is difficult to say.

<sup>110</sup> After the death of a man in Aibom, two women from the deceased's mother's clan as well as his sister and his wife spent the time until the main mortuary feast in the "house of mourning", working on forty-nine fish traps. On the occasion of the mortuary feast, the fish traps were embellished with totemic flowers from the deceased's mother's clan and displayed in front of the

### Behaviour patterns of men and women

The two bridewealth ceremonies brought out the difference between behaviour patterns of men and women very clearly. Bateson delineated the topic of male and female ethos in his book *Naven* (1958: 123).

While the men attached great value to formality and ritual protocol, solemnly recited the names of the clan ancestors, and dealt with the financial side of the transaction with due diligence, the women behaved casually, playfully, even raucously at times. Among other things, this found expression in the evident identification of the groom's mother with her husband and that of the groom's father's sister with her brother (referred to in Tok Pisin as *papameri*, that is, "female father"). These scenes most likely related to the task of underpinning the ties between the husband's clan and the women married into the clan, and women married out of the clan, respectively, through ritual enactment. However, the women did not emulate the solemn, reverent ritual demeanour the men habitually displayed, but acted spontaneously and played it out in an easy-going, casual manner, caricaturing their male counterparts. As far as the two women's identification with the groom's father is concerned, it is worth noting that the groom's mother is referred to as *yau* by a female Ego while a male Ego uses the same term to designate his father's sister (see Bateson 1958: 215). Thus it seems that a wife has a similar relationship with her mother-in-law as the husband has with his father's sister. During the entire ceremony the two women, Uemanoli and Maabma, were referred to as *yau*.

Trying to interpret the beatings meted out by the *yau* to their *kandshe* is more difficult. A female Ego uses the term *kandshe* to designate her HFBD [husband's father's brother's daughter], her HZ [husband's sister], and her BW [brother's wife]. The fact that, in kin terms, the HFB is identical with the HF, explains the term. The BW stands in the same relationship to the female Ego as the Ego does to the other *kandshe*. The tie between the husband's younger sisters and their brother is at least as strong as between husband and wife, certainly in "emotional" terms; indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the bond between brother and sister is even stronger. Thus the relationship between Ego and her *kandshe* also carries a touch of rivalry. This could possibly suggest that, in ceremonial terms, Ego and her *kandshe* are carrying out an underlying conflict.

Stepping over a prostrate relative in rituals is common to many parts of Melanesia, just as women are forbidden to step over the body of a man in everyday life.<sup>111</sup> Stepping over male and female relatives (as in Kamenimbit)<sup>112</sup> or only female relatives

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house of mourning. Later they were given to members of the deceased's patrilineal clan. – Information from Gisela Schuster.

<sup>111</sup> Meggitt (1964: 209) provides evidence for this in the Highlands.

<sup>112</sup> Kama maintained that this was wrong. The men should not have prostrated themselves, but they had been carried away by the atmosphere of the ceremony, hence the "mistake".

(in the case of Kwedndshange) is called *sora* in Iatmul, in Tok Pisin *fani* (funny). One man said that the same was done when a *laua* built a house for himself. The *wau* would lie on the ground and the *laua* would step over him; this, too, is described as *sora*. The same man offered a further example: when, in earlier days, a headhunting party returned from a successful raid the men would be greeted at the banks of the river by the Tshoshi and Dimasholi.<sup>113</sup> The wives of the successful warrior's brothers would wade out towards him and, while he was still standing in the canoe, start beating and splashing him with water. The headhunter's *wau* would call him by the name he had once given him. This scene, too, is referred to as *sora*. Bateson describes a *naven* scene staged upon the return of a successful headhunter to the village (Bateson 1958: 20). All the women stripped off their clothes and lay naked on the ground in front of the respective man's house. The headhunter, who had killed a human being for the first time, was made to step over the prostrate women with his head turned to the side so that he would not see the women's genitalia while the latter commented on their vulvae with the words: "That so small a place out of which this big man came." The only women he did not step over were his wife and his sisters. His sister accompanied him and pretended to grasp the other women's genitalia. Upon reaching the wife of the headhunter's elder brother she called: "A vulva!" upon which the woman replied: "No! A penis!"

In some way or another, stepping over the prostrate women seems to touch upon the headhunter's origin, his birth. Unfortunately Bateson includes no information as to the kin relationship between the headhunter and the respective women. His mother was certainly among them, just as his wife and sisters were excluded from the line-up. The facts indicate that the performance is, in a way, meant to celebrate the headhunter's birth by a woman.

But let us return to the bridewealth ceremony. Disregarding the case of Kamenimbit for the moment, we recall that the bride stepped over women of Yamandane descent and women married to Yamandane men, whereby all of them represented men, at least to a certain degree. Setting this against the description above, one notices that here the women involved are all linked to the husband's clan either as descendants or affines. In the headhunter scene it appears that we are dealing with women belonging to the mother's generation (or, to be terminologically more inclusive, with women married to the headhunter's father generation). Thus, when the bride steps over the bodies she is not addressing her own birth but "promising" to give birth in the future in order to secure the continuation of the Yamandane lineage.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>113</sup> These names were given as the general term for women in the Middle Sepik area. The same terms are found in myths.

<sup>114</sup> This "stepping over" probably relates to a similar practice common to many parts of Papua New Guinea (but not encountered among the Iatmul). Schmitz (1960: 206-207) – to cite just one example – mentions that among the Gwamak of the Upper Nankina a woman and her newborn child have to crawl between the legs of relatives (?) at the end of the ritual birth period.

Pregnant and menstruating women are under no circumstances allowed to step over objects or food meant for her husband lest he fall ill or prematurely grow old (in Tok Pisin the term is *skin bilong man i go lus* – the man’s skin becomes slack). That being so, when a woman steps over men’s bodies (as in the case of Kamenimbit) or over women representing men (as in Kwedndshange) we are dealing with a ritual inversion of the normal rules of conduct: instead of fear and distrust (as with the common taboo), the men lying on the floor are ritually expressing their acceptance of the new, outside woman into their clan by letting her step over them. The case of Kamenimbit, where the bride stepped over her male *na* (to be more precise, the groom’s FZS), remains somewhat of a mystery. Whether or not it is linked to the marriage rule that a male Ego may marry his patrilineal cross-cousin remains an open question.

#### 4.5 The relationship between wife givers and wife takers

From the outside perspective, the two clans (that is, the groom’s and the bride’s) are more or less equal in standing and it would be misleading to say that one was ranked higher than the other (see Korn 1971: 117), all the more so considering the exchange of bridewealth and dowry. Besides, each “acquisition of a woman” is offset by a subsequent “transfer of a woman” in the opposite direction. On top of that, the exchange of clan specific, *kowar*-decorated staffs between the two parties seems to indicate a status of equality.

Possibly this was not the case in earlier days. At least a specific ceremony reported from Aibom as well as Palimbe seems to suggest something along this line, although I do not know whether the ceremony was also performed in Kararau.<sup>115</sup> Still, for the sake of (relative) completeness I shall briefly describe it here. In the case that the bride was the eldest child it was not uncommon to have a “name competition” in front of the men’s house to which the bride’s father belonged.<sup>116</sup> There, the groom’s relatives had to guess the name given to the fish trap the bride was supposed to bring into the marriage as well as the bird of paradise feather which the bride wore in her hair.<sup>117</sup> These name competitions could go on for hours and ended when one of the groom’s relatives thrust his spear into the trap. The parties would then set off for the groom’s house where the bride’s family had to guess the secret name of the *kowar* staff. In Gaikorobi the groom’s clan had to guess the bride’s secret name, and the bride’s family that of the groom, but this was only done in the case of a *shambla* marriage.<sup>118</sup> Bateson mentioned secret names, which a wife was expected to

<sup>115</sup> Personal communication G. Schuster and F. Weiss, respectively.

<sup>116</sup> As so often the case, there are many other reasons, not necessarily specified by the people involved, to perform this ceremony. This kind of exclusivity and the strict set of rules that are said to accompany these events are often the figment of the anthropologists’ imagination and not that of the people they are trying to study.

<sup>117</sup> For the event, the fish trap was attached to two poles each of which also had a secret name.

<sup>118</sup> Personal communication M. Schindlbeck.

confide to her husband (1932: 410). Possibly he was making reference to this name competition.

When exchanging *kowar* decorated staffs, the corresponding magic spells (referring above all to the propagation of food resources, for example, a certain species of fish) are not disclosed. One man, however, stated that the bride's father would pass on the spell to his daughter under the condition that she would never reveal it, neither to her husband nor to her children, though several women denied this. Of Labuanda I know that she was given the spells by her father in trust, but this only because she was his only child.

With the aid of the groom's clan's *kowar* staff, the bride was symbolically drawn into the house. This ritual act is slightly reminiscent of a ceremony that is staged when a new men's house is inaugurated (see Bateson 1932: 452, caption to plate VII).

Upon the occasion of the opening of a small men's house in Mindimbit, the men erected in front of the house a female figure (*malu*) made of twined coconut leaves within a circular area described as *dshula*, which means as much as fishing net. In this circular area the men stuck "totemic" shrubs belonging to the Mandali clan, which also owned the men's house. On its back the figure carried a string bag (*alionda*) filled with betel pepper and nuts from which, according to the origin myths, all human are said to have once emerged. In addition, the figure was adorned with a second string bag filled with sago cakes and halved coconuts. Attached to the most important totemic shrub (*dshimbi*, also referred to as *dshimbia-bus*) was a rope (Kasambundimi), which ended in a small opening at the top end of the house's gabled façade. During the ceremony men positioned under the gable roof pulled on the rope, making the shrub shake violently. Whether this indicated that the *dshula* as such was being drawn to the men's house (or vice versa) remains unclear. Certainly the figure was seen to embody the female dimension of the men's house. Incidentally, "Malu" was the second name of the men's house Mandalimbit.

A comparison between the opening of the men's house and the specific part of the bridewealth ceremony should be limited to the observation that, conceptually, there is a close link between the two entities "woman" and "house". To a certain extent a house is identified with a woman. The string bag carried by the brother to the groom's house is regarded as the embodiment of the house's "spirit", a symbol of the wife's virtue, so to speak. If she commits adultery, she destroys the string bag and thus, in a figurate sense, also the house.

The *Noguanbo* song (also called Nokembo or Nanguambo), which the women of the groom's clan strike up when the bride crosses the threshold to her new home, supports such an interpretation. The singing and coconut clapping is performed primarily by the *yau* and *mbambu* (*mbambu* is used synonymously with *ababu*) both of which are clearly identified as belonging to the "father line".

The song goes as follows:

*Wuna nyamun tipmuiarangai timpuia*  
 My brother built the gable to this house, gable  
*tina gego yigenba kawatnba nanguambo*  
 of the men's house, tread gently when you enter it, proudly  
 (Tok Pisin: *amamas*)  
*wuna nyaitkutna kengombingei kengombingego*  
 My father built the threshold to the house, the men's house  
*wowumba kowatnba naguambo*  
 Tread gently when you enter it, proudly.

The message of the song is that the bride, when entering her husband's house, is asked to adapt to a new form: the house represents the "form", the woman herself the house's contents, with form and content becoming congruent.

The "rape" the bride was submitted to in her husband's house by the *yau* can be understood as an act of appropriation by members of her husband's clan, who were in effect women but posing as men. Closely linked with the "rape" stands the act of *rabim as* (*garek* in Iatmul), that is, the buttock rubbing scene. Bateson describes this gesture based on descriptions: the *wau* rubs his buttock up and down the *laua's* shin if the latter has uttered boasts in the context of an earlier *naven* (1958: 8). Bateson goes on to describe a similar incident when, during an initiation, the initiator rubs his behind on the novice's head; this, however, is regarded as an act of anger and contempt (1958: caption to plate XIII): "This gesture is presumably quiet distinct from the gesture of the *wau* who shames himself by rubbing his buttock on his *laua's* leg."

In Kararau I was told repeatedly that the *wau* removes his trousers to rub his behind up and down the male *laua's* shin if the latter has had the cheek to overstep the mark in his relationship with his mother's brother, for instance, by making jokes (in the sense of the joking relationship) which, according to Iatmul etiquette, is a no go and not acceptable under any circumstances. The *wau's* act of buttock rubbing is extremely humiliating for the *lau*, I was told. Spoken more generally – providing an interpretation of this behaviour is at all possible – by performing this act, the *wau* is actually offering himself to his *laua* for sexual intercourse, more specifically, for anal intercourse (Bateson 1958: 81-83). This kind of solicitation has been evidenced in a different *naven* ceremony, too, where the *wau* inserts an orange-coloured fruit into his anus to mark a clitoris and goes on to feign sexual intercourse, with him in the female role (Bateson 1958: 20).

In a ritual gift exchange, the mother's brother gives food to his sister's son upon which the *laua* reciprocates with a gift of shell valuables (today money). Taking that food is female and (shell) money is male (as F. Korn does in her interpretation of Bateson), gift exchange also reflects the relationship between men and women.

– The mother’s brother assumes the role of a woman, but in a male guise. In certain *naven* ceremonies, the *wau* calls his sister’s son “husband” (Bateson 1958: 10). Looking at matters from this perspective, one could say that the ritual bond replicates and ritually substantiates the affinal relationship between the two clans, that is, Ego’s mother’s and father’s clans.<sup>119</sup>

As far as the buttock rubbing gesture during initiation is concerned, the situation just might be different to what Bateson imagined.

Anyhow, let us return to the bridewealth feast: the deliberations set out above suggest that “sliding down” the bride’s body by the “*lain bilong papa*” might have much in common with the practices described above, albeit transferred to the female sphere. The women masquerading as men offer themselves to the bride. In this case we seem to be dealing with a symmetrical transfiguration, given that it is women of the husband’s clan who perform this act on the bride (as the mother’s brothers do to their male *laua* in the examples above). Thus, the bride holds a similarly marginal position towards the groom’s clan, as do mother’s brothers in relation to their sisters’ sons.

Allow me to add one final remark on *naven*, particularly with regard to wedding: in my opinion *naven* ceremonies are based on the principles of social structure, in which the relationship between the clans is pivotal. As regards the relationship between clans through marriage, *naven* have a reinforcing effect while, at the same time, they serve as an emotional outlet (especially as far as the women are concerned) in the (often strained) relationship between men and women.

## 4.6 Marriage as described in a myth

I go on to outline the significance of marriage in the oral tradition of the Iatmul by reciting a myth told to me by a woman called Kamabindshua (who is from the Ema-sa clan and is married to a man of the Kandshene lineage of the Mairambu clan). Tellingly, the woman in the myth bears the same name as the narrator.<sup>120</sup>

“The story I am going to tell you is about the child of Kamabindshua. When the child (a boy) was still young he was loved by a woman, however, another man went on to marry her, so he never thought of her again. Instead, a different woman fell in love with him and he wished to marry her. This son

<sup>119</sup> Bateson (1958: 12) also mentions that in certain *naven* ceremonies in which the *wau* wears tattered women’s clothes, his *laua* refers to him as “child”. The material at hand suggests that the “male-female” and the “mother-child” relationships seize on two different aspects of the social structure – on the one hand, the rapport between two clans (affinity), and, on the other, the question of descent – and stages them in the form of drama. – I myself only ever witnessed *naven* ceremonies in which women took part.

<sup>120</sup> Kamabindshua told the myth in Iatmul. Sabwandshan consecutively provided a translation into Tok Pisin. Later I asked Koliuan to go over the Tok Pisin translation again, sentence by sentence. The two translations differed merely in details. This myth version was translated by Koliuan.

of Kamabindshua was an only child; therefore he hesitated. So once again another man married this woman. He had loved this woman, so he decided to move away. He went to Kumbrangai, to Maringwat. He left his mother because he was sad. He left her and went to live in the forest called Maringwat. When he parted from his mother he held a string in his hand (Tok Pisin: *rop*) which his mother had made. He went on his way holding one end of the string while his mother held the other.<sup>121</sup> With the help of this string he attempted to climb into a sago storage pot (Tok Pisin: *na em i wok long wokim na pulapim i go daun long wanpela bigpela sospen*). He climbed into this pot and, pulling at the string, which was very long, he finally arrived at this forest in Maringwat. He entered the forest and married a powerful (Tok Pisin: *bigpela*) woman. Her name was Mebinbragui.

After marrying her he gave the string a tug until it was tight. They all pulled on the rope until he finally arrived back at home. Upon his return, the mother pulled at the string which again led to this large pot. He went home. Upon arrival at home he hid this woman Mebinbragui from the eyes of the old woman, his mother Kamabindshua, who had given birth to him. His mother always went to fetch water at the spot where he was hiding his wife Mebinbragui.

He went to the house and called: ‘Mother, I’m back.’ The woman Kamabindshua heard it and answered: ‘Who calls me “mother”? My child left me because he was cross about this woman. I don’t know which forest he went to. I’m still mourning my son. Since then I have not washed, have not cut my hair, I sit in the dirt, mourning for him. Who calls me “mother”?’ Then she saw; she was startled and called out to him: ‘Oh, how did you get back, have you just returned?’ He answered: ‘Yes’. The mother lay down on the ground and the son stepped over her. Then they entered the house and he said to her: ‘Mother, I want you to go and fetch water.’ His mother replied: ‘Oh child, I’ve just come back from fetching water; it is here if you would like to drink; whatever you would like to use it for, take as much as you like.’ The son answered: ‘No mother, I want you to empty this water and fetch some fresh water from the spring.’ His mother understood, so she emptied the water and went down to the spring carrying her container.

There Mebinbragui caught sight of her husband’s mother and called to her, ‘Ah, *yau!*’ Kamabindshua was startled and answered: ‘Who calls me *yau*? Oh, are you the wife of my son? Come here my child.’ The women embraced (Tok Pisin: *holim em*) and returned to the house. Prior to this, the husband had said to his wife Mebinbragui: ‘No other man and no other woman uses this path down to the spring, apart from my old mother, she’s the only one,

<sup>121</sup> While preparing for a headhunting raid, a man’s “spirit” leaves the house at night in search of potential victims in the respective enemy village. Hereby the man’s *waken* remains linked to his wife by a string. See also p. 216.



and I will have sent her. When you see her you can call her *yau*.' That is why she (Mebinbragui) held her (her mother-in-law) by the hand and called her *yau* and the old woman asked, 'Who calls me *yau*?' before catching sight of the young woman and saying, 'Oh, you're the wife of my son. Where did my son find this good woman?'

The old woman rose and then lay down on the ground. She performed a *singsing* for her; she was proud of her and then she lay down again on the ground. Her daughter-in-law stepped over her. In front of the house she lay down on the ground once more, and again her daughter-in-law stepped over her body. Inside the house they repeated this lying down and stepping over one last time. Then they turned their thoughts to how they could buy this woman (Tok Pisin: *baim meri*).

Upon this Kamabindshua said: 'I think we can now buy her' They all set off and went to a stretch of land where neither trees nor bushes grew, with the exception of one single tree. This tree we call *nui*. They all sat down and waited for the mother of this woman. Her husband asked her: 'Have you seen your mother, is she coming?' The woman replied: 'Yes, she's coming. I believe you can see her now.' The man climbed the tree we call *nui* and said: 'No, I only see a large forest with many trees and birds; in this forest there are wildfowl and bamboo and a few palm trees. It is coming towards us.' The woman answered: 'That's my mother, she's approaching us. She only looks like a patch of forest.'

The mother came right up to the tree, *nui*, which stands in the *kunai* and where they all had been waiting for her. The mother, Mebinbit, came closer and closer until her nose became entangled with the tree's roots (Tok Pisin: *as bilong diwai*) on which the man was sitting. She greeted him. She wanted to shake off all the adornments she was wearing, all kinds of animals, trees, bushes, birds, all wild beings and plants. All these things the mother Mebinbit loaded off on to her daughter Mebinbragui, making the young Mebinbit look like the forest she carried to Kambiambit, to Kumbrangai. All these things, the cassowary, tree-kangaroo, opossum, birds and pigs, all these things originally only existed in Mebinbit until the mother Mebinbit gave everything to her daughter who had married the son of Kamabindshua. She gave everything to her daughter as the gift a woman brings into her marriage; this is how we do it when it is time to pay for the woman. Her parents and her brothers then give her a gift to take with her, a fire bowl, a few adornments, knives, an axe and a few other things. For the same reason the mother brought with her this patch of forest for her daughter who herself now looked like a forest. The daughter then looked like her mother had done before. The two were now the same (were identical?). Then she too shook herself in the direction of Lengau, until nothing was left clinging to her body. The only thing she held in her hand was a small empty bag (Iatmul: *kimbi*). Otherwise she was naked.

Thus the woman lived in Lengau with her husband and his old mother. The three lived together.

One day Mebinbragui went off fishing in her canoe. She took with her a net because she was planning to catch small crabs. When she withdrew the net full of crabs from the water, she saw that she had also caught a beetle (Iatmul: *dangi*; Tok Pisin: *binatang*). She emptied the net into her canoe. She was very hungry, so she took a piece of sago and baked it in her small fire bowl. She ate from it, including a few small crabs and the *binatang*. Mebinbragui ate the *binatang*.

She didn't die immediately of it, but this raw *dangi* clung inside her belly and began eating her up from the inside, until Mebinbragui was dead. The husband and his old mother buried her body and mourned Mebinbragui. It was this small *dangi* that had killed Mebinbragui. It was still alive within the corpse. Whilst her body was rotting away the *binatang* ate all the flesh that was left. It ate as much until it looked like the large sea turtle we call *mambi*. It went on eating and eating until it filled the entire grave. It looked much like the corpse had looked. The husband and his mother observed this. The old woman said to him: 'Take the *dangi*, build a cage, and put it inside. The more it defecates the smaller it will grow.' This is what the old woman said, so he followed her instructions. After the *dangi* had excreted a lot of faeces it returned to the size it had had while still living in the water. Then the husband's mother, Kamabindshua, took the *dangi* and ate it. She swallowed it. The *dangi* went on to devour the old woman, just like it had done with Mebinbragui. It ate so much (of her) that Kamabindshua died. The son dug a hole in the ground and buried his mother. But he didn't close the grave. He just put a few coconut palm leaves and fronds over it. This kind of grave cover we call *gangrap*. The *dangi* went on to consume the entire corpse until it, once again, had reached the size of the large sea turtle we call *mambi*. When the man saw it (the turtle), he exclaimed: 'Oh, now the *dangi* looks as it did before!'

He left it in the grave and went to fetch his stone axe, the one he used for hard wood, for firewood. He used his axe to cut the hard wood we call *kwibi* and *sanguan*. This wood makes very hot flames. He made a large fire, took the *dangi* from its grave and threw it into the fire where it burnt to ashes. It now looked like the ashes (was reduced to ashes). The man exclaimed: 'That's enough now.' From then on the man lived alone.

That's the story of the woman who goes by the same name as I do, Kamabindshua. That's also my name."

The myth helps to explain the meaning of the marriage ceremony. Kamabindshua's son (whose name is unfortunately never mentioned), who is connected with his mother by some form of umbilical cord (?), lives in Kumbrangau, an area which lies opposite the place where all living beings originated from: Mebinbit. Mebinbit lies to the northwest, Kumbrangui in the southwest. He marries Mebinbragui, who is from Mebinbit,

and returns with her to his mother Kamabindshua. Kamabindshua thought her son had died and thus was surprised to see him again. She lies down on the ground for him to step over her. Down at the waterhole she meets her daughter-in-law. In front of the house and, later, inside the house, Mebinbragui steps over her mother-in-law. The marriage ceremony is performed on a barren stretch of land where nothing grows except for the tree called *nui*. Mebinbragui's mother, who goes by the name of Mebinbit, approaches the group in the shape of a large forest populated by a myriad of animals and plants. She locks into the base of the *nui* tree with her nose before shaking herself and passing on all things to her daughter Mebinbragui. This gift (dowry) is what Mebinbragui brings into the marriage. Mother and daughter now look identical (have become one?). Mebinbragui goes on to shake herself over Lengau and Kumbrangui, thus introducing all living beings and plants, which, until then, had been indigenous only to the place of origin, Mebinbit, to the areas of Lengau and Kumbrangui. The action leaves Mebinbragui completely naked barring a small string bag.

The main point of the narrative seems to be that the marriage of Mebinbragui with the son of Kamabindshua brings the flora and fauna in the form of a dowry to the other half of the world, to an area which until then had been a wasteland. Expressed in simplified terms, the marriage stands for the joining of two areas (which, in reality, are separated by the Sepik River), with Kumbrangui gaining the wealth which, before, had been the privilege of Mebinbit. The myth says nothing about the size and form of the bridewealth but in significance it is evidently second to the dowry. A further point worth noting is that the exchange seems to be performed almost exclusively by women. (This myth, as well as many others, suggests the existence of primeval women who lived without male companionship).

In the process of the exchange, Mebinbit locks into the base of the *nui* tree with her nose. What this tree actually stands for would require examination by comparison with other myths. Possibly, the interlocking of Mebinbit with the *nui* tree has something in common with the interlocking of the *kowar* staffs in the marriage ceremonies described above, but this, too, would require more evidence. – The couple, which had moved in with Kamabindshua before the transfer of the dowry, continues to reside with her after the marriage.

The last part of the myth involving the *dangi* beetle, which is consumed first by Mebinbragui, then by Kamabindshua, killing them both, begs explanation on the basis of a single variant of the myth. The motif of the turtle, which also represents a woman, is found among other language groups in the area too, for example, among the Arapesh people.<sup>122</sup> All we can extract from the final passages of the myth is that both women, Mebinbragui as well as Kamabindshua, that is, wife and mother, die in the incident, leaving the (unfortunately unnamed) man behind.

<sup>122</sup> Fortune 1942: 221. The turtle is also referred to as the sponsor of the initiation ritual.

#### 4.7 Duties and rules of conduct after marriage

After marriage has been sealed and bridewealth paid, a new phase of life begins, with many new duties for the husband. The relationship between mother-in-law and son-in-law is governed by a set of strict rules: the son-in-law may never utter the name of his *naisagut*,<sup>123</sup> nor may he address her directly, instead he must go through an intermediary. He is not allowed to sit near her nor can he eat in her presence. On the other hand, the son-in-law (*nondu*) can be called on to perform duties for his parents-in-law (*naisagut*), above all in connection with garden work, house or canoe building, and tool making. Moreover, he has the duty to care for his father-in-law should the latter fall ill. These duties hold to this day.

Even our assistant, Kugua, otherwise very modern in his outlooks, refused to ask a woman whether I could record her life history when I once asked him, because the woman was a classificatory *naisagut* of his. The work Kugua had to perform for his parents-in-law was getting too much for him. One day he asked whether he could borrow our canoe to fetch home the tobacco he had harvested. On the way there he proudly pointed out to us his food garden, claiming that he alone owned it. Later we found out that it was his in-laws' garden but that he had done much of the work.

From the moment on we knew who really owned the garden, Kugua often complained about the heavy workload he was asked to do for his in-laws. When his wife one day passed on the message to him that he should take his sick father-in-law to hospital in Kapaimari, he drew the line, exclaiming verbatim: "I purchased you / paid money for you, that's enough!"

The statement indicates that, in the context of bridewealth exchanges, cash is not considered an equivalent of shell money. The fact that one can buy stick tobacco, a new shirt, or scented body oil with cash without the purchase engendering further social obligations or even services in return is more than evident, so that it is hardly surprising that purchasing a wife is conceptually put on a level with buying goods in a store. By contrast, in the exchange of shell valuables the emphasis is on sustaining or, in certain cases, initiating social relationships between groups of people.

A strict rule of avoidance also pertains to the wife of the one's own wife's elder brother, who is labelled "real *naisagut*". Towards the elder brother himself, the husband (male Ego) stands in a joking relationship,<sup>124</sup> while, on her part, the wife may not crack jokes with her husband's elder brother, moreover, she is not even allowed to utter his name.<sup>125</sup> Neither is she allowed to joke with her parents-in-law but oth-

<sup>123</sup> The Iatmul term for this prohibition is *wup iriganan*.

<sup>124</sup> The term for joking relationship in Iatmul is *kasakundi*; *kasaraganan* = to joke.

<sup>125</sup> This is evidently a means to create distance between a man and the wife of his brother. Thus, one might expect that conflicts involving sisters-in-law are quite rare. However, this is not the case as borne out by the life histories of Woliragwa (p. 261) and Yaknabi (p. 265) and by court records from Angoram (involving Kubeli and his elder brother's wife).

erwise she is more or less free to act and interact as she pleases. Furthermore, there's nothing stopping from her entertaining a joking relationship with her husband's younger brother.

The degree to which a husband is subject to the whims and wishes of his parents-in-law varies considerably. In the case of our assistant, Kugua, the dependency was more than evident.

His father-in-law managed all the money Kugua earned from working for us, handing it over, it seemed, almost on a daily basis. He certainly never had any money on him when visiting the store to buy something, his explanation being that he had given everything to his father-in-law. Possibly one of the reasons for this dependency was that he and his family had lived in his parents-in-laws' house for several years. At marriage the young couple had – according to custom – gone to live with Kugua's father, but his wife, Kai, had fallen ill. Kugua claimed that she had actually died and then come back to life again, but without really ever recuperating. Kugua and his wife decided to move in with Kai's parents, fearing that his father's house had a bad influence on her health. In her own parents' house Kai soon got well again, but since it is deemed improper for a son-in-law to live in his *naisagut's* house for any length of time without good reason, Kugua and his family were turned out of the house after about three years – long after Kai had regained health. They didn't want to go back to Kugua's father, and building a house of their own seemed too strenuous (for which other men in the village severely criticized him) so, in the end, Kugua decided to move in with his mother's brother.

### Changing locality when sick

It is not uncommon for a husband and his wife to move in with his mother's brother – not actually sharing the same house but at least living on his property – notably when someone falls ill. Sickness is often said to be related to locality, more specifically it is put down to the influence of a person's ancestors (i.e., a man's patrilineal ancestors).<sup>126</sup> In turn, ancestors are only effective within the territory belonging to the clan in question, so that if a man moves to his mother's brother's compound he is out of their reach.<sup>127</sup> The reasons why ancestors should inflict harm on someone are varied. Common lines of argument include that a specific marriage union was against the will and rules of the ancestors, that a clan-owned mask or similar ritual paraphernalia had been sold, or that incest and adultery, respectively, were at play.

<sup>126</sup> An illness inflicted by ancestors is referred to as *ku grembi* and as *kundshe bauda*.

<sup>127</sup> A myth describes how the mythical Kindshin snake once pursued a man with the intention of devouring him. But when the man fled to his mother's brother place, the Kindshin snake lost track of him.

Tipmange also moved to her parents' home when her husband, Sangrue, fell ill, in order to escape the reach of his ancestors (Yagum clan). It was said they had sent the sickness because Sangrue's father had sold off a significant mask belonging to the Yagum clan. Sangrue stayed there for several weeks, before finally sacrificing a pig to placate the ancestors. When this too had no effect, he moved to a different village and the house of a classificatory mother's brother, in the hope of getting well again. However, this too did not help, and Sangrue died shortly later.

Sick people occasionally also go to stay in the house of a "shaman" (Bateson 1932: 421), a man versed in healing rituals.<sup>128</sup>

When a girl of about fourteen was suffering from headache and severe bouts of fever, we gave her some malaria tablets. When we went to see her a few days later to give her some more tablets, she was no longer living with her mother. We finally found her staying with Kabuseli, a man skilled in magical spells. Kabuseli himself was not fully convinced of his own healing skills, maintaining that he only had the power to cure illnesses sent by the ancestors and that other ailments could only be countered by Western medicine. In this sense he occasionally referred patients to us or had them sent straight to the hospital in Kapaimari. In the case of the young girl mentioned here, he immediately agreed to send her to hospital.

Amblangu and her husband Kisaman also lived on his mother's brother's property, the reason being that she had frequently fallen ill after getting married. The next time she fell sick, she left her husband and took her youngest child with her to stay at her brother's house where she remained for several weeks before recuperating. Amblangu and her brother Waani had an especially close bond (see also life history of Amblangu, p. 263).

<sup>128</sup> One such healing song goes as follows:

*Gamba min, gamba min, Tshukendimi gamba min,*  
 you skeleton, you skeleton, Tshukendimi, you're a skeleton  
*Kumbundinga, gamba min, maktungurnan gamba min*  
 I beat you with *kowar*, I beat you with *kowar*.  
*wetna gamba min, sawe gamba min*  
 and the skeleton goes, you'll see nothing.

*gamba min, gamba min, Manguayabinmeligumban, gamba min, etc.*

Tshukendimi is said to be the ancestor who created magical spells at the dawn of time. At the same time he is regarded as the primeval *waken*. Manguayabimeligumban is regarded as the other important figure (in terms of magical spells), second only to Tshukendimi.

## 4.8 The relationship between brother and sister and between husband and wife

In most cases the relationship between brother and sister is closer than that of husband and wife. Sabwandshan, who stated – not without a touch of regret – that among white people husband and wife had the same kind of harmonious relationship as did brother and sister among the *Iatmul*, clearly suffered from not having a biological brother. The system of upbringing appears to be geared to nurturing the close relationship between brother and sister from early childhood on. During our stay I had the chance to witness two incidents which I believe to be of significance in this respect and which I would like to describe here.

When I was once visiting Sabwandshan at home, her son, who was then about three years old, became tired and began whining. His elder sister, about ten, took him on to her lap and started soothing him, with success. Then she began stroking his genitals and kept on caressing him until he fell asleep, before carrying him gently to his sleeping mat.

This kind of stroking of the genitalia I had otherwise only ever seen mothers perform on their small baby boys. According to the *Iatmul* – at least this is the impression I got – this kind of behaviour has nothing to do with sexuality, a term which is strictly reserved for physical intercourse between grown men and women and which always contains an element of danger (at least from the man's point of view).

On another occasion we were sitting in the men's house. A roughly fourteen-year-old boy was also sitting on a bench, next to him his sister of about eleven. The little girl was leaning her head on his shoulder, cuddling up to him. Her brother let it be. *Uanoli*, an old man, suddenly noticed this and, disapproving of it, told the girl to leave the house in a loud voice, maintaining that she, as a woman, had no business in the men's house and that she should go and stay with her mother and the other girls of her age. – The girl first smiled in embarrassment and moved away a little from her brother's side. "Go!", *Uanoli* shouted angrily. Then her brother, too, told her to leave in a quiet voice. But she did not budge. So her brother repeated his orders, this time more vehemently, upon which she left. She remained standing outside for a while, undecided what to do, before leaving the scene.

Even though one never sees any exchange of affection between grown-up brothers and sisters (let alone between husband and wife), a close bond exists between siblings – as the example of *Amblangu* goes to show. In times of sickness, shortly before giving birth, or after a row with a husband, women often seek refuge in their brother's house.

Of *Yapmai*, a legendary village near *Kararau*, it is told that when they were routed in a raid, the *Kararau* spared all those men whose sisters were married to men in

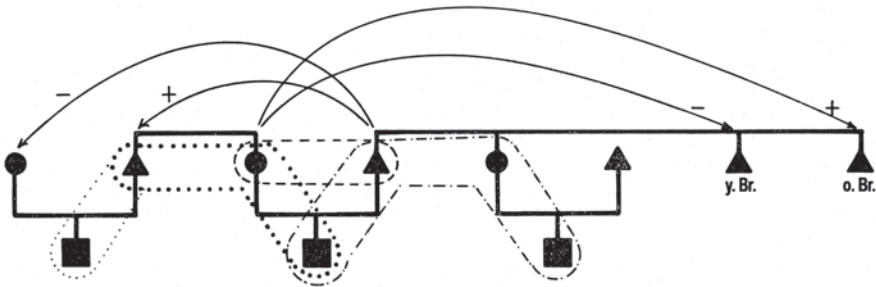
Kararau.<sup>129</sup> In connection with headhunting raids, too, men would warn sisters married to men in the targeted village shortly before the raid, giving them time to get themselves and their children to safety.<sup>130</sup> Sisters did the same for their brothers, as both men and women put on record.

With regard to *shambla* relationships (Bateson 1932: 270-271), large food prestations presented by one *shambla* to its counterpart play a significant role (at least this was the case in the early 1970s). Each man must contribute in kind and amount what he received from the opposite party on the occasion of a preceding feast. If a man has difficulties in procuring the required amount of cups, sticks of tobacco, betel nuts, rice, chicken, etc. he will ask his sister for support, not his wife. A man's sister is probably something akin to a wife's rival – as we witnessed above in the context of the bridewealth ceremony. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for a sister to become involved in the upbringing of her brother's child.

Langda once beat the child of Senguimanagui, her brother's wife, when the little girl didn't stop molesting her *mbare*. Senguimanagui was sitting close by but did not intervene when Langda beat the girl with a broomstick.

Likewise, the relationship between Sabwandshan and her husband's sister, Amblangu, was tense. Although it never came to blows, the rapport between the two women was marked by animosity.

I have talked about the relationship between a *wau* and his *laua* above (see p. 146). For this and a number of other reasons, "nuclear family" (a couple and its children)



<sup>129</sup> Although the people of the hinterland generally called the river dwellers "Yapmai", "Yapmal" and "Yatmal" (Bateson derived the term Iatmul from a clan name), the people of Kararau said that the Yapmai were an especially savage group inhabiting a close-by village in former times. Because of the Yapmai's fierceness, the Kararau decided to raid the village and kill off most of the inhabitants – very few were spared. Gowi, an old man, recounted that, as a young boy, his father still remembered seeing the coconuts left standing in the destroyed village.

<sup>130</sup> The relationship between a man and his sister acquires special significance during the preparations for a headhunting raid (see p. 215)



cohesion is not overly strong among the Iatmul. Instead, the closest family unit is what Lévi-Strauss called “atom of kinship” (1958: 5-30), thus, a man is not only bound to his parents but also to his mother’s brother. Moreover, the siblings of both parents have a special relationship to their nephew/niece (and vice versa). The forces that impact on a married couple and their offspring could be depicted as follows: (opposite page)

The dotted line indicates the wife’s relationships with her child and her brother. The relationship with her brother’s child is marked by the very finely dotted line. The dash-dot-dash line indicates the husband’s relationship with his child, his sister, and her child. The broken line reflects the relationship between husband and wife. The + sign stands for positive relationships, above all joking relationships, the – sign for strict avoidance. The conjugal dyad is the most fragile of them all, as I will go on to show below.<sup>131</sup>

The diagram also helps to explain why the Iatmul have no given term for “nuclear family” as a unit; descendants, that is, offspring (*nyangu*) is the only alternative and is used by both husband and wife to designate their children. On the other hand, sharing residence (local unit) – despite men usually spending most their time in the men’s house – and jointly cultivating a garden (partial economic unit) are forces that contribute to cohesion within the “nuclear family”.

## 4.9 Spatial division of the house

The spatial division of the house reflects social relationships at a micro-geographic level, similar to the findings described in the chapter above. In the following I shall sketch three different house types.

The section facing the waterfront – provided the house is not occupied by several couples and their children – makes up the living quarters of the owner of the house and his family. If a man has only one wife, the division between his and her quarters are pronounced and immediately evident to the eye. The side to the right of the entrance door (looking from the inside) belongs to the husband, in this case to Koliuan (see layout of Koliuan’s house). The right front part of the house is exclusively Koliuan’s domain. The left half – the women’s side – is occupied by Koliuan’s wife, Senguimanagui. This section, which is always equipped with a fireplace, has a small, door-like window. Next to this opening is the spot where Senguimanagui gave birth to her children. In the period immediately following parturition, the mother may only leave and enter the house through this narrow opening by means of a small ladder made especially for the purpose. The back of the house is inhabited by Koliuan’s old mother. This is also the section where Koliuan’s sister, Langda, slept when she

<sup>131</sup> Adams (1971: 28) speaks of three dyads within the core family: 1. husband-wife (conjugal unit), 2. mother-child (maternal unit), and 3. father-child (paternal dyad).

came to her brother's house to give birth to her first child. During the day she stayed in her sister-in-law's (Senguimanagui) part of the house where she was also allowed to use her household items.

The different sections of the house are distinguished by a number of unobtrusive markers. If the door to the house is at the centre of the dwelling's façade, it serves as the starting point of an invisible, longitudinal line. House posts, for instance those at the centre of the house, may also serve as dividers. In the absence of conspicuous structural elements, items like seemingly randomly placed washing lines, sago storage vessels, and similar items may serve as demarcations. These divisions are known to and respected by all inhabitants of the house. Nobody would ever think of disregarding these lines.

### Koliuan's dwelling house

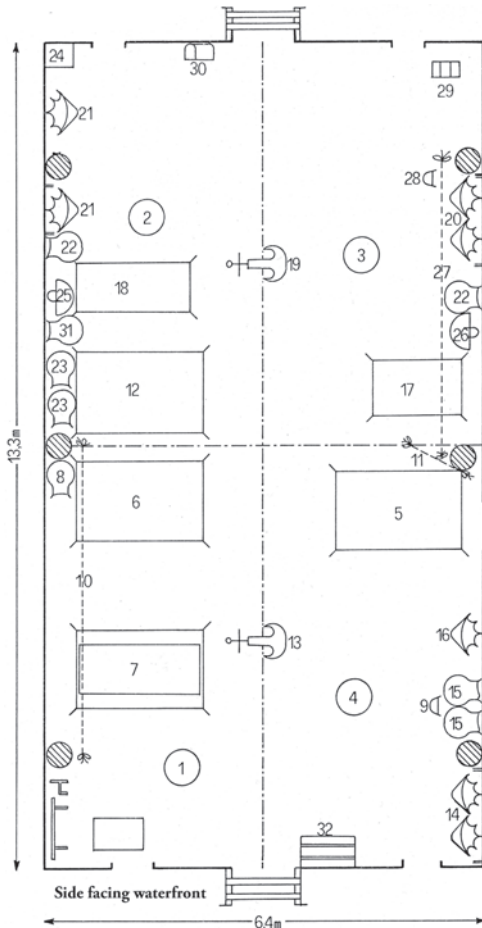
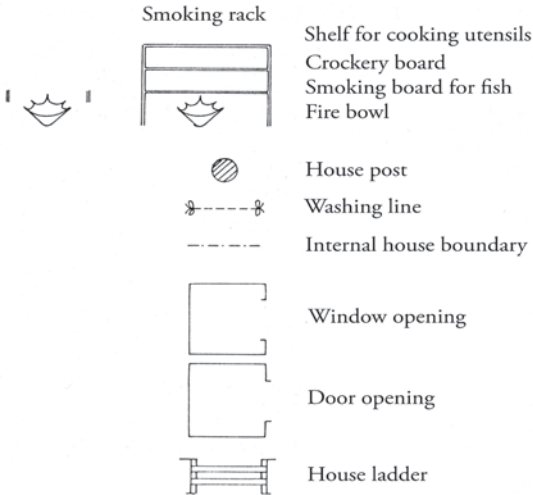


Fig. 46: Koliuan's dwelling house (clan Mbowi).

1. Koliuan's section of the house, containing, among other things, a table, a chair, two lockable chests, an hourglass drum, and a kerosene lamp.
2. Wanbowi's section of house. Wanbowi, a younger brother of Koliuan, lives in Wewak for the most part of the year and only spends a few weeks in the village.
3. Gambu's section of the house. Gambu is Koliuan's youngest brother. He, too, is away for most of the year. This section and Wanbowi's section are normally occupied by Ngu, the brothers' widowed stepmother.
4. Section of house belonging to Senguimanagui, Koliuan's wife.
5. Mosquito net and sleeping mat of Senguimanagui and her baby.
6. Mosquito net of Senguimanagui's twin daughters.

Key to symbols:

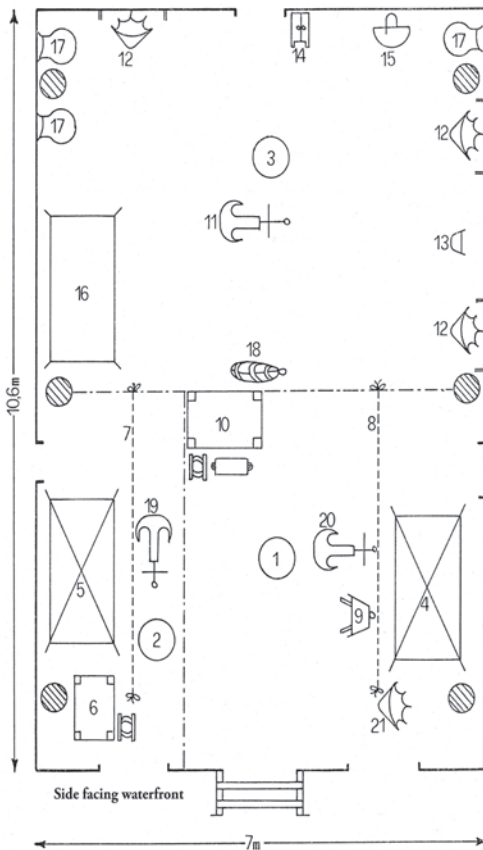


7. Koliuan's mosquito net and mattress.
8. Senguimanagui's sago storage vessel. Suspended above from a beam are an adze, a saw, and dance paraphernalia, all belonging to Koliuan.
9. Rubbish bin.
10. Washing line with clothes belonging to Koliuan's family.
11. Sago bags for (wet) sago and bags for collecting firewood.
12. Mosquito net and sleeping mat of Langda, Koliuan's sister, and her baby. Langda moved to her brother's house to give birth to her first child. She remained there for roughly three months.
13. Suspension hook and sago cake baskets for Koliuan, Senguimanagui, and their two daughters.
14. Two fire bowls belonging to Senguimanagui but used by Langda during her stay in the house.
15. Two sago storage vessels belonging to Senguimanagui.
16. Senguimanagui's fire bowl.
17. Mosquito net and sleeping mat of Bandshe, the child of Ngu's brother. The boy goes to school in Kapaimari and therefore sleeps in Kararau (and not in Kwendndshange).
18. Ngu's mosquito net and sleeping mat.
19. Suspension hook belonging to Ngu with sago cake baskets for herself and Bandshe. Also suspended from the hook: a bag with dried fish, a bag with coconut husks, two sago cake baskets suspended from the transverse side (indicating that their owners, Wanbowi and Gambu, are not around).
20. Ngu's fire bowls.
21. Ngu's fire bowls (she uses the bowls on the one side for a few weeks and then switches to the fireplaces on the opposite side for the next few weeks (the smoke prevents insects from damaging the roof)
22. Sago storage vessels.
23. Two sago storage vessels belonging to Wanbowi.
24. Rack for Ngu's cooking utensils and crockery.

25. A fish net, a string bag for turtles, and a bag for smoked fish (all suspended from the roof).
26. Unfinished wickerwork and bags (suspended from the roof).
27. Ngu's washing line.
28. Ngu's rubbish bin.
29. Three small, lockable chests (Gambu's?)
30. Singer sewing machine belonging to Wanbowi's wife.
31. Ngu's sago storage vessel.
32. Senguimanagui's crockery shelf.

Under the roof is the place for storing spears, bamboo poles, paddles, and already packed tobacco.

Gimbun's dwelling house



1. Gimbun's section of the house
2. Section of the house belonging to Gimbun's grown-up son Yangendeimbange.
3. Section of the house belonging to Gimbun's wife, Namui.
4. Gimbun's mosquito net and bedstead.
5. Yangendeimbange's mosquito net and bedstead.
6. Yangendeimbange's table.
7. Yangendeimbange's washing line.
8. Gimbun's washing line.
9. Mask suspended from the roof representing the men's house Muintshembit.
10. Table, stool, and locker belonging to Gimbun.
11. Suspension hook with sago cake baskets belonging to Gimbun and Namui as well as a bag for smoked fish.
12. Namui's fire bowls.
13. Rubbish bin.
14. Cupboard for cooking utensils and crockery.

Fig. 47: Gimbun's dwelling house (Yamande lineage of the Mairambu clan).

15. Bags for wet sago and small empty sago cake bags.
16. Namui's mosquito net and sleeping mat.
17. Sago storage vessels.
18. Masks and other ritual paraphernalia (all packed away) belonging to Gimbun.
19. Empty suspension hook.
20. Suspension hook for bags belonging to Gimbun.
21. Small fire bowl belonging to Gimbun which he presently uses because the men's house is flooded and because this is the only fire where he can warm himself and dry his tobacco leaves.

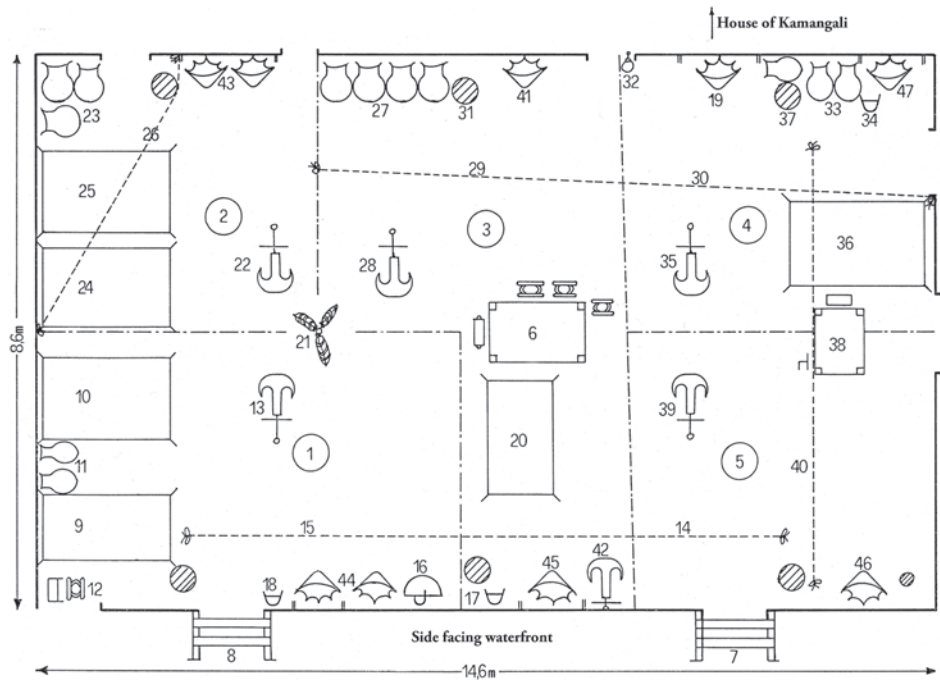


Fig. 48: Family dwelling house of Kamangali, Wanyo, and Tshui.

#### Family dwelling house of Kamangali, Wanyo, and Tshui

1. Wanyo's section of the house (half-brother of Kamangali).
2. Section of the house belonging to Karabindsha, second wife of Kamangali.
3. Section of the house belonging to Labu, third wife of Kamangali.
4. Section of the house belonging to Kwapmei, first wife of Kamangali.
5. Section of the house belonging to Tshui, son of Kwapmei and Kamangali. Tshui, his wife and his children rarely live in the house, preferring to stay with the parents of his wife, Sapingen.

6. Table, various stools, and a large chest; the things belong to Kamangali (Kamangali's only furniture in this family house).
7. Entrance door used only by Kamangali, Tshui, Kwapmei, and Labu.
8. Entrance door used by the family of Wanyo, Karabindsha and their children.
9. Wanyo's mosquito net and sleeping mat.
10. Mosquito net and sleeping mat of Labuanda (Wanyo's wife) and their two children.
11. Two sago storage vessels belonging to Labuanda.
12. Table, chair, lockable chest, and ukulele belonging to Wanyo.
13. Suspension hook with sago cake baskets of Wanyo, Labuanda and their two children.
14. Labu's washing line.
15. Washing line of Wanyo and his family (attached to Labu's washing line).
16. Labuanda's sago bags and bag for collecting firewood.
17. Labu's rubbish bin.
18. Labuanda's rubbish bin.
19. Kwapmei's fire bowl.
20. Labu's mosquito net and sleeping mat.
21. *Mai* mask and other securely tied-up ritual paraphernalia looked after by Kamangali.
22. Suspension hook with sago cake baskets of Karabindsha, her daughter, and Kamangali.
23. Three sago storage vessels belonging to Karabindsha.
24. Karabindsha's daughter's mosquito net and sleeping mat.
25. Karabindsha's mosquito net and sleeping mat.
26. Karabindsha's washing line.
27. Four sago storage vessels of Labu.
28. Suspension hook with sago cake baskets of Labu, her daughter and Kamangali.
29. Labu's washing line.
30. Kwapmei's washing line (attached to Labu's washing line).
31. Baskets and string bags belonging to Labu.
32. Suspended coconut from which Kamangali drinks water. Kwapmei regularly fills it up.
33. Kwapmei's sago storage vessels.
34. Kwapmei's rubbish bin.
35. Suspension hook with sago cake baskets of Kwapmei and Kamangali as well as an hourglass drum.
36. Traditional sleeping mat belonging to Kwapmei.
37. String bags and baskets belonging to Kwapmei.
38. Tables and chairs belonging to Tshui.

39. Suspension hook with sago cake baskets for Tshui, Sapingen, and their children.
40. Tshui and Sapingen's washing line.
41. Labu's fire bowl.
42. Suspension hook with sago cake basket belonging to Labu.
43. Two fire bowls belonging to Karabindsha; over them a framework with two shelves.
44. Two fire bowls belonging to Labuanda.
45. Fire bowl belonging to Labu.
46. Fire bowl belonging to Sapingen.
47. Fire bowl belonging to Kwapmei.

In Gimbun's house (see layout of Gimbun's house) the whole front part is occupied by the husband and his grown-up son. But in this case, too, father and son do not share the same section, instead, each man has a corner for himself. The back part of the house, which has no door, belongs to the wife and their married daughter when she comes to spend a few days with her parents.

The house of Councillor Kamangali is divided into different sections (see layout of Kamangali's family house). Kamangali himself does not dwell there. Only the table standing in the middle of the house belongs to him. He lives in a little house which he built for himself at the back of the family abode; there he lives on his own. Apart from his three wives, the house is occupied by a brother of his with his wife and two children, and occasionally his son with his wife and child. Although, in general, the side facing the waterfront is considered the better half and therefore usually occupied by a man's principal wife, here the situation is a bit different. Because Kamangali's house faces the forest, his principal wife, Kwapmei, chose to live in section of the house closest to her husband. The space next to her is occupied by Kamangali's second wife and their yet unmarried daughter. The side facing the waterfront is inhabited by Wanyo (Kamangali's half-brother) and his family, by Kamangali's third wife and her daughter, and, occasionally by Tshui, the son of Kamangali and Kwapmei, with his family.

It goes without saying that each resident respects the property of the others. Even though, at first sight, the large dwelling house looks like consisting of one large common household, the impression is wrong. The house is made up of individually owned sections, with each section constituting a household in its own right, following its own business and rhythm of life. Informal cooperation between the occupants is taken for granted, for instance, one of the women cooks for all the others when these are out fishing or have gone to the market or are tending to their gardens.





## 5 Conception, Pregnancy and Birth: Concepts and Practices

During menstruation and immediately after parturition, the division of the house into a male and female domain is painstakingly observed. A menstruating woman can – at least in more recent years – cook for her husband, but if she should step over the food she has just prepared, the husband would fall ill or, alternatively, age and weaken prematurely.<sup>132</sup> During menstruation, a wife is not allowed to enter the male section of the house. Some interlocutors maintained that a woman was not allowed to bake sago cakes during her period but I doubt whether many abide by this rule. During menstruation, sexual intercourse is definitely avoided, again lest the husband fall sick and age prematurely.

In earlier days women were forbidden to enter flowing waters, in other words, to bathe in the river, instead they had to make do with waterholes in the bush. Men, on their part, would avoid these places. But this had changed by the early 1970s, and you often see women taking a bath in the lagoon. One man claimed that women used menstrual blood to prepare and perform *sanguma* with the intention of harming or even killing someone.<sup>133</sup> However, my women interlocutors strictly denied

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<sup>132</sup> Mead (1950: 172) writes that women were not allowed to cook for their husbands during menstruation.

<sup>133</sup> *Sanguma* is a Tok Pisin term for “harmful magic”.

this. Fact is that men fear everything that has to do with female menstruation. Blood is closely associated with motherhood, the belief being that, in conception, it is the women who contribute the blood. New life grows from the convergence of female blood and male semen: mothers provide the blood, fathers the bones (see Bateson 1958: 42). If a couple wishes to have a baby, they have to engage in frequent sexual intercourse. Especially newly-weds who are planning for their first child are compelled to follow strict avoidance rules. During this period the man is referred to as *gimandu*, the woman as *gimanragwa*. Until the woman shows signs of pregnancy, they are restricted in mobility and not allowed to move far from their house. Going fishing, for instance, is out of the question.

During the flood season, the lagoon on which Kararau lies was suddenly awash with eels, which were avidly speared by the village men and women. One day, no one caught an eel, much to the people's dismay because they loved the fish's fatty meat. In the end it became apparent that a *gimandu*, a newly wed man, had speared an eel. This was a serious breach of rules and the man was scolded by the others. Everyone in the village knew that there would be no more eels this season due to this.

*Gimandu* and *gimanragwa* are forbidden to ask a person whether he or she is going fishing.<sup>134</sup> If they do, the person will catch nothing. Nor are the newly-weds allowed to climb up betel or coconut palms lest the trees should bear no fruit. The same goes for freshly planted gardens where the crops would fail. They may wash sago, provided it is for their own consumption. Should they ask someone whether he or she is planning to wash sago, the latter would find only water in the canoe, but no sago. All the examples indicate that *gimandu* and *gimanragwa* represent a serious threat to the others, which is put down to the fact that they engage in frequent sexual intercourse. They are charged with a force or energy that becomes destructive as soon as it is brought into contact with beings and plants whose fertility, directly or indirectly, is prerequisite to human wellbeing. Should a *gimanragwa* not observe the rules, one of the village men was bound to react with a *shipekundi*, a magic spell, out of anger or revenge, to the effect that the woman in question would not be able to give birth and die together with her unborn child.

To perform *shipekundi* a man takes a piece of bamboo, casts a spell over it and thrusts it into a large sago storage pot.<sup>135</sup> He then fastens the bamboo tightly and closes the pot. This done, the woman can no longer give birth. If her husband catches wind of the *shipekundi*, he gives the man who cast the spell some betel nut and

<sup>134</sup> When a person leaves the village by canoe, people usually ask him or her where they are going. The person answers and is given as a reply, "okay, *yu go!*"

<sup>135</sup> The myth of Kamabindshua also mentions a sago storage pot (p. 148) but it remains unclear whether climbing into the sago pot symbolizes the boy's birth. – In the present example, however, we may assume that the sago pot stands for a uterus.

begs him to reverse the magic. If he agrees, he will remove the bamboo from the pot, thus making way for the birth to go ahead.

From Mindsh I was able to record the following *shipekundi* destined to prevent a woman from giving birth. *Shipekundi* are performed if a *gimanragwa* does not abide by the rules, if a girl gets pregnant from an unknown lover, or if a father demands too high a bridewealth for his (pregnant) daughter.

<i>nyait-a,</i>	<i>wal Kabakmeli,</i>	<i>ngual-a</i>	<i>Mangakabakmeli</i>
Father,	Kabak crocodile,	grandfather/ ancestor	Mangakabakmeli crocodile

*waan mina wui nambu gil nambu tshirigande wakekirigande*  
your strand of hair, all your hair on your head closes up

<i>nyait-a Tshibatandi,</i>	<i>Kembanandi</i>	<i>ngual-a</i>	<i>Kembanandi Kemban</i>
Tshibatandi crocodile,	Kembanandi	grandfather/ ancestor,	Kemban crocodile

*waan mina, wulpu gipu tshirigande wakekirigande*  
your strand of hair, the black chest is closing

Nyait-a	Yesenambundimi,	gual-a	Kasanambundimi
Father	Yesenambundimi crocodile,	grandfather/ ancestor	Kasanambundimi crocodile

*waan mina wulungai, kilengai tshirigande, wakekirigande*  
your strand of hair, the hip, the pelvis is closing

*kabre ndu, kabre ragwa, nyan ana kurgia-e, nyana*  
evil man, evil woman, the child shall not be born

*kai wa-un mbugu bilip yigyage angiamba*  
I do not want it, it can rot/die, it is coming to an end

<i>Kipma Kabak,</i>	<i>Andi Kabak,</i>	<i>nat yigi-yare</i>
Kipma Kabak	Andi Kabak	it is to leave.
(name of a personified earth),	(name of a personified earth),	

Parts of the *shipekundi*, above all the names of the mythical crocodiles, are repeated several times. When he has finished uttering the spell, the man blows into the air. In due course the puff will reach the woman the spell was intended for.

As regards the mythical crocodiles, Mindsh offered the following explanation: when the world was created, Kabakmeli raised the first piece of dry land to the water's surface. When the crocodile opens its mouth, good can emerge / be created;

when its snout is closed, nothing happens.<sup>136</sup> In the context of birthing, a closed mouth spells death for the mother and her child.

If a woman does not fall pregnant, even months after getting married, she will visit a senior man versed in magical charms and spells. The following *shipekundi* is called *tsogrokalanda* and is uttered over a piece of betel nut, lime, or betel pepper, alternatively over a piece of sago cake.

<i>Kumburpmeandu-a,</i>	<i>Angripmeandu-a</i>	.....
First name of a	second name of a	(name of the
mythical coconut palm	mythical coconut palm	respective woman)

*minyai nyangutugui, nyangugambra kamba ya-karanda*  
 your children            all children, they come down

The names of the coconut palm are cited repeatedly, as is the spell as a whole. After uttering the *shipekundi*, also referred to as *kumburpma*, meaning a “cluster” of coconuts, the man who has spoken the words hands the woman the respective piece of betel nut or sago cake with his right hand, without looking. The woman takes and eats it. If she fails to become pregnant, people assume that she is barren, in other words, that she is a *kievi-ragwa*. If a couple does not have any children, it is not always the woman who is made responsible. According to the Iatmul, a man too can be infertile, in which case he is referred to as *kievi-ndu*. In view of the frequency of divorces and second and third marriages, respectively, time will naturally tell which one of the partners was unable to conceive. Infertility is not the intrinsic “fault” of either a man or his wife, but put down to the evil doings of a sorcerer who brought on this condition. Barren women are not condemned for what they are, neither are they pitied. Thanks to the very flexible system of adoption, women who are unable to conceive still often get the chance to rear two to three children. If a man suspects that his wife is unable to bear children, he might well take a second wife to bear him offspring. This is what I was told by interlocutors, but in actual fact, I never came across a man in the village who had married a second wife exclusively for this reason.

Kabuseli, too, whose first wife had not given him children, did not marry a second time for this specific reason. Actually, one could say that Yambunde, his second wife, and a woman who had a reputation among villagers for her active sex life, married him. After a few years Yambunde gave birth to a child, but whether the child was their joint offspring or a result of one of her many extra-marital affairs remained an open question. In fact, the issue was never really raised in the village. More important was that the child served as proof that Kabuseli was not a *kievi-ndu*. His relationship with his first wife did not seem to suffer under his new marriage. On the contrary, he showed loving care for her, especially when he once found her doubled up in pain on her

<sup>136</sup> It is worth noting that, in initiations, the initiate is symbolically devoured by a crocodile. The scarification marks stand for the crocodile's bites.

knees in the house. He himself took her to the next medical aid post in his canoe, an act which in Kararau was considered a clear sign of affection on the part of Kabuseli.

If a woman remains childless, her husband has no right to reclaim a part of the bridewealth. As far as I know, no man in the village ever even tried to do so.

When a woman becomes pregnant she starts counting the moons from the moment on she realizes that she has missed her period. She announces the pregnancy to her husband, his mother, and her own mother. Some women keep track of their pregnancy by adding a knot to a cord each month, others simply count the months. On average, a pregnancy is believed to last eight months.

When she was pregnant, Senguimanagui one day claimed to be in her tenth month. This was confirmed by her husband as well as her mother-in-law, so, fearing the worst, we dashed her off to hospital. There the nurses established that she was roughly eight and a half months on.

During pregnancy women are forbidden to kill and eat lizards and snakes (this also goes for eels). The ban also pertains to the husband. Nor are they allowed to kill and eat a specific aquatic bird called *sela*. Furthermore, the wife is prohibited from eating the eggs of junglefowl, lest the child in her belly die. Nor is she allowed to climb coconut palms and breadfruit trees. Otherwise she can go about her normal daily chores. Moreover, the people say that if she were to just sit around and do nothing, the foetus would do nothing but sleep and her child would later turn out frail and weak. From the second or third month of pregnancy on, the foetus is referred to as *yagua tshigindu*. From then on, the couple should refrain from sexual intercourse.

Sabwandshan once complained that her husband was forcing her to have intercourse although he knew that she was three months pregnant and that it could be damaging to the unborn child. Moreover, it could also result in sickness if not even permanent damage, for instance, in the form of a skin disfigurement. She had frequent quarrels with her husband, which usually ended in a beating and forced sexual intercourse.

During a wife's pregnancy the husband is not allowed to dig the ground or plant sago, coconut, and betel palms – the same applies to bamboo shoots – lest the child be stillborn. For the same reason he is not allowed to carry out repairs to his house, but he can ask his brother to do it for him, without any danger to the unborn child. If the man catches a crocodile he must avoid binding its snout (which is the normal procedure) because this would prevent the wife from giving birth or, alternatively, the child could turn out mute.

This last prohibition clearly ties in with the *shipekundi* mentioned above (p. 168) in which the mythical crocodile is made responsible for “closing” a woman's pelvis before birth.

During the pregnancy of his wife Senguimanagui, Koliuan was involved in making sago-leaf thatches for the councillor's house. For this, single sago leaflets are sewn to a transverse slat with rattan vine. Since all the village men were called to work, Koliuan did not want to be the odd man out. Shortly after work had been completed, Senguimanagui gave birth to her child, which, as it turned out, was covered in long black hair on its arms. Sengui scolded her husband, blaming him and his irresponsible behaviour (producing leaf thatches) for this unusual mishap.

Usually a pregnant woman works until the day she gives birth. Actually, it is not unusual for a woman to deliver her child whilst in the gardens or out on a fishing trip.

During the latter months of her pregnancy, Sengui suffered severe back pain which is why she did not go fishing in the weeks before delivery. She claimed that her husband had once beaten her on the lower back with a palm rib so hard that she had lost consciousness. (Apparently, the reason for the beating was that she had refused to wash Koliuan's trousers. According to Sengui, her husband didn't look after his clothes, which is why they required frequent washing. Furious about her reluctance, Koliuan had decided to give her a thrashing). Ever since, Senguimanagui has suffered from back pain during pregnancy.

When a woman is expecting her first child, she goes to stay with her parents or moves in with a married brother to give birth, accompanied by her husband. Since young husbands usually feel superfluous in this "foreign" environment they tend to stay away most of the time. At the baby's age of two or three months, mother and child move back to the husband's house. If a woman – after delivering a first, possibly even a second healthy child – suffers a stillbirth she will go back to her parents or her brother to deliver her next child. Apart from the first child, a woman usually delivers at home in her husband's house. When a woman feels that birth is imminent, she takes a vine rope and ties it to a crossbeam in the roof, with the rope ending approximately 120 centimetres above floor level. Then she fixes a rod measuring roughly 30 centimetres to the end of the vine rope, referred to as *gungung*, to which she will cling while giving birth in a half crouching position. If it is her first birth she will be accompanied by two or three senior women who will prop up her lower back and lend support in whichever way they can. If she has problems in delivering, the women will massage her belly and – according to my interlocutors – try to turn the baby in her belly so that it is born head first.

Men are strictly excluded from all steps of childbirth because it poses a threat to them. If it becomes apparent that even experienced midwives are not able to help, an old man well versed in incantations is called in.<sup>137</sup> He is not allowed to see, let alone

<sup>137</sup> Women acting as midwives do not have a specific name or title. Since midwives can be women who have never given birth themselves, it seems obvious that their capacity is based on their advanced age or at least on the fact that they are well beyond the birthing age.

touch the woman in labour located in the women's part of the house behind a leaf fence (today a screen of fabrics). The healer prepares and speaks his magic spell, a *shipekundi*, over a bowl of water (occasionally over a coconut), which the woman is given to drink. The idea behind it is that the *shipekundi* will "open" the woman's pelvis.

The newborn baby drops on a palm sheath on the floor. The mother cuts the umbilical cord approximately five to six centimetres above the child's belly. Then the child is washed, usually by a woman who joins the group after delivery. The placenta is transferred to a coconut shell, which is then sealed off with the opposite half. The women go to great lengths to remove all traces of the birth from the house.

We were once sitting in Kabuseli's house. Roughly two metres beside his dwelling was the house of Kugua. A few days before, I had asked Kugua in which month of pregnancy his wife was. He had pondered for a moment and then answered that he had forgotten. While we were sitting in Kabuseli's house, Kugua was sitting in front of the house, carving a children's paddle. Suddenly we heard a faint call coming from Kugua's house. Kabuseli's first wife jumped up and went over to see. The next thing we heard were the screams of a newborn baby. Five minutes later I was by Kai's side, Kugua's wife. Her husband was still sitting outside, quietly working on his paddle. The baby was washed by her sister-in-law (the wife of Kai's brother). Kai herself was sitting on the floor, dressed. Dangling from her mouth was a hand-rolled cigarette measuring about twenty centimetres in length. She in no way looked exhausted or drained, more like she had just got up from a brief nap.

The aim or ideal of every woman is to give birth alone. It is only when the baby is out (with the exception of first deliveries) that she calls for another woman to come. Moreover, she is expected to give birth without uttering any cries of pain. My women interlocutors often emphasized that they were proud of any woman who gave birth alone and without any signs of suffering.

A quarter of an hour after delivery, Kugua called out "*mindana?*" – what is it? The woman who had come to help told him that it was a boy. Kugua showed no emotion and simply kept on carving his paddle.

When Slabui's daughter was about to give birth, the women commented that they were not expecting it to be a good child, the reason being that the parents had kept on having intercourse well into the pregnancy.<sup>138</sup> When the child was finally born, after endless attempts to speed up the exceptionally slow delivery, it lay on the floor motionless. Senguimanangui had rushed to help the young woman, heated a bunch of coconut fibres over the fire until they were burning hot and then applied them to the child's soles and to the top of its head. Still the child did not move. Using a tiny stick, Sengui cleared

<sup>138</sup> This and the following description are based on accounts offered by Senguimanangui.

the baby's nostrils and, with her finger, its mouth. She heated the coconut fibres a second time, this time applying them to all the baby's joints. Finally the baby began to stir and started whimpering faintly. – Today the child is different from others in the sense that it has an unusual head shape and one ear is stunted and closed. In terms of intelligence the child is no different – at least this is the impression I got.

Another woman, Yamanda, was about to give birth to her third child. She was sitting in front of her fire bowl, cooking some food, when she suddenly felt a powerful jolt to the back of her neck, catapulting her on to the bowl. But there was nobody else in the house; she was alone. The only answer was sorcery. The knock had been so violent that the fire bowl had broken into pieces. Yamanda was shaken to the bone. Immediately after the incident she went into labour. She left the house to seek protection with another woman, but she didn't get far. She gave birth under a coconut palm nearby, where Sengui found her. She placed a small ladder against the wall and helped the young woman with the baby to climb back into the house.<sup>139</sup> The baby died a few hours later. Neither did the placenta follow, despite the women's efforts. Yamanda herself died a few days later.

Very few women make an effort to travel to the mission hospital at Kapaimari to give birth in the presence of the resident nurses. I know of only one young woman who decided to deliver her first child there, and probably only because she had spent several years in a coastal town and knew that white women usually went to hospital to give birth.

When, giving birth, complications arise or either the mother or the child dies, the reason is always sought in the evils of sorcery. Labuanda, who lost two children shortly after birth, maintained that nothing could have prevented this, and that her body was simply befallen by some kind of wicked magic.

On the other hand, the death of a newborn child is – as mentioned above – usually put down to illicit intercourse, with the husband bearing the brunt of the blame for indulging in sex too often.

On the occasion of a mortuary feast (three months after the funeral) people from different villages made their way to Kararau, among them a young woman from Tambunum who had travelled the whole day by canoe, exposed to the full force of the sun. When she arrived in Kararau, she complained of severe belly pain upon which she was taken to the house of friends. Her relatives asked me to go and take a look at her and give her some medicine. Her father-in-law and her husband's brother stayed by my side all the time, on the strength of the argument that they were responsible for the woman's wellbeing since her husband had stayed behind in Tambunum. She appeared

<sup>139</sup> Women who have recently given birth are not allowed to use the main ladder lest the house and her husband should suffer severe harm.



to be about six or seven months pregnant although both she and the two men denied this. I offered to take her to hospital but the men declined, insisting that she remained in the village. A few hours later, at nightfall, the men changed their minds and asked me to take the woman to hospital. The father-in-law and her husband's brother accompanied us. She had gone into labour and upon arrival in hospital it became clear that delivery was imminent. The woman was lying on a bed, completely exhausted and close to fainting. The men urged her not stay in Kapaimari, talking her into giving birth in Kararau, or even better in Tambunum. The argument waged to and fro. In the end the woman gave in and began dragging herself on all fours towards the steps out of the hospital. The men tried to get her to her feet, but she collapsed again immediately. Her water had broken and was running down her legs; still the men insisted. It was then that we stepped in telling them that the woman was in no condition to travel.<sup>140</sup> In the end she stayed in hospital, watched over by her father-in-law while her husband's brother returned to the village with us. She gave birth shortly afterwards but the child didn't stand a chance. When morning broke the men went to fetch her and brought her back to the village.

The incident was fiercely debated in Kararau, with the men openly speaking their minds: "the man slept with her too often", "it was the man's fault", "the child was conceived high on spirits".<sup>141</sup> The women, too, discussed the matter but they refrained from openly blaming anyone. Miscarriages appear to be quite frequent but I was unable to obtain detailed information as regards prevalence. Non-viable or prematurely born children are buried by the women somewhere out in the bush, without ceremony.

## 5.1 The significance of birth in Iatmul thought

Concerning the deeper significance of birth in Iatmul thought, I merely have a number of clues to go on. These form the basis for the following comment:

All matters relating to birth and pregnancy play a key part in the way woman think and act. The same, albeit with a slightly different emphasis, is true of Iatmul men. From one myth I was only able to gather a few disjointed fragments; the myth tells of how the first humans – in this case men – beat on the ceremonial stool in the men's house of Muintshembit with a bundle of leaves upon which a number of children sprang from the stool sprang and went on to become the founders of the various clans.

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<sup>140</sup> We regularly assisted people in case of illness and took sick patients with our outboard canoe to the hospital at Kapaimari (as in this case of the woman from Tambunum), as long as they agreed to us helping them.

<sup>141</sup> In the absence of good but affordable drink, men occasionally consume methylated spirits during festivities.

Another myth (told by Koliuan) tells of how women learnt how to give birth:

“When, in earlier days, the women became pregnant and the time of birth had come, they didn’t know how to deliver. They (meaning the men) used to cut the woman open, take out the child, and bury the mother in the ground (since she had died during the ‘operation’). This was done so for a long time. One day, when a next woman was pregnant and expecting birth, a cockatoo flew by, perched itself on a branch and began watching the women. All the women had gathered, ready to cut open the belly of the pregnant woman in order to extract the child. At this moment the cockatoo flew down to the women and said: ‘Wait a moment! There’s a different way to deliver children.’ The bird went on to tell them what he knew and said: ‘Come on, I’ll show you how it’s done.’ The cockatoo took a vine and attached it to a tree. He threw the rope down and told the pregnant woman: ‘Get up and hold on to the rope.’ The woman stood up and took hold of the rope. Then the cockatoo said: ‘Hold tight and breathe deeply, breathe deeply (the Tok Pisin term for this was *taitim win*), then you will deliver the child.’ The woman listened to what the cockatoo had to say. She held the rope tightly, flexed her body and gave birth to her child. The cockatoo continued: ‘Now cut the umbilical cord, wash the baby and rub it with coloured earth. Then a mother has to ensure that she has milk to give to the child. This is how it is done. You cannot go on killing the mothers.’

From then on all the women did it the way the cockatoo had told them to do. A few men joined them and commented: ‘Oh, this cockatoo has given us good counsel (Tok Pisin *lo*), he has helped us a lot.’ Then they asked the bird: ‘Koki, how can we show you our appreciation, what can we give you?’ The cockatoo answered: ‘I don’t want much, a stone axe would do.’ The people gave him what he had asked for and said: ‘With this stone axe you can remove the buds (Tok Pisin *het*, so possibly also meaning shoots) from any betel or coconut palm, or from any other tree, for that matter, and eat them. It now belongs to you.’ Ever since the cockatoo has cut off the cones of betel and coconut palms and branches of other trees and eaten them. This has been the way of the cockatoo since then.”

Other myths, too, give testimony of the importance of conception, birth, and women’s fertility in Iatmul thought. For instance, there is one myth which tells of how, at the beginning of time, the ground in Mebinbit had the shape of a vagina; another describes how the primeval mother Mebinbragui, also referred to as the earth, gave birth to a couple of male twins. She severed the umbilical cord with her fingernail. A wooded area near Gaikorobi is said to be the embodiment of this same Mebinbragui. Nobody is allowed to fell a tree on this land, lest the blood of this primeval being should spring from the ground. A myth about Kamabindshua, Mebinbragui, and Mebinbragui’s dowry – her mother represented as a forest full of natural wealth – relates to the same context of primeval mother and her life-giving capacities. Yet another

myth tells of how a group of primeval women allowed themselves to be impregnated by the wind. These women are represented in the wooden statues at the lower end of gable posts in the (former) huge men's houses.— Furthermore, it is worth noting that, during a certain *naven* ceremony, the *wau* imitates giving birth to a female *laua* (Bateson 1958: 16-18).

## 5.2 The post-partum period

After giving birth, the rules of conduct for husband and wife remain in force. The house remains divided into a male and a female sphere. The mother sits with her baby near the women's window (*guendsherat*). If she needs to wash or bathe, the only way to leave the house is via the small ladder, *menguit*, leaning against the *guendsherat*. During the first five days – after a first delivery ten days – she is not allowed to wash in open water. In earlier days, a woman in childbed had to use, as during menstruation, a waterhole far off in the bush. Today she is more likely to fetch a bowl of water from the river and wash behind the house.

The coconut shell containing the placenta is rarely buried in the ground.<sup>142</sup> In Kararau, it is usually placed in a sago cake basket and suspended from a tree, deep in the forest. If a woman wishes to avoid pregnancy in the future, she pulls down a branch, attaches the basket to it, and lets go of it, making it shoot skywards. But she has to do this without looking or turning around afterwards. Another way of avoiding a future pregnancy is to have another woman cut the umbilical cord after birth. In this case the placenta is buried in the ground and the woman plants the shoot of a *limbum* palm over the spot. If the young tree grows, it is taken as a sign that she will not become pregnant again.

For the first five days, until the remains of the umbilical cord have dropped off, the husband is not allowed to see the child from close distance, let alone touch it, since its body still has “half of the mother's womb” (Tok Pisin: *hap bel*) and blood clinging to it. Furthermore, if the husband touches his wife, the Iatmul say, his spine would become bent and his skin begin to wrinkle prematurely because she too still has blood on her.

In earlier days, the newborn baby was washed and anointed with *gwat*, an oily tree resin, and red earth to make the skin smooth and firm. Occasionally the baby was rubbed with white earth to make it sleep soundly, while yellow earth helped to make it put on weight quickly. Black earth, normally associated with the male sphere and killing, was only applied when all other options proved fruitless and the child failed to thrive. Nowadays people usually omit the tree resin and coloured earth, relying on soap, water, and talcum powder instead. According to Sabwandshan, the old women today often chide young women for no longer relying on tree resin.

<sup>142</sup> In Aibom the placenta is always buried in the ground in a coconut (personal communication Gisela Schuster).

During the first five days (ten days, respectively), the woman may not light a fire in a large fire bowl, nor is she allowed to cook. She usually keeps a small log glowing in a tiny fire bowl for drying tobacco leaves for the occasional smoke. Throughout this period she and her family are looked after either by her mother-in-law, her own mother, or a sister. She is forbidden to eat any large fish, especially not *kamui* fish (Tok Pisin: *pis i gat nil*), and she is not allowed to consume chicken and dried coconut meat. After this post-partum period, she is allowed to bathe in the lagoon.

After returning to the house, she lights a fire in a large fire bowl and bakes her first sago cake in a long while. She does not eat it but uses it to rub down her body before going on to bake further cakes for herself, her husband, and her elder children. During the next few weeks (up to three months) she hardly leaves the house. She goes neither fishing nor to the market. During this period she is supplied with fish by the women with whom she has entertained loose but regular exchange relationships in the past (see survey of fish exchange. pp. 63–64).

I got the impression that for all these mothers (during our stay five children were born) the months after giving birth is the time that they live their life “to the fullest”, or, in other words, they can be their “real selves”, displaying a sense of pride and dignity which I often found lacking in other women. In discussions, Iatmul men often seemed a bit bewildered, or at least embarrassed, when I began talking about a woman who had delivered a child only days ago. I do not believe that this has to do with the fact that they were forbidden to be present during birth (after all, in Iatmul culture, too, the norms are determined by men;<sup>143</sup> thus it might be more apt to say that it fits the pattern of overall Iatmul ideology). Rather, I tend to assume that, considering that a Iatmul male draws identity from his community with other men and, at least in the olden days, from headhunting, the act of giving birth is a rather unsettling moment for him. Since men *cannot* contribute to this pivotal event upon which the further existence of Iatmul society hinges, they prefer to exclude themselves from the start. In the same vein, one should not forget that a man who comes into contact with a newborn child or a woman in childbed loses his ability to kill (on the equivalents of killing and giving birth, see p. 224).

The relationship between mother and child remains very close for the first two or three years, until the child is weaned. She gives her youngest her full attention; at the same time, her elder children, maybe only four or five years old, learn to face the painful reality that they are no longer the centre of attention. While still breastfeeding, a woman is forbidden to have sexual intercourse, lest the husband's sperm should mingle with the mother's milk and make the baby sick.<sup>144</sup> If a woman

<sup>143</sup> The men's house is the place where all decisions affecting the village as a whole are taken. It is also the place where “conform” and “non-conform” behaviour is discussed. At the same time, the men's house serves as a “court room”. These important discussions are attended exclusively by men.

<sup>144</sup> In a patrol report of 1961, F. V. Esdale wrote about Kamenimbit: “Strong native custom here is that a man may not continue sexual intercourse with his wife until a child is two or three years

becomes pregnant before the child is weaned, the husband is reprimanded by the senior men for his behaviour.

If a woman decides not to have any more children but has missed the chance to ask a woman to sever the umbilical cord at her last delivery or failed to follow the correct procedures when disposing of the placenta, she will seek help from a man versed in magic spells.<sup>145</sup> Although there are several old women who also know the pertinent *shipekundi*, women often prefer to seek guidance from an experienced old man whom they know and trust.

Mindsh, whose wife was advised by doctors not to have any more children (owing to a lack of breast milk), explained that he performed the *shipekundi tsigrakabak* approximately once a week (which could roughly correspond with the frequency of intercourse). The spell is spoken over some betel nut and pepper along with a piece of sago. The man then passes the mix to his wife with his left hand for her to eat. A further mixture consisting of betel nut and pepper is placed in a bamboo tube and stored under the roof of the house where the betel is left to dry.

The *shipekundi* must be performed at daybreak, before husband and wife have passed water.

*amuin, amuin, amuin, Mebinbragui, amuin wungugambi*  
cassowary, cassowary, cassowary, Mebinbragui, cassowary, woman's body

*saka wolinyen tsigrokabak*  
tightly-closed legs, blood running dry

*gongu gamba saka wolinyen tsigrokabak*  
closed legs tightly-closed legs, blood running dry

This *shipekundi* is also referred to as *mbal Wolingau*. *Wolingau* is the name of a type of creeper, possibly also that of kind of aerial roots which, according to a myth, once joined the sky to the earth. Humans used to be able to travel to and fro between heaven and earth. One day a man (whose name was not mentioned) severed *wolingau*, thus separating the sky from the earth, just like the two moieties form separate entities (sky people: *nyau*; earth people: *nyamei*). It is said that a woman is unable to sweat profusely after this *shipekundi*. Women who sweat a lot are believed to be fertile, and therefore described as good women. I was unable to gather any evidence concerning the *shipekundi's* efficacy, but given the way men and women spoke about the spell, it appears to have done its job regularly and quite efficiently (by whichever means).

On average, women become pregnant again after two to three years. Presuming a woman has given birth to six children in the course of her life, it means that she has refrained from intercourse for a total of something between twelve and eighteen years. I got the impression that the women regarded

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old. The Aid Post orderly insisted that should the husband break the rule the infant was liable to get yaws or dysentery from the mother's milk."

<sup>145</sup> Some magic spells were already referred to on p. 167.

this as a burden – especially during the third, and last, year of breastfeeding. What the husbands thought to this is difficult to say. Possibly men now over thirty-five fear the “dilapidating” influence of sexual intercourse too strongly as to run the risk of breaking the taboo too often. Among younger couples I noticed the tendency to resume intimate relationships at a much earlier point in time.

## 6 The Relationship Between Husband and Wife

Although the ban on sexual intercourse during pregnancy and after delivery is not the ultimate reason for the often tense, if not aggressive relationship between men and women, it certainly can put a strain on marital relationships. The causes for disputes between husband and wife relate, firstly, to sexual matters, secondly, to matters concerning food provision (when a husband claims his wife is not providing him with enough food), and, thirdly, when a man plans to marry a further wife.

When a woman refuses to sleep with her husband, this usually leads to a physical confrontation in which the wife does not hold back but usually loses out (Bateson 1932: 282-285).

Waani often suspected his wife, Sabwandshan, of having an affair with another man, which she, however, always denied. Still, his jealousy was frequently the cause of making him beat his wife and then raping her. She left him twice, travelling by canoe to Angoram (without her children), a two-day journey, where she stayed with her parents. On both occasions, Waani went to fetch her back. The fact is that Sabwandshan had always felt disgusted by Waani but her stepmother had talked her into marrying him, arguing that a man with such a hairy chest promised to be a hardworking husband. In addition, her family was not asked for a dowry to offset the bridewealth. Ever since being a young girl, Sabwandshan had been in love with Tamuin with whom she

had been in a relationship before marriage. Waani knew about this and was probably aware that his wife still had feelings for Tamuin. In their twelve-year marriage, Waani had beaten his wife to unconsciousness several times and, on one occasion, even been charged by the *kiap* (Australian patrol officer) for it.<sup>146</sup>

Sabwandshan never spoke about her ordeal in detail, but Sengui, a classificatory sister, told me more of her story:

“One night, Sabwandshan came to the house of Sengui and called her name. Her face was all bruised and she was crying because, once again, Waani had given her a heavy beating. Sabwandshan stayed the night at Sengui’s house. The next morning she told Sengui that she was moving in with Tamuin [who meanwhile was married], claiming that she still loved him and wanted to be with him. There was nothing to change Sabwandshan’s mind and, in the end, she actually did go to visit Tamuin. But he didn’t want her to stay, fearing sickness and trouble. He pointed out that she was married and told her to go back to her husband, upon which Sabwandshan left the house again. In the meantime Waani had gathered his fellow clansmen in the village, and together they assaulted Sabwandshan and severely beat her using sticks, her screams ringing out across the bush. Sengui, who had gone fishing, heard her shrieks and hurried back to help her sister. Together with Koliuan, her husband, and his father, who was *tultul* at the time [assistant to the appointed village headman], they tried to talk some reason into the assailants, but to little avail. After also beating up Sengui and her two helpers, Waani and his men finally let off from Sabwandshan.

Sabwandshan had made several attempts to leave her violent husband, but with little success. Although devoted to them, she had each time left behind her four children.

Twice Sabwandshan had attempted to commit suicide [by hanging] but been discovered in time. – Since Waani did not wish to set eyes on Tamuin any longer nor give his wife the chance to meet him, he accepted a job as aid post orderly on the upper reaches of the Korewori River. Before Sabwandshan left the village with her children, she had Sengui and Koliuan make the promise that, should Waani ever beat her again, they would take her in and provide shelter.”

Suicide is in fact quite rare. According to both men and women, suicide is regarded as a typically female mode of resolving a conflict.<sup>147</sup> The last suicide in the village must have been more than twenty years ago, but the people still distinctly remember the fate of two specific women. One of them, a young unmarried woman was in love

<sup>146</sup> Entry in village book (12 October 1966).

<sup>147</sup> Suicide as a form of conflict resolution was already described by Malinowski (1926) with regard to the Trobriand Islands.



with a man whom she was not allowed to marry (her father wanted her to marry her *yanan*). Unfortunately, the secret love affair came to light upon which several men got together, ambushed and then gang-raped the woman. Shortly afterwards, the young woman hung herself from a tree. The second woman also hung herself – this must have happened in the 1920s – after her husband had been killed on a head-hunting raid and her only child had died shortly afterwards. When asked whether men also committed suicide, both my male and female interlocutors denied. Men are strong, was the common answer. Suicide was something women did when in anguish (in Tok Pisin described as *wori bilong meri*). When a man faced trouble (*wori bilong man*) he didn't respond by killing himself but by killing others. If a woman cheated on her husband, the cuckold would seek out his rival and kill him. That was how men used to solve their problems, people said (nowadays people prefer to file a complaint with the *kiap*).

Kama, the grand old village big man killed his second wife roughly thirty years ago. "I merely hit her with my hand", he professed. "There must have been sorcery at play", he went on to say, "how else could I have killed her with my bare hands?" – With his first wife, Kamabindshua, he has found his peace – at least these days. One day, when we were bringing his wife back from hospital, we docked our canoe at a jetty, which was connected to the shore with nothing but a tree trunk. Kama had noticed this. The old man, now well into his seventies, went to fetch his small canoe in order to escort his wife, who was unsteady on her feet, to the door of the house. In the meantime another man had already come to help her cross the slippery trunk, watched over closely by Kama who kept his eye on every movement she made.

Now, in old age, the couple was united in something like close affection. One got the impression that the two had seen enough of life to realize that deep-rooted gender opposition was a hallmark of their society but that the gap between men and women was bridgeable, provided the necessary distance is kept. In their case, distance came with old age. Above I have already described the relationship between Gimbun and Namui, which was something akin to what we would call love (see p. 126).

In most cases, wives appear to accept or at least acknowledge the authority of their husbands, especially when the authority is underpinned by the tendency to violence. Most married couples live in a type of relationship we find difficult to grasp and express in our own terms. By and large, however, men and women lead more or less separate lives. The men spend most of the day in the men's house in the company of their peers, while the women are busy procuring food and looking after children. As man and wife rarely work together, the only things they really have in common are food and sexual intercourse, although even this is only partly true because men and women mostly consume their food separately; usually the man retires to his part of the house or the men's house to eat. (When one day, on a visit, my husband and I shared food from the same plate, it caused quite a stir among our hosts).

Still, not every husband rules over his wife at will. I came across a number of cases in which the wife played the leading role, not only in economic terms – as the sago and fish surveys above revealed – but in all respects as far as family and household are concerned.<sup>148</sup>

Amblangu was not actually a bossy person, but she was certainly more energetic and realistic than her husband (I have already addressed Amblangu's reliance on her brother, Waani, above). For her it was quite normal to say that her husband was slightly mad, even when he was in hearing distance. Kisaman, a gentle man, never taken seriously by his peers, would just sit there, smiling gently. One never heard him raise his voice in anger – this was quite untypical for the village where one constantly heard angry shouts and cries coming from people's homes. But Kisaman was by no means an imbecile. His brother, too, was of the gentle type, at least according to Iatmul standards, but being distinctly older, his gentleness emanated a kind of quiet authority and aura that comes naturally with age. Kisaman washed and mended his trousers himself, and often accepted household chores from her.<sup>149</sup>

Tipmange, who was basically very fond of her husband, often got very annoyed when he preferred to remain silent when he actually should have spoken his mind. In these cases she didn't hold back and was prone to scold him in front of all people present.

When two people disagree on some matter, the dispute is carried out without delay, in front of everybody who happens to be present at the moment. Deferring the matter to a later date when the two disputants would be alone is practically unheard of.

When travelling to Angoram one day, we took Mindsh with us. He fetched his stuff from the house and climbed into the canoe. A short while later we passed his wife on her way to fishing. She kept her eyes glued to the water while he turned his head the other way. The two did not say hello to each other, as was usually the case when two people passed each other, especially two of the same sex.

Even though the relationship between husband and wife can be tense at times and conflicts are not rare, a woman will always defend her husband vis-à-vis outsiders.

Koliuan, who repeatedly declared that he never drank denatured alcohol because it was harmful to the liver (during his medical training he had once been shown the liver of an alcoholic), one day got dead drunk on methylated spirits during a feast. In the end he was lying on the floor unconscious or least deep asleep. Another man had to carry him to his canoe (where he threw up repeatedly) and take him home. When, some days later, I visited Koliuan

<sup>148</sup> See Bateson 1958: 42, and Mead 1950: 94.

<sup>149</sup> Such new chores like washing trouser are more frequently assigned to women; however, the division of labour in these matters is still being negotiated.

and his wife, I mentioned his blackout the other day, evidently with a bit too much mockery. While Koliuan shrugged the matter off, maintaining that he had not really been dead drunk, Sengui stood by her husband vehemently, claiming that Koliuan was able to drink as much alcohol as he liked and never become drunk, because he was such a strong man.

My careless remark had clearly offended the man in his pride, and Sengui had stepped in to defend him. I believe looking at it from this angle explains why, during a *naven*, women enthusiastically imitate the proud demeanour of men (while the latter mimic the “foolish” behaviour of the “weak” women), namely because a proud and assertive attitude is a typical trait of Iatmul men and acknowledged by all members of the community. In line with cultural standards, women’s behaviour is accredited with distinctly less prestige. This fact is also acknowledged by women; they do not question the reigning value hierarchy.

The Iatmul women did not like the idea of my husband sitting down to paddle a canoe (this was the women’s way, but distinctly easier for an untrained Westerner) instead of standing like ordinary Iatmul men did. They tolerated it on the three-and-a-half-hour journey to the market place, but as soon as we approached our destination they firmly ordered him to get up and paddle the rest of the way standing up. When we arrived at our destination *comme il faut* the women were evidently proud of “their foreigner”.

## 6.1 Polygyny

Polygyny appears to have been practised much more often in earlier days (Bateson 1932: 286). Since, today, bridewealth has to be paid in cash, it is hard for any suitor who does not have a town job to gather sufficient money for the transaction.<sup>150</sup> At the time of our stay in Kararau, only six men had more than one wife. The first wife ranks as the principal wife and has more rights than a co-wife.

As far as Kamangali is concerned, his first wife was also his *yai*. Even when she was still a young girl but already betrothed to Kamangali, she lived in his house. Kamangali called Kwapmei, his *yai*, his real wife (Tok Pisin: *meri tru*). It is told that Kwapmei later convinced Karabindsha to also marry Kamangali, one reason being that the two women had always gotten on well with each other. So, according to my interlocutors, Karabindsha agreed to marry Kamangali. According to Kamangali, Kwapmei had asked him to take Karabindsha as his

<sup>150</sup> Urban migration among young men seems to have led to a surplus of women in the villages a few years ago. This is no longer the case today. In a patrol report of 1956, S. M. Yeaman writes: “There are large numbers of women and children in most villages and the census check showed an increase on previous figures. Women outnumber men but as polygyny is practised, this is not disturbing. Some more influential men have three and four wives.”

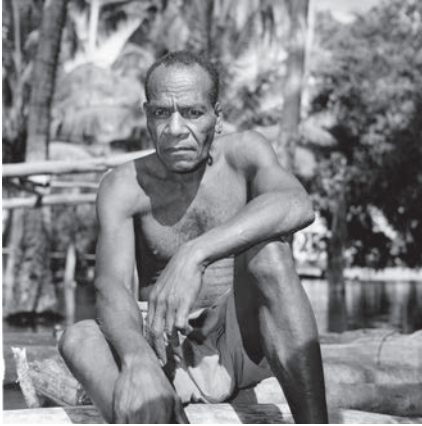


Fig. 49: *The village counsellor, Kamangali (1973).*

second wife, because she was no longer able, or willing, to tend to his many gardens all on her own. But when Labu also suddenly started showing an interest in Kamangali, it got too much for his first two wives so, one day, they waylaid Labu and gave her a thrashing. But to no avail, Labu didn't give up her advances. Kamangali commented: "Labu was crazy, she's my clan sister. One night she crept into my sleeping bag and wanted to have intercourse with me. So I married her." Today all three women live in the same house, and the situation seems to have calmed down.

Still, Kamangali clearly favours his third and youngest, childless wife, which was met with disdain by other villagers.

Kabuseli, too, had two wives. His second wife, who had been married already three times, was his *yai*. Still, she didn't rank as his principal wife. On the contrary, she showed great respect towards the first wife and never questioned her privileges. She seemed to accept her role willingly. She took on all the heavy chores without complaining and often rode the first wife in her canoe to the gardens and back.

Kabe, the village businessman – he had, with the support of all the villagers, bought a truck which he used to transport goods back and forth between Pagui and Wewak – had been married to the same wife for many years. His oldest daughter, Betshiyimbunagui, had a child, and Kabe was clearly considered a man of age. In Wewak he one day got to know a young woman from one of the bush villages who had been married three times. The Kararau women claimed he had picked her up on the street, meaning that she was a prostitute (Tok Pisin: *public meri*) but, regardless, Kabe wished to marry her. When he informed his wife Undambi, she flew into a rage, exclaiming: "What do you want? I have given you many children, isn't that enough?", before threatening, "I shall beat this woman until she leaves my house again." The daughter, too, was ashamed of her father and left the village for a few months to save her having to watch him bringing the young woman to the house. Evidently Kabe was impressed by the resistance his wife and daughter showed. For the moment he only brought the young woman as far as Pagui. Later he took her to stay with relatives in another part of the village, but he never brought her to his house. A few weeks later the woman had left Kararau again; whether she thought the situation had become too unsafe or whether he had come to his senses, remains unanswered.

After several years of marriage, a man from Kwedndshange brought home a second wife. The principal wife attacked her, which led to a prolonged fight. Being younger and stronger, the second wife gradually gained the upper hand, breaking the principal wife's arm. Upon this, the second wife began crying, telling her opponent how sorry she was, after which the two women reconciled.

When two wives quarrel, the husband usually does not intervene. Only when matters threaten to get out of hand, he steps in and gives both wives a thrashing, my interlocutors explained.<sup>151</sup> The principal wife is referred to as *numanragwa*, all subsequent spouses as *kambennimbaragwa*. Wives call their husband *kiande*. The principal wife occupies the front part of the house, that is, the part facing the river, while the second wife resides in the rear part. The principal wife gets a larger garden and can freely dispose of its produce, while the second wife has to make do with a smaller tract. The same is true of the tobacco crop. The wives work jointly but the principal wife gets the larger share. When a man carves canoes for his wives, the principal spouse receives the one made from the lower, thicker part of the tree while the co-wife has to make do with the upper, narrower part of the trunk. In general, I think it is fair to say that no wife enjoys having to share her husband with another woman and that – especially in the early phases of marriage – there is much acrimony and quarrelling, especially if the husband seems to be favouring one over the other.

Kamangali said he treated all his three wives equally and that he didn't like to see his wives quarrelling. This is why, each day, he ate food prepared by a different wife.

When the two wives have settled down and got used to one another, family life in a polygynous household is usually more relaxed than in a single-marriage household. Or, to put it differently: the antagonistic relationship between husband and wife is pushed to the background as soon as the principal spouse has a potential rival at her side. The husband's position is, even if it sounds paradox, "safer" because his two wives are hardly likely join up against him.<sup>152</sup> Conversely, a wife with a co-wife at her side is less likely to be beaten by her husband, and divorces appear to be less common in polygynous marriages than in single ones.

When a woman decides to desert her husband, she has to leave everything behind except for the clothes she is wearing. In other words, all the household items that once made up part of the dowry remain with her husband. She has no claim to any part of the property. She also has to leave behind her children, since they are not hers but members of her husband's clan. She can take with her young children that still rely on her (for example, babies who are still being breastfed) but it goes

<sup>151</sup> In Malinge a principal wife once killed the co-wife her husband had recently brought to the house, not in a quarrel, it appears, but through a premeditated act of violence carried out at night, and at a point when one might have assumed that by then the woman had come to terms with the situation (personal communication, F. Weiss and M. Stanek).

<sup>152</sup> See also Mead 1950: 97.

without saying that they have to return to their father as soon as they have grown and become more independent, or should their father remarry.

A young man, who only occasionally visited the village, lived with a woman in Wewak. Since he earned quite a lot of money (at least for village standards) he decided to take a second wife. His first wife was strictly against it but this did not stop him, upon which his wife left him. She was not allowed to take her two-year-old child with her, instead it was given to the second wife to raise. The reason given was that the man had paid bridewealth for his wife, which meant that the child belonged to the husband.

If a woman leaves her husband, he cannot fetch her back by force. On the other hand, a man may evict his wife if she, for example, has a lover she is not willing to give him up or if she neglects her husband and her children (the latter is almost unthinkable). If he does not evict her by force, several people told me, it is enough for a man to raise his tobacco and betel nut pouch over his head and call the name of his principal *shambla*, thus terminating the marriage.<sup>153</sup> However, my interlocutors were unable to name a specific case when a marriage had been dissolved in this fashion. In all the divorce cases I was able to record, the wife had left her husband. I was unable to ascertain whether the husband had actually evicted the woman or whether she had been planning the move already for quite a while.

This was also the case with the young man in Wewak. His brother maintained he had thrown her out of the house, while a female interlocutor stuck to her story that she had left her husband of her own accord because she was not willing to accept a co-wife next to her.

If a man marries a divorced woman, he is asked to pay compensation to the former husband in the height of the original bridewealth. Occasionally a deduction is made for any children she gave birth to in her first marriage. But this is not a fixed rule because it is expected that she will go on to bear more children, which will then belong to her new husband.

## 6.2 Divorce

As mentioned above, a (serious) conflict between husband and wife can be resolved by the wife leaving her husband for good. If both parties agree to the separation, or if the wife has already moved in with a new man, this counts as a divorce and no further ceremonial steps are required to confirm it.

It was practically impossible to determine a more or less precise rate of divorce in the village because it was difficult to ascertain whether a woman had actually left

<sup>153</sup> Each moiety has a principal *shambla*. For the Nyame this is Maimbange, for the Nyau Kongoli. Maimbange and Kongoli are a pair of mythological brothers.

her husband for a new partner or whether she had entered the new relationship after the death of her husband. Of the total of 66 women, 41 had married only once.<sup>154</sup> 16 women had married a second time (three of them marrying a deceased husband's younger brother), three a third, and two a fourth time. Of the 52 men, 36 had married only once; 9 had married twice, five three times, and two men had married five or more times.<sup>155</sup> Apart from these 52 men, 6 men had more than one wife at the same time. They are not listed in the figures given above. Although polygyny is not the solution to the latent conflict between husband and wife, it may help to mitigate a tense relationship. The divorce rate for woman is higher than it is for men; 25 of 66 women had married more than once, while the figure for the men was 16 of 52.

Writing on divorce in Europe and the United States, Goode (1967: 178) comments: "Data from numerous investigations indicate that women complain more frequently about their marriage than men do. A probable reason for this is that marriage has more significance for women than it does for men and that for them success and good fortune in life is more dependent on the state of their marriage" (translated by N. S.). Although the findings cannot necessarily be transferred to Iatmul conditions, they do seem to imply a universal trend that women tend to concentrate on a society's internal structure<sup>156</sup> whereas men tend to focus on its external structure.<sup>157</sup> Among the Iatmul, women are primarily entrusted with all the tasks (fishing, gardening, market trading) that focus on and sustain the household, while men direct less attention to the immediate local unit and its upkeep (dwelling house and its inhabitants) as they do to the village community and its wellbeing as a whole (men's house, ritual activities, warfare in former times). In addition, it seems that (lived) sexuality is more important to women as it is to men, which is probably why women grant the question of marriage and married life more emphasis. This is possibly also a reason why a woman is more prepared to give up a marriage in lieu of a new, hopefully better, relationship.

Whether the rate of divorce used to be as high as it is today is difficult to say. On the one hand, more marriages were arranged by the spouses' parents, irrespective of personal preferences, on the other, ending a marriage faced stronger resistance and more obstacles (*yai-yanan* marriages were indissoluble). These matters were often

<sup>154</sup> Here I would like to add that the survey included very young, i.e. freshly married women, senior women as well as truly old women who looked back on an eventful life.

<sup>155</sup> Yamanabi had been married to six women in total. During the Second World War, when the Japanese occupied Timbuktu, he had given refuge to four women who had fled. Locally they were regarded as his wives.

<sup>156</sup> Here structure is understood as "... a set of any elements between which, or between certain sub-sets of which, relations are defined" (Lane 1970: 24); hereby the "internal" and the "external" relate to the elements.

<sup>157</sup> Tiger (1973: 126): "Men liaise with a view to the macro structure, women with a view to the micro structure." I have not used the terms macro and micro in this context because they do not fit. In the Iatmul case it is more a matter of "internal" and "external" whereby both are closely interlinked.

discussed in the men's house with the intention of hindering a woman from abandoning her husband. One should also not forget that, in earlier days, men now and again fell victim to warfare, thus ending a marriage prematurely. Today, only very few marriages are arranged, and the number of self-initiated unions is on the rise.<sup>158</sup> At the same time, the village community's resentment against divorce has declined. Possibly the rate of extra-marital affairs was higher in earlier days, without necessarily leading to a divorce and subsequent re-marriage.

Prostitution in the sense of intercourse as an exchange of bodily services for material gain was unknown in traditional Iatmul culture. This is plausible when one considers that Iatmul women were – unlike women in Western societies, at least, with regard to prostitution – not regarded as sexual *objects*. As the cases described above go to show, women were usually the more active agents in relationship matters, at least as long as sexual relations were based on affection. Sexual intercourse as a means of exerting power or dominance or as a form of retribution, or as a means of regaining power and control (pre-marital, marital, or extra-marital sexual violence) is a typically male mode of action. The two modes – “love” and violence – are diametrically opposed. One should also consider that, in their role as daily food providers, women were not overly reliant on their husbands for support. In Kararau, women living alone were unheard of. When a woman deserts her husband, she usually moves in with a brother, her parents, or a new partner, which explains why, in this situation, women rarely face economic distress which otherwise might force them into prostitution (as occasionally seems to be the case in coastal towns). Gardi (1956: 150) mentions a village said to be notorious for its prostitution but I was unable to elicit the name of the place.<sup>159</sup>

Myths occasionally make reference to a woman kept prisoner in a men's house and forced to have intercourse with all its occupants.<sup>160</sup> Whether this was a potential fate of prisoners of war in earlier days is difficult to ascertain. My interlocutors categorically denied such practices. In any case, it would not fit the definition of prostitution offered above, but fall under the category of rape instead.

### 6.3 Changes in the course of a woman's life

As suggested so far, women serve as mediators between clans and villages – at least from an outside perspective – in the sense that, in their capacity as marriage partners, they create new, or underpin existing, bonds between distinct social bodies. This puts a married woman in a somewhat insecure intermediate position.<sup>161</sup> She is not exclusively

<sup>158</sup> Strathern, A. (1968: 43): “Further, antagonism between husband and wife is I would suggest, likely to be dependent on the degree to which the prospective partners to a marriage are able to choose each other, as well as the nature of the affinal tie.”

<sup>159</sup> Personal communication René Gardi.

<sup>160</sup> See section on myths below, pp. 291.

<sup>161</sup> Strathern (1972: VIII) describes this situation among the Hagen as women “in between”.



dependent on her husband for support (provided that she is not from a clan that is not represented at the place where she is married), instead she can fall back on a number of relatives such as brother, parents, mother's brother, etc. for backing if needed, for she retains contact to the clans of her father and mother. Here she finds refuge whenever required. The fact that her husband is obliged to render labour services to her parents underpins the ties to the wife's clan. In the course of the marriage, especially when she has given birth to already a number of children, her position in the husband's clan is strengthened. When she has passed her menopause she ceases to be a potential danger to her husband, owing to the loss of her sexuality which, according to Iatmul reckoning, used to become manifest in her monthly bleedings. Men's view of, and behaviour towards, senior and elder women differs completely in relation to that towards young women. This might have to do with age as such, since, in the male age grade system, the eldest ranked highest and had the highest prestige and power. A wife's status conforms to that of her husband, provided she does not stand out by virtue of exceptional personal qualities. But age alone does not explain the occasionally almost deferential behaviour men show towards older women.<sup>162</sup> It is to a woman's credit to have grown-up sons who are capable of and ready to assume responsibility in the community of men.<sup>163</sup> I never heard a man speak contemptuously about his (real or classificatory) mother.<sup>164</sup> In the male mindset, mothers form a category of their own, distinct and clearly set apart from the younger, sexually active women. I once asked why women play such a prominent part in myths, upon which Mindsh answered: "All men and women come from a mother; everything strong and powerful comes from the mothers (Tok Pisin: *ol strongpela samting i stap long mama*).

Old women are also well versed in mythology and occasionally even know some spells, and men often seek advice from them in such matters. Three or four of the old women in Kararau knew *shipekundi* relating to pregnancy and birth. Among

<sup>162</sup> This view of old women is not exclusively positive, ambiguous would be a better term. Telling a man he is an "old woman" is a serious insult because it implies that he is physically as weak and helpless as an old woman.

<sup>163</sup> Bateson (1958: 48) describes a funerary ceremony for a deceased woman. Her prestige was judged by the merits of her sons. In male funerary ceremonies emphasis is placed on the number of slain enemies and the number of pigs he killed.

<sup>164</sup> According to Whiting (1965: 126) boys who spend their first three years of life exclusively in the company of women, attain a "cross-sex identification"; "...in short, if he is a boy he will have a cross-sex identification. If, later in life, he is involved in a world that is obviously dominated by men, a world, in which men are perceived to be more prestigious and powerful than women, he will be thrown into a conflict. He will develop a strong need to reject his underlying female identity. This may lead to an overdetermined attempt to prove his masculinity, manifested by a preoccupation with physical strength and athletic prowess, or attempts to demonstrate daring and valor, or behavior that is violent and aggressive." Although I will not enlarge upon this subject here I believe that this cross-sex identification and the behaviour resulting from it, also applies to Iatmul men's. According to Silverman, men's idealizing image of motherhood is accompanied by a compelling image of motherhood that is defiling, dangerous, and aggressive. He perceives iai-marriages as a Freudian form of the Oedipus complex (2001: 100-113).

these senior women, Dshangu, the wife of Gowi, was prominent. She originally was from Tigowi, and Gowi was her third husband. She had no children from any of her husbands, which an interlocutor commented on as follows: “She only ever took that one part of a man” (Tok Pisin: *em i kisim hap bilong man tasol*). Although she had no children, she enjoyed high esteem in the village, not least because she was knowledgeable in healing rituals.

When a middle-aged man by the name of Kubeli fell ill, he asked us for malaria tablets; however, the sickness did not subside, upon which Kubeli began avoiding us. He went to see Kabuseli who performed a *shipekundi* to banish the sickness, giving him an artistically twined cord to wear around the neck. Still the sickness did not go away. So he went to Dshangu who also gave him a cord to wear around the neck after bespeaking it with a magic spell. Later he went on to consult a third healer. At last, after several weeks, he regained his health. – Some time later we asked him who had helped him most, upon which he answered that all three had contributed equally, but his illness had been so serious that it had required the support of all of them.

To a certain extent, every woman is involved in healing practices but healing with the aid of *shipekundi* is a different matter:

When I once went to see Sabwandshan, I found a disgruntled Waani sitting on a stool. On his back he had several cuts. When I asked Sabwandshan what had happened, she replied that Waani had been complaining about a fever and had asked her to bleed him in order to drain off the hot and bad blood, upon which she had applied several small cuts to his lower back with a razorblade to get rid of the bad influence.

A few weeks later we came across Wolibieng, a young widower. A few days ago he had twisted his knee. After receiving treatment at the hospital, which had not helped, he had applied roughly fifteen cuts to his knee, each between one and two centimetres in length, with a razorblade. He, too, believed that before the knee could heal, the bad blood had to be drained off.

In the case of headaches, people apply small cuts to the forehead. In fact, bloodletting is the first thing people do in the case of a physical ailment, as borne out by the scars one often finds on men’s backs and bellies which we initially believed to be scarification marks (inflicted during initiation). Cuts with a razorblade are also applied to young children, even babies, especially when they do not stop crying for no apparent reason (see Hauser-Schäublin 1973: 34) Women, too, cut themselves, or have another woman do it, to get rid of any bad blood. Whether, according to Itamul conceptions, menstrual blood falls into this category is difficult to say. Certainly there are clues to suggest that menstrual bleeding is believed to have a “cleansing” effect on a woman.

Dshangu once stepped in as adviser to help the men. During our stay, crocodile hunts produced very meagre results, leading to lengthy discussions in

the men's house as to the causes for this failure.<sup>165</sup> They also appealed to the ancestors but received no answers. Around this time, Dshangu's deceased brother appeared to her, telling her to personally take betel nut to the men's house to honour Kararau's mythical crocodile. She did as she was told. After leaving the men's house and climbing in to her canoe, her deceased brother made himself felt again. The canoe began to rock to and fro violently, throwing her into a strange state of excitement. Her aim was to get home as quickly as possible, but each time she tried to dip the paddle into the water, the boat tipped to the other side. She began speaking loudly to herself and kept turning around to look behind her. Then the canoe began rocking so strongly she feared it might capsize. She desperately held on to the gunwales with both hands. Then she started flailing one arm through the air as if trying to drive something away, speaking in a staccato voice. At last she was able to row back to the jetty near her house, with the canoe still swaying dangerously. It cost her all her strength because each time she approached the landing the canoe began drifting off again. Finally she made it, falling to the ground as soon as she felt land under her feet. The canoe stopped rocking immediately, and Dshangu entered the house where, by chance, I was sitting and waiting for her after we had arranged to meet to record her life history. Upon entering she behaved absolutely normally, and her husband, too, who had witnessed the scene, seemed unperturbed. All he said was, "Yes, once again it seems that her brother climbed into the boat with her." – Later, we heard that the deceased brother had reprimanded her for taking such a small amount of betel to the men's house.

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<sup>165</sup> For decades crocodile hunting had been promoted by Chinese and European traders who purchased the skins from local hunters. Thus, excessive hunting had decimated the crocodile population. In addition, the local population has a taste for crocodile eggs, which are regarded as a delicacy; this, too, has led to a decline of the crocodile population. Hence, men rarely get to hunt a crocodile these days.



*Part Three*

*Women, the Realm of Men, and the World Beyond*



## 7 Sorcery and Witchcraft

Women play a rather vague and not easily discernible part in all matters concerning sorcery (the generic Tok Pisin term for sorcery is *sanguma*). If an accident happens or a family is stricken by serious sickness, people usually seek the cause in an injustice or an offense committed against the ancestors. This ancestral power is called *ku glembi* or *kundshe bauda* in Iatmul (in Tok Pisin sik bilong *tumbuna*).<sup>166</sup> If nothing is found and the ancestors do not make their presence felt (by appearing to a member of the family), the people pin the disorder down to an act of sorcery performed by some man (rarely a woman). If a man A wishes to harm a man B he will try to lay his hands on some food remains, pieces of hair, fingernails, or excrement left behind by B, which he places in the fire and burns to cinders, putting the ashes in a piece of bamboo and closing it. In the middle of the night he smashes the bamboo tube with a hammer, upon which the victim falls immediately ill, or even dies. This kind of sorcery is referred to as *grndap* (Tok Pisin: *poisen*).

Another interlocutor told me it was enough to deposit hair, fingernail clips, or food remains behind a woman's fireplace. When she begins cooking, the heat of the fire would make the targeted victim sick or even kill him. The same result could be achieved by taking any item that has transcended the body of the potential victim, placing it in a piece of bamboo, and heating it over a fire before smashing it with a

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<sup>166</sup> Bateson (1932: 423) translates *nglembi* as "trouble".

hammer, making the bits fly out with a loud bang. Instantly the targeted man (rarely a woman) would fall sick.

Apart from *grndap*, which can be learnt by all but seems to be exclusively practised by men, there is a second form of sorcery called *kugua*, which best translates as witchcraft. Unlike *grndap*, *kugua* cannot be learnt as a technique, it is more like a quality of the person who uses it.<sup>167</sup> *Kugua* was (and still is) the most feared form of sorcery. I was told that in earlier days, specific men and women would visit the cemetery at night to steal the flesh of the dead (preferably from the head). They would burn the flesh and then utter a spell over the ashes, targeting a specific victim. The marked person would immediately fall seriously ill or die. According to both male and female interlocutors, today *kuguandu* and *kugaragwa* are restricted to certain bush villages. However, they remained unsure whether, after all, there were people in Kararau who still possessed this quality and knowledge, and knew how to apply it, because they began speaking in whispers and nervously glancing around as soon as we broached the subject. *Kugua* knowledge was passed down within the family, usually from mother to daughter. Men and women who relied on the flesh of the dead for their wicked art could not be detected because they “used a different path” (cf. Bateson 1958: 237) by which I was vaguely made to understand that men who performed *kugua* were able to take on the shape or appearance of women.<sup>168</sup> I heard of a similar case in Palimbe.<sup>169</sup>

For the phenomenon of men turning into women or at least assuming the appearance of women when wishing to harm someone by devouring the flesh of corpses, my interlocutors had no immediate explanation. I would like to expand somewhat on this issue. As mentioned above, men fear that women could perform sorcery against them with the aid of menstrual blood. There is the concept that a child grows from the mixture of female blood and male semen, an indication of this being that pregnant women do not menstruate. In other words, menstrual blood is, to a certain extent, considered the dispensable (thus dead) half of the child.<sup>170</sup> In other words, women possess the feared and sinister ability (as borne out by the rigid rules of conduct during menstruation) to produce each month something that is “dead”. This threatening capacity with the propensity of being dangerous to men (for instance, if a menstruating woman steps over a man’s food) is an embodied quality of women, in other words, the capacity to destroy is female.

<sup>167</sup> Forge 1970: 259 applies to the Abelam the distinction between sorcery (a technique) and witchcraft (an innate quality) in line with Evans-Pritchard’s use of the terms for the Azande.

<sup>168</sup> Forge says about the Abelam: “[...] sorcery being exclusive the province of men and witchcraft of women” (1970: 259). Among the Abelam witches are called *ku-tagwa*. Regarding the Gunantuna of the Gazelle Peninsula, Winthuis (1928: 261-262, note 71) writes: “The angangar sorcerer who tries to steal his victim’s soul and kill him respectively, dresses as a woman [...], that is, he takes on the appearance of a woman or rather: he transforms into a woman [...]”.

<sup>169</sup> Personal communication M. Stanek.

<sup>170</sup> Bateson (1958: 42) states that the placenta is regarded as the mother’s child.



It seems that, in a certain sense, menstrual blood in the context of sorcery and in its quality as “dead” material, is likened to the flesh of corpses.<sup>171</sup> In Kararau it is women who bury the corpses (Kaberry 1941: 362 reports the same for the Abelam<sup>172</sup>). People told me that if a man should bury a body, he would lose his ability to kill the enemy in war, actually the same reason why a man cannot touch a woman in child-bed or a newborn baby (see p. 176). If a man wishes to perform sorcery by means of the flesh of a corpse, he might be in possession of the mediating substance (the flesh) but not of the required ability because he is not in command of the respective destructive power, which is a female asset. He must assume the body and essence of a woman before he is able to gain real power over the mediating substance and turn upon his chosen victim.

A myth told to me by Mindsh recounts how humans acquired magical power (“magic” in a more general sense):

“After the earth had become almost hard and there were already quite many humans around, we didn’t have this knowledge [Tok Pisin: *lo*] of making a man sick or making a sick man well again, or helping one another. We hadn’t received this knowledge yet, at least not the most of us. Only one single man whom we call Tshukendimi had this power, a power which he then passed on to us.<sup>173</sup> Now we too have this power. He is the man who watches over this knowledge. He gave us this knowledge, now we have this knowledge of a magic doctor [Tok Pisin: *dokta*] along with the knowledge of harming others [Tok Pisin: *nongut*]. Tshukendimi heads all those who have this power, he gave us this knowledge. Once upon a time he gave two men the task of overseeing this knowledge [this time referred to as *wok* in Tok Pisin]; their names were Agasawan and Magasawan. He [Tshukendimi] was the boss, the other two the foremen of this knowledge.

A man, Tshangan, and his wife, Mundshunguia, had two children. The parents went in search of food [in Tok Pisin referred to as *painim abus*]. Their children were called Kagabanda and Agabanda, or Kigendali and Abandali, they each had two names [of each name pair one]. The children went to look for their parents. They looked for a long time before they met a woman called Kutagushet, an old woman. They approached her and looked at her. The old woman asked the two children: ‘Why did you come here?’ They answered: ‘Oh, old woman, we’re looking for our father and mother, our parents, Tshangan and Mundshunguia, did they pass by here, have you seen them?’ The old woman answered: ‘No, I haven’t seen them, I’ve only seen you. I’ll give you some food but when you’ve eaten you will have to go back.’ The

<sup>171</sup> Forge (1970: 268) “The kwu (ku-tagwa) would appear to be inactive before puberty [...]”

<sup>172</sup> My own research in the Abelam village of Kalabu 40 years after Kaberry does not support this statement

<sup>173</sup> Later the interlocutor told me that there were two kinds of *sanguma*, one of them called Tshukendimi (actually a male name), the other Dimanagui (a female name).

children stayed and waited. The old woman cooked some food and gave it to the children. When they'd eaten, she said: 'Now return along the same path as you came.' The children set off and walked along the path they had taken before. They kept on walking until the path came to an end. So they turned back and went to the old woman Kutagushet again. The woman said: 'Oh, why have you come back, don't you want to see your mother and father?' The children answered: 'No, old mother, we wanted to go home but the path suddenly stopped, so we came back.' The old woman said: 'Try it once more.' So the two left for a second time. They walked until the path ended. Then they went back to the old woman, for the third time. She ordered them to go again. So the children left her, for the third time, but still the path ended in nowhere, so they returned to her, for the fourth time.

The old woman said: 'Alright, you can stay and sleep here.' She kept them with her and the two children went to sleep. They slept. In the night, morning was not far off, she took a spear and used it to close the opening of their sleeping basket. She closed the opening through which one crawls in and out. These baskets do not have a second opening. She closed off the opening completely, leaving the children locked inside. They tried to crawl out of the basket, but did not make it. The woman told them: 'Stay where you are, I'm now going to the village to fetch some men. Then we'll collect firewood. We'll fetch water and a large pot and then we'll cook you. We'll gather here, then we can eat you.' The children listened to her words and began to cry in the sleeping basket.

The woman went to the village to gather some men, telling them to collect and prepare firewood and to fetch water and then come to her. These men were cannibals; it was the village of the eaters of human flesh. This woman was a cannibal, this woman Kutagushet and her husband Kishiget. The children were in their village. Now they wanted to kill the children. They had fetched water, got the firewood ready, now they were ready.

Two women, Dimanagui and Damanagui, were watching and thought to themselves: 'This knowledge of our father Tshukendimi, why is it that only we and our two brothers, the guardians Agasaban and Magasaban, have it. We could pass it on, let all people have it.' This is what they thought. They said to the two children: 'Hey you kids in the sleeping basket', upon which the children answered, 'yes, we're here'. Dimanagui and Damanagui went up to them and opened the basket by removing the spear; the two children crawled out. The two sisters now said: 'Go now and kill the pig that belongs to this woman Kutagushet and her husband Kishiget. The children went and killed the pig. They then built a platform at the top of a *talis* tree [Iatmul *kalaga*]. The children stayed up there on the platform where they cooked the pig. Then they sat down and began eating.

In the meantime, the woman Kutagushet had gone to fetch her husband and some other men. They had cut firewood and fetched water; when they arrived, they asked: 'Are the children still here?' They were not; they were no longer in the sleeping basket. 'Where could they be', they asked themselves. They all pulled on the spear that was locking the basket. They opened the basket and looked inside, but the children were not in the basket. The children had gone. The woman went to the sty where she kept her pig but it was not there. It was dead and no longer there. She should have kept an eye on the pig and the two children. She asked the two women, the two sisters Dimanagui and Damanagui, she asked them. They answered: 'You'll find them.' Kutagushet left to look for them. She searched and searched, then she looked up and discovered them at the top of the tree. They were sitting on a platform. She called out: 'Ah, you two killed my pig and then you climbed up this tree.' She called for all the men to come. They came and all started shouting; they all wanted to kill the children, but the tree was very high. They believed it was impossible, so they asked Dimanagui and Damanagui for advice because the two women had a lot of power, both to kill and to heal people [Tok Pisin: *paua long lukautim olgeta lo long graun, long kilim man na long oraitim man*]. They approached the two women and began voicing their worry. The sisters answered: 'We can't help you to kill these children.' This is something the two did not want.

Now they all got moving. They killed a pig and staged a large feast for the two [sisters]. They brought shell money and placed it over the arms of the two sisters. They were trying to bribe them [Tok Pisin: *baim*], they wanted to kill the children. The sisters accepted the shell money. The younger sister said to the elder, Dimanagui: 'Oh sister, go and fetch the string bag with the lime gourd. I will try, I will eat betel nut.' Dimanagui gave her younger sister the string bag with the lime gourd. She ate some of the lime, it was very hot [in Tok Pisin *paitim mor*]. It had magic power [Mindsh spoke of *magic*] or some other power [Tok Pisin: *lo*] to kill people. The lime was hot, very hot. She wanted to try, so she ate some of it. She said, 'It's enough, elder sister, now you try, it is too hard, your *kowar* or something similar would be good.' The elder said to her younger sister: 'Now pass me your string bag and the lime gourd. I will eat some [of the lime], I will try. The younger sister gave her elder sister the string bag and lime gourd. The elder sister ate some of it, she tried, but it was very, very hot. The two sisters now both felt really hot, the two of them felt exceedingly hot, upon which they said: 'Oh, now it's good, now we can climb up [the tree].' The two called names: 'Sister, now watch me cutting off the top of the tree, then I will sprinkle lime over the two [children]', the elder called out to the younger sister. The latter answered: 'Sister, me too, I will cut off the top of the tree, then we will sprinkle lime over the platform with the two children.' This is how they spoke, this was their power, their magic.

When the two sisters began circling the tree, getting ready to climb to the top, *sanguma* fire shot from the sisters' behinds. It was very bright. Then they rose to the top. One, two, and they were up there. They cut off the top of the tree with a stone knife. They cut it off, but the children didn't fall off. The two had uttered a spell [Tok Pisin: *lo*] which their father had taught them. They remained on top [of the tree]. They performed this *stori-singsing* and flew off like this bird *tointoin*, a red cockatoo. The wings of this small cockatoo are red below and green on top. The children flew off, calling out: 'We are going back to our father; we name this tree Tshanguan.' The two called their father's name before returning to the place of origin of us all, Mebinbragui. They returned to their father. Now we have these ancestors [Tok Pisin: *tumbuna*] and all these clans living in Kararau, Kamenimbit, Angerman, Mindimbit, Palimbe and Yentshan. This red-and-green cockatoo is the sign of them all.

Dimanagui and Damanagui returned to the ground and told the people: 'Villagers, you have now seen our power, that is the end of our *sanguma*.' Thus spoken, the people answered: 'We know that the two of you have great knowledge. Now you can divide up this knowledge and give each of us a piece of it, so that all of us on earth, at Mebinbragui, our place of origin, gain something from it.' They spoke these words because they had given the two a lot of shell money. This is why the sisters had to pass on their knowledge. The sisters said: 'All of you, come here, sit down and wait.' The two went to the people. They told them all their knowledge, bit by bit. The sisters distributed all of their knowledge among the people. When they were finished, they said to the men: 'Now hold out your hands, hold them out! All men, women and children, big and small, all should come here.' The sisters took their lime gourd, the lime gourd made of bamboo, and poured a little bit of lime into the hands of all men, women, and children. They gave all of it away, down to the last grain. Then they took the *kowar* and distributed it among all the people. When they were finished they said: 'Now you people of Mebinbragui have received knowledge from our knowledge; what we have left is this empty lime gourd and the empty string bag. All we can do from now on is watch over you. Now you can kill people with evil sorcery [Tok Pisin: *poisen*] and magic [*sanguma*]. If you regret it, you can undo the harm. You can either kill or heal people. For this you may accept betel nut and pepper, shell money and tortoise shell [for the spells you perform for others]. This means you can do something [perform a spell] and get something for it. This means you have a livelihood.' After having spoken so, the sisters' knowledge had come to its end. All they could do now is watch over others. Now we men and women possess all this knowledge and know how to use it."

In essence, what this lengthy myth has to say with regard to magic and sorcery is the following: The father of magic/sorcery was a man called Tshukendimi. He had four children, two sons, Agasawan and Magasawan, and two daughters, Dimanagui

and Damanagui. He appointed Agasawan and Magasawan to guard the knowledge. Dimanagui and Damanagui alone had the power to use and pass the knowledge on to humans. The sisters themselves were surprised to find out that only they, but not their brothers, had this power, that is, the power to destroy and to recover, in other words, to kill, help as well as heal. The two women passed on their complete knowledge and power to men, leaving the women depleted and, thus, void of power. One passage offers a clue of the special properties of women (in contrast to men). This passage describes the sisters' ascent to the top of the tree to get hold of the children as the villagers had asked them to do (however, the two women helped the children to escape). It is told that a flash of *sanguma* fire "burst from their behinds", most likely referring to their genitals.<sup>174</sup> In order to fly, the "sisters" had to first become hot what they achieved by consuming lime (otherwise used for chewing betel nut). Lime induces transformations; it is described as a magical substance.<sup>175</sup> –

It was always said that *sanguma* men and women "take a different path". They do not walk like ordinary humans, which is one reason why they are so difficult to locate. Another myth describes a *sanguma* man flying through the air on a spear, after daubing his skin with red earth and chewing some betel. In Gaikorobi, Markus Schindlbeck was told that *kuguandu* fly from the house at night while their wives stoke the fire inside (personal communication).

In summing up, we may say that *sanguma* men and women have the ability to fly (or the other way round: flying is a prerequisite of sorcery). In order to do this a *kuguandu* has to become "hot". "Heat" or "becoming hot" is a quality ascribed to women and evidently associated with the female genitalia. It thus appears that sorcery is associated with the nature of women. Men are afraid to lose their strength and power if they come into contact with women, especially during menstruation and childbirth. It is particularly women's "dead" blood that weakens men's capacities. The colour red is considered female and associated with blood.<sup>176</sup> For practising *sanguma*, however, men need to acquire these "female" qualities in order to be become effective.

<sup>174</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that, in the primordial age, fire was first discovered in a woman's vagina. – We hear the same from the Maprik area (Schuster 1965: 383-384); see also Schmitz 1960: 268 (myth recorded by Dempwolff from the island of Bilibili).

<sup>175</sup> The two women also sprinkled lime over the children so that they were turned into birds and were able to escape. The transfer of the women's power to the villagers took place by distributing portions of lime which in this context served as a kind of carrier substance.

<sup>176</sup> See Forge 1962: 10-11. The colour red ranks as "hot", "irritating" and "powerful".



## 8 Women and the Realm of Male Rituals

In general, it is safe to say that women are excluded from all male rituals. As already indicated in the village map, women are not even allowed to go near the men's houses or at least what, today, is left of these formerly impressive structures. – However, this changes when the nurse from the hospital visits the village every two or three months to counsel pregnant women, vaccinate children, and tend to injuries and sick people.

The nurse from Kapaimari would berth her canoe next to one of the men's houses and carry her kit straight to the *hausboi*. Shortly later the house would fill up with women and babies. The men would sullenly retreat to a bench at the side, but see to it that every woman left the house again immediately after treatment, with words like, "okay, you're done, it's time to leave again". The men didn't like the presence of women in the men's house although they recognized the utility of medical treatment. But this female invasion into their realm was almost unbearable.

In Kamenimbit the old men still lamented the fact that the mission had revealed the long bamboo flutes which, up till then, had been painstakingly kept from the eyes of women.<sup>177</sup> Practically all ceremonial events are focussed on the men's house. During a ritual event, women make an extra wide berth around the men's house. In case

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<sup>177</sup> Bateson 1936: 163-164 reports the same incident.

of a particularly important event, the men erect a leaf fence beside the men's house behind which the ceremony is staged. In earlier days initiations were performed in such enclosures. In present-day Kararau, secrecy refers above all to the sacred flutes, which are kept hidden from women. They were never played within the men's house, but always outside within a special enclosure.



*Fig. 50: Koliuan blowing a long, decorated bamboo flute (1973).*

flutes away again, Amblangu came out of her hiding, seemingly unperturbed. "I was really scared", she claimed, but with a wide, almost cocky grin on her face, which made it hard to believe that this was actually the case.

In a men's house, the men were once carving two *mai* masks. When finished, the men wanted to ask the ancestor of the Nyamei moiety represented by the mask's face whether he would accept the work. For this purpose the men fetched an identical mask, but which belonged to the opposite moiety (Nyau). Two men held the mask horizontally over a fire until the mask began to swing back and forth. Then the elders began asking the ancestor, who had entered the mask, questions. During the procedure the atmosphere in the men's house was tense and silent, with the men carefully watching the swinging mask. Outside, a woman climbed down the ladder from her house, causing commotion within the men's house. The men called out to



*Fig. 51: Consultation of the ancestors via a mai mask which is held by two men over the embers of a fire in the men's house (1972).*

When, one day, the village men went to the forest across from the village to collect sago leaves to thatch the roof of a new house, they wrapped the flutes, which they were taking with them, in leaves, prior to placing them in the canoe. The women were ordered to retreat to their houses; those who were too far from home grabbed their children and ran to the forest at the back of the village. Later, Amblangu, surprised to see the men already returning home with the flutes, chose to hide behind our house with her two children. As soon as the men had come ashore and hidden the



the woman and ordered her to immediately get back inside, which she did. – On another occasion, the interrogation of the mask, which went on for about an hour and a half, was interrupted when a woman berthed her canoe and came ashore. She wasn't looking towards the men's house, probably because she sensed or had already seen what was going on, but the men interrupted the procedure immediately – but only until the woman, pursued by watchful eyes, disappeared into the house.

In Mindimbit we had an opportunity to attend the first of a cycle of feasts staged for the inauguration of a men's house.<sup>178</sup>

In the morning the men gathered in front of the men's house. Two old men invoked the names of the principal ancestors of the Mandali clan (which had built the men's house). The women and children were watching from a distance. Later, the men played the long bamboo flutes on the upper floor of the *hausboi*. If you looked closely you could see them because the roof of the house only consisted of a few loose palm fronds. Immediately in front of the house a female figure made of twined coconut leaves had been erected (see description on p. 145; Fig. 53). When the shrubs next to the figure began shaking (because a man sitting on the upper floor holding a fibre rope attached to the totemic plants gave the rope a sudden jerk), the women began dancing around the circle in one direction, the men in the other.

Beside the men's house was a small enclosure within which two men were singing into short bamboo tubes. Later, the men inside the men's house sang *sagi* for many hours.

The dance around the circle containing the coconut-leaf figure and the totemic plants was the only activity the women were actively involved in during this event, which was pivotal for the community of men (men from Kararau, Timbunke, and Tambunum had been invited to the ceremony). The



*Fig. 52: Uanoli and Kama (Kamendimi), the leading senior men, attentively follow the movements of the mai mask (1972).*

<sup>178</sup> Mindimbit is under the influence of the SDA Mission. Bateson reports that, even then, the village was strongly affected by European culture. Traditional ceremonial life had rested for many years. Recently, however, the village has experienced a revival of traditional culture, led by a man who told every European that he had been the assistant of Mebinbrawan (Bateson's Iatmul name). The revival resulted in the construction of a new (although modest) men's house in 1972/73.



*Fig. 53: Inauguration of a men's house in Mindimbit. Women encircle the rondel (dshula, meaning fishing net) in which a female figure made of twined coconut leaves and different totemic plants and shrubs had been set up. The figure was tied to a rope which ended on the upper floor of the men's house. When the men positioned there pulled on it, the figure and the plants began to shake. (1972).*

men's secret to themselves, possibly because they could not imagine a life without male secrecy.

Having a secret sphere to themselves – ritual – seems to lend Iatmul men a certain degree of self-confidence and independence towards women; yes, one could even say secrecy is identity forming and confirming (cf. Erikson (1959)). This assertion is underpinned by a few examples.

In Gaikorobi the men often played the long bamboo flutes out in the bush, near the paths leading to the market place. The old men deemed it necessary to play the flutes when the women went to the market. If the young men flouted their advice, believing it to be unnecessary, they were chastised by the elders. While playing, the elders often sent young boys to take up position behind trees near the path leading to the market. Their task was to hear what the women had to say about the men's flute playing, whether it was good and

women danced relaxed, even playfully at times. When not immediately involved, they went to sit with a large group of children and other women about fifty metres away from the men's house.

When I asked the women, probably a bit too loudly, whether they knew what was going on in the men's house, they gave me a sign to keep my voice down, before answering my question in whispers: "yes, on the top floor", they explained, "there were two men playing the long flutes. Another man was pulling on the rope, making the shrub jerk back and forth, and within the enclosure were two other men singing into short bamboo tubes." The women didn't laugh while telling me this. On the contrary, they spoke of the men's secret with a serious demeanour. I got the impression they were actually proud of their men for being capable of doing all these mysterious things – mysterious probably being the more fitting term than secret – and had a vested interest in keeping their knowledge about the



*Fig. 54: Inauguration of a men's house in Mindimbit. At one point of the feast, a few men dressed up as women and joined the women in the dance around the rondel (1972).*

what they didn't like about it. Later they would inform the players about the women's comments, leaving the men to discuss the verdict.<sup>179</sup>

Bateson (1958: 128) writes about the flute players "... and if they make a technical blunder in the performance, it is the laughter of the women that they fear."<sup>180</sup> With regard to Tchambuli (Chambri), Mead (1934: 266) wrote that the women played the part of distant observers as far as male secrecy was concerned: "They carefully avoid referring in public to the fact that they know all about the tamberan secrets. Perhaps it is a matter of form and courtesy between the sexes..."

The cults, from which women and children are barred and therefore bear the label of secrecy, make up the male sphere. As far as the *latmul* are concerned, women and children play the part of spectators, the ones excluded from the cults without which male ritual life would be more or less meaningless.

As far as mask carving is concerned, too, the women in Kararau were well informed about what went on inside the men's house. Sabwandshan commented: "When I'm near the men's house I don't look; it's only when I'm a bit further away or sitting in my house that I look through the cracks of the wall to see

<sup>179</sup> Personal communication M. Schindlbeck.

<sup>180</sup> Similar observations have been made among other groups, too. See e.g. Read (1952: 7) who, writing on the Gahuku-Gama, indicates why men prohibit the women from seeing the flutes: "Should they know", the men explained, "they would laugh at us."

what the men are doing.” Mingu reported similarly when the men carried the long flutes to the forest opposite her house. Moreover, the women know the name and the voice of each flute. For curiosity’s sake, I asked the women about the flutes’ names. They hesitated at first, but when I promised them not to mention anything to the men, they gave me the names of all the flutes.

In earlier times, the sanctions applied to women who showed too great an interest in cult instruments and rituals were drastic and prohibitive. According to the men, women who spied on male secrets were killed immediately, but even my oldest interlocutors were not able to name an incident when this had actually happened (see Bateson 1958: 99-100). Rather, a woman who, for example, had laid eyes on a secret flute was initiated like a man with the difference that, before being scarified, she was gang-raped by the men of the initiating moiety (in Kararau the initiation moieties were called Kishit and Miwat<sup>181</sup> (see also the interviews with initiated women, pp. 237-245).

I never got the impression that the women, as a collective, envied the men for having exclusive possession of the ritual sphere, although, outwardly, men ranked higher than women in terms of cultural valuation, at least as far as prestige was concerned. Probably it would be more appropriate to say that men and women were subject to alternate sets of values, which, however, are hardly comparable. But judging simply by rights and privileges, men are definitely in a better position because they clearly have more influence when it comes to setting social norms and – with the men’s house as the legislative, executive, and judiciary centre – managing society. Nevertheless, one occasionally hears of cases in which a woman or a young girl attempted to attain male status by subjecting herself to the ordeal of scarification at the hands of a fellow woman. But these were exceptions (see p. 246).

The women occasionally celebrate feasts in imitation of male ceremonies but without laying claim to exclusivity. For instance, a month after the men had staged an elaborate *shambla* ceremony (cf. Bateson 1932: 70), the women performed their own version. While in the men’s event the emphasis had been on a ceremonial exchange between the two ritual moieties and the narration of the mythical origins of the feast, the women’s feast centred above all on the preparation and consumption of food. The songs performed during the occasion (under the disdainful eyes and comments of the men: “the women have gone mad”) were comparable to the men’s songs, but were sung in a very much more relaxed and joyous atmosphere.<sup>182</sup> Thus

<sup>181</sup> Bateson 1932: 434 mentions these two initiation moieties for Mindimbit.

<sup>182</sup> Among others, the women sang the following song (*mbal*) attributed to the Yagum clan; in the main it consisted of a listing of the various names of the primordial crocodile Kabak:

Walkabak	Mambakabak	tipmuin guiwan walana
1 <sup>st</sup> name of crocodile	2 <sup>nd</sup> name of crocodile	I close the mouth of the crocodile
<i>dshangu dshangu guiwan walana waan nyamei</i>		
At the bottom of the water I close the mouth of the crocodile, I am your mother		
<i>yimbuno kalanmbo kiapmaladga brandoro brandoro oeo-e</i>		
Her skin is slippery	(untranslatable exclamation)	
<i>Ngurankabak</i>	<i>Yambuguronkabak</i>	<i>tipmuin guiwan walana ...etc.</i>

the women's *shambla* carried a completely different emphasis than the men's version. The main difference was that the women's performance claimed no religious significance of any kind, it was simply an enjoyable social event. When they did cite mythical clan names before commencing the actual songs, *sagi*, they did it with the appropriate degree of solemnity for the simple reason that they accepted the overall authority of the ancestors no less than their male counterparts did. This did not belie the otherwise joyful atmosphere of the feast; after all they were in no way making fun of the men's *shambla*. In some respect I believe the women were not even really aware of the difference between the two versions of the feast.

Overall – and as the above examples indicate – the role of women in cultic life is that of (admiring) spectators who, through their presence, reconfirm the importance of men's ritual performances. Without this audience, male rituals would make little sense, since these rituals have to be seen against the backdrop of women's powerful domains. As briefly mentioned above, among the *latmul* – as in many other parts of Melanesia – men and women subscribe to distinct value systems. Thus, the European concept of gender equality makes little sense in assessing the distinct spheres of men and of women. Men's dependency on women as an audience and commentators on male rituals was already mentioned by Bateson (1958: 128). Markus Schindlbeck's observation affirms that the men are truly scared of the ridicule they could face from women if they were to be heard making mistakes while playing the flutes.<sup>183</sup>

The application of physical violence against women who have chanced upon men's secrets constitutes the last resort for assigning women "their place" in society (and keeping them there). The success of each and every ritual event from which women are excluded – for example, preparations for a headhunting raid, initiations, mask performances, etc. – ultimately depends on the men observing the pertinent rules of conduct, namely refraining from sexual intercourse with women. Sexual intercourse and ritual acts are mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed: the ritual

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3 <sup>rd</sup> name of crocodile <i>Mbatngauigumban</i>	4 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Dandinauigumban ... etc.</i>
5 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Simbalandigumban</i>	6 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Kumbalandigumban ... etc.</i>
7 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Lisanambundimi</i>	8 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Kasanambundimi ... etc.</i>
9 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Ngusrabuindima</i>	10 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Kipmasrabuindima ... etc.</i>
11 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Dshanguininga</i>	12 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile <i>Dshanguwawabi ... etc.</i>
13 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile	14 <sup>th</sup> name of crocodile

Unfortunately I was unable to discover more about these names and the significance of this *mbal* but see Wassmann (1991 and 2017) about totemic songs in Kandinge.

<sup>183</sup> From many other areas in New Guinea we know that rituals tend to collapse when women spy on the secrets of flutes. Berndt (1962: 69), for instance, noted for the Eastern Highlands that "In the northern district, when women have seen the flutes, all the associated rituals and ceremonies immediately collapse."

sphere, which is associated with men, and sexuality, which is assigned to the women. Forge (1972: 539) comments: “New Guinea cultures invariably exaggerate and dramatise this difference [between the sexes], thus increasing the separation between men and women, but at the same time making possible unequal, uncompetitive life-long complementary relationship between men.” By this phrasing Forge indirectly refers to Bateson’s concept of schismogenesis with which he tried to answer the question as to why a culture with such a “schism” (the differentiation into contrasting female and male “ethos”) keeps working.<sup>184</sup> Bateson came to the conclusion that this type of schismogenesis was complementary. Thus, Forge uses the term “complementarity” for what I have termed “distinct sets of values for men and women”.

Approaching the issue from a different angle one could refer to “ritual” and “sexuality” as structural equivalents.

### *Women and “Art”*

Most of what we assign to the pictorial-expressive and representational aspect of religious thought, in other words, art, belongs to the realm of men. It seems that traditional Iatmul culture never brought forth women carvers or painters. For my interlocutors the idea appeared more than far-fetched since – so their argument – most of the representations included motifs that traced back to the secret myths of origin. Moreover, carving and painting were said to be activities that women were not able to perform qua their status as women. The secularization of previously sacred domains has had its impact on the privilege of male artistic expression.<sup>185</sup> Sabwandshan, for example, had begun carving whilst living in Rabaul. She had made a crocodile which she had sold to tourists, simply because she needed money to buy a certain item she had seen in a local store.<sup>186</sup> – However, this was the only piece she ever carved. As far as I know, no other women ever followed in her footsteps. Apart from the highly prestigious “artefacts” on the international art market, such as carvings produced by men, women are experts in handicrafts, for instance, plaiting.

They produce plaited bast-fibre baskets used for a large range of purposes (carrying firewood or wet sago, men’s and women’s bags used for keeping and carrying personal items such as betel nuts, betel pepper, a lime gourd and the odd tobacco leaf, as well as bags for carrying sago cakes). The baskets are made from a reed-like grass called *shaap* in Iatmul. Especially the sago cake baskets –each family member has his or her own – are decorated with different designs. The reed-like grass grows in an area roughly a day’s journey from Kararau, between Gaikorobi and Timbunke. The

<sup>184</sup> See Introduction (revised) and Afterword to the topic of schismogenesis.

<sup>185</sup> If, today, a woman sets eye on a flute or comes too close to a men’s house during a ceremony, she is asked to pay a fine of several dollars.

<sup>186</sup> Since crocodiles are inextricably linked with the creation of the world and the initiation complex, a few years ago it would have still been unthinkable that a woman decided to carve such a figure. Even today, such an act would lead to long discussions in the men’s house. But as Sabwandshan carved the figure hundreds of miles from home, she had nothing to fear from the men in the village.

women go there once or twice a year by canoe, usually in groups of up to six women, staying overnight under a makeshift roof. Back in the village the grass is beaten with a wooden beater to separate the woody from the more flexible fibres. After drying, a part of the *shaap* material is dyed. In earlier days the women used pigments extracted from the leaves of shrubs planted specifically for the purpose. Today they rely on store-bought paints.<sup>187</sup> The dyed bundles are then hung up to dry before using the fibres to make different types of baskets. The use of the baskets is defined by shape or form. One can distinguish between six main types: 1. *nau-kimbi* – sago



Fig. 55: Kwapmei plaiting a basket (1973).

cake basket, 2. *kwanda sibwa* – small sago cake basket placed within a *nau kimbi*, 3. *tshambui* – men’s “handbag”, 4. *tshatekimbi* – firewood basket, 5. *yimbui* – basket for wet sago or dried fish, 6. *balem-kimbi* – basket for dried sago.

The technique of plaiting is quite complicated (see Reche 1913: 213-215). The women rely on a diagonal twill weave structure (rapport 4, 2, 2). They start at the centre of the basket’s base, overlaying the two systems with the aid of a rod. The edge is produced from one piece in the course of plaiting.<sup>188</sup>

Not all baskets are decorated to the same extent. While recording the different designs (always from the perspective of women’s artistic expression), I concentrated on the ones used to decorate sago cake baskets (*nau-kimbi*). The other types were decorated to a lesser extent, often even left in their natural state, that is, the yellow-beige colour of the *shaap*. The *nau-kimbi*, however, were always embellished with distinct designs; the colours used were blue and red. In earlier days, black (from a black earth called *kaat*) was used instead of blue, which was only



Fig. 56: Komeagui in her festive dress: a grass skirt and a rain cape (both made by herself) and shell decorations, including a lime container (1973).

<sup>187</sup> The colour blue is extracted from used carbon paper purchased by the bundle.

<sup>188</sup> I am grateful to Annemarie Seiler-Baldinger for this piece of information.

introduced during the early colonial days.<sup>189</sup> The patterns (*waande* – linear designs) which the women still knew and applied include: *kawandshe ragwa waande* – name of a small (female?) snake; *nguse waande* – tortoise pattern; *waan kowi waande* – ear of a certain dog, *wintshembu waande* – bush spirit pattern; *kolirambe waande* – elbow pattern, or pattern of the flexed arm; *wotkeragwa waande* – shell ornament pattern. The patterns *nguse waande* and *kawandshe ragwa waande* are rarely used today. I was unable to find a single *nau-kimbi* featuring these patterns in the village. In the end, two women agreed to make them upon our request but had to ask several old women for advice since they themselves were not quite sure of all the details.

The ornamentations are characterized by symmetrical linear patterns, in fact, practically all of them consist of line patterns. As just mentioned, every design has its name. I asked several men about the names of the different patterns but they all claimed to know nothing about them. The women were unable to explain the relationship between name and pattern, on the one hand, and name and “natural” phenomenon, on the other. Possibly the patterns are to be viewed against the backdrop of the so-called totemic system, but this is not more than a conjecture on my part. In Kararau, a number of women are regarded as particularly skilled plaiters and are consulted by others when they get stuck on a particular pattern. If the men don’t know the names of the designs it is not because the women keep them secret, but simply because they are not interested.<sup>190</sup>

In conclusion one must say that a (significant) share of the designs seems to have been lost and forgotten. By chance I found in a house an old basket – from roughly forty years back – which bore a completely different type of pattern. Even the old women knew very little about it – they referred to the pattern as “stones” – nor were they able to copy it. In former days, the women’s rain capes were decorated with patterns similar to those of the *nau-kimbi*. But since such rain capes have not been produced for the last ten to twenty years and are no longer worn, I was unable to compare the two sets of patterns.<sup>191</sup> The same applies to string bags: they are hardly produced any more. Photographs taken by Behrmann and Roesicke (from Kararau to Tambunum) indicate that they used to be very much more common. The women of Gaikorobi in fact still produce decorated string bags today. A style comparison of the designs created by women would have to include, next to the *nau-kimbi* and the rain capes, also the string bags in order to display the full range of designs, with all their differences and similarities. Possibly one would then be able to say more about women’s pictorial art (compared to the men’s) than is possible at present.

<sup>189</sup> Evidently black and blue are regarded as identical colours; they are denoted with the same name. In the case of glass-bead necklaces, black and blue are considered of equal value and distinctly different to other hues (such as yellow and red).

<sup>190</sup> A stylistic comparison of the patterns with male forms of artistic expression (e.g. in painting) would go well beyond the scope of this work. I can merely assume that such a comparison would reveal that (aside from the question of materiality) differences do exist.

<sup>191</sup> In place of traditional rain capes people now use slit-open plastic rice bags and old cloths. In doing so, no attention is paid to the material’s aesthetic appeal.



## 9 Familiarity with Kinship Terminology

My attempts to gather kin terminologies from both male and female interlocutors with the aim of acquiring an overall picture of the kinship system (from a man's as well as woman's perspective) ran up against the problem that women found it exceedingly difficult to specify kin terms in an abstract sense, that is, when there was no specific relative around who met the defining criteria (see kin terminology in the Appendix). Even interlocutors who had the ability, in contrast to many other villagers, to express complex ideas in such a way that even outsiders – such as foreign anthropologists – could follow them, failed in this respect. Even when several women were gathered it was impossible to compile such a thing as the kinship system in its entirety. Sabwandshan, a woman who frequently reflected on the community she was part of, was evidently disappointed that she was unable to help me, admitting with a tone of resignation: “These are not things we really think about. Our task is to rear children and keep the house in order.”

It happened quite frequently that women gave me kin terms that did not fit into the system (at any rate not into the one construed by the anthropologist). At least in one verified case this was due to the fact that the woman based her reckoning on an existing kin person, considered how she referred to him/her, and then gave me the term. As it turned out she had reckoned through her father's lineage, but then, for some reason or another, given me the kin term as reckoned through her mother's side. This was a typical case where interlocutors make use of the comparatively wide

range options with regard to the respective “point of attachment” or, rather, “point of emphasis” (Firth 1963: 27).

When asking a woman or a man about their relationship to a specific person, I would often receive the answer: “When I think of my mother, I call her X, when I think of my father, I call him Y.” Such replies were offered equally by men and women. They are clear evidence of how seemingly clear-cut concepts such as “patrilineal” are often not more than futile attempts to delineate a complex phenomenon by means of a single term.<sup>192</sup> Following (and modifying) Barnes (1962: 6), the best way to describe the Iatmul system would be by a combination of “cumulative matri-filiation” and patrilineal descent.

In contrast to the women, several male interlocutors showed the ability to reproduce the kin term system as a detached, theoretical construct, at least more or less. Conceptually they would proceed in the opposite direction. If, for instance, I asked, “what do you call your father’s sister’s husband?”, they would answer, “we call him *nondu*.” Only after specifying the term, would they assign the term to specific kinsman to whom they applied the term. The men commonly exchange views on and debate kinship and clan issues in the men’s house. For hours on end – often even days on end – they engage in disputes on specific names to which different clans raise claims. In the course of these disputes they reconstruct the histories and kin relationships of those men and women who were the last persons to bear the name the dispute is focused on. These events are certainly one of the main reasons why men are so familiar with the kinship system in general and the relationship terminology in particular. Girls, on the other hand, grow into the system by learning in the course of time how to correctly address and refer to specific kinsmen and women, however, without having to reflect on the system in theoretical terms. It is therefore not surprising that elder women were no better in these things than their younger peers. Being familiar with terminological issues was – unlike in the case of mythological knowledge – not a matter of age but rather of the range and diversity of a woman’s kin network.

<sup>192</sup> Murdock (1949: 240) simply turns Bateson’s cautious statement that, “...while the morphology of the system is patrilineal the sentiment of the people is preponderably matrilineal”, into “patrilineal descent”.

## 10 Women and Headhunting

What significance headhunting had in the intellectual and emotional life of the Iatmul is now – thirty years after pacification – almost impossible to say. The life histories of the four oldest men in the village, which I was able to record, indicate that headhunting played a key role in the life of men.<sup>193</sup> This is not the place to go into detail as to what triggered headhunting raids and forays against specific villages in the area. Suffice it to say therefore that the villages with which Kararau entertained ongoing warlike relations (Mindimbit, Timbunke, Palimbe, Kanganamun) stood in very specific kin relationships to Kararau.<sup>194</sup>

In the night before the men set off on a headhunting raid, important ritual preparations were made. My male interlocutors told me that the men manning the various war canoes (one per clan or lineage, captained by the most prominent man of the respective kin group) were subject to specific rules and taboos. The headmen had to abstain from food and sexual intercourse. In the part of the house belonging to the head of the household, wooden guardian figures (*wakendu* and *wakenragwa*) and occasionally ancestral skulls (?) were kept. On the eve of a raid, I was told, the male

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<sup>193</sup> Newspaper report (“Sun”, November 1933) about a major raid by Kamenimbit on a Krosmeri village, during which 22 people were killed, shows that such raids often resulted in multiple killings.

<sup>194</sup> Palimbe, for example, is described by Kararau as *na*, that is, father’s sister’s child.

*waken* sculpture representing an unspecified ancestor would turn to face the direction in which the raid was to be carried out. The *waken* would then fly to the enemy village in the dark and pick out the persons designated to be killed the next day. In the process the *wakendu/wakenragwa* killed the “souls” (*waken*) of the chosen victims, leaving it up to the warriors to kill off the physical part of their bodies the next day.

According to other accounts, the “soul” of a man, usually of the most prominent man of the clan, would leave his body in the night before the raid. During this period, the man’s first wife (principal wife) was forbidden to eat and sleep. Instead, she had to watch over the body of her husband. She would hear his *waken* descending the stairs and leaving the house on his way to scout the village which was to be raided the next day. There the *waken* would kill the “souls” of the people destined to die during the coming raid. Shortly before daybreak the man’s *waken* would return to the house. His wife would hear him climbing the steps. Only then was she allowed to go to bed.

In Aibom and Palimbe<sup>195</sup> the people reported the following: the wife of the most prominent man (of a lineage or clan) would tie one end of a cord around her large toe (of her right foot?), the other end was held by the man’s *waken* which would leave the house through the roof on a “bed” of spears and set off for the enemy village to kill the “souls” of the later victims. The woman holding the one end of the cord sat naked next to the fire bowl and had to remain awake throughout the process. Should one of the man’s sisters be in an (illicit) sexual relationship, the cord would snap and the man’s *waken* would crash to the ground, killing the man’s body at the same time (as reported from Palimbe). In Palimbe it was also said that each time a *waken* dealt a mortal blow, the penis of an ancestor would penetrate the vagina of the woman at the other end of the cord. After the *waken* had returned home, the man would ask his wife: “How many times?”, upon which the wife named a figure indicating how many times the ancestor had penetrated her. Upon this the man knew how many people of the enemy village would be killed during the raid the next morning.

After the war canoes had left before daybreak and possibly already even reached the enemy village, the wives of the men designated to make a kill were visited by the spirits of the future victims and had intercourse with them. All this occurred in a dreamlike state of consciousness, with the women thinking that the raid was over and that their husbands had already returned home. Realizing their error gave them, at the same time, confirmation that their husbands were about to return to the village as successful headhunters. I have no evidence for such beliefs in Kararau; instead my interlocutors provided the following information (which, in turn, does not apply to either Aibom or Palimbe): during the raid, the women remained in the village with their children. The women assembled according to clan (that is, the clans of their husbands) in a house. The wife of the most prominent warrior, who, according to his rank in the genealogical system, would position himself at the front of the canoe, would climb a coconut palm and carefully fetch down a coconut. She was

<sup>195</sup> Personal communication Gisela Schuster and Florence Weiss respectively.

not allowed to let it drop to the ground (as is usually done). The woman placed the coconut at the centre of the house, upon which all the women gathered around it.<sup>196</sup>

Young women, who had not yet given birth, prepared sago pudding, filling it into a large pot. The pot, too, was placed at the centre of the circle of women. If the sago slopped in the direction in which the men had set off, it meant that they would return victoriously. A spill in the opposite direction spelt defeat. Each time the sago pudding overflowed, the women carved a mark (a line) into the coconut according to the direction in which the sago had spilt. Vertical lines stood for a successful raid, horizontal lines for defeat. The women were only allowed to eat the soup when the men's victory was certain. The woman who had fetched the coconut from the tree was not allowed to eat any of the pudding.

On their return home the men indicated to the women by means of a signal horn (*kuii*) how many enemies they had killed and how many of their own men had fallen. The wives of the brothers of a successful warrior and his father's sisters (dressed as men) waded into the water to greet the approaching canoes. They splashed water on to the successful headhunter and cuffed him (for a short description of the second part of this *naven* see above p. 143; see Bateson 1958: 16). In Palimbe, according to some interlocutors (others disagreed), the women dealt blows to the severed head when they reached the *wombuna* (the ceremonial ground in front of the men's house) and threw it to the ground. Afterwards they turned the war canoe, the prow of which was then touching the shoreline, until its stern faced landwards (its normal position). Whilst turning the canoe – an act to which the interlocutors attributed major significance – the women blew a signal horn. Subsequently the women (still dressed as men) went to the men's house where they dealt blows to the men assembled there who responded with calls of “*ol nyamun i paitim mipela*” (Tok Pisin for: “the elder siblings are beating us”). After tying the captured head to a stone on the *waak* mound, the women performed a *singsing* using hourglass drums. The men performed the same *singsing* at night. Later the skull was prepared over a fire lit with a special kind of wood, which the women had previously collected and passed on to the men.

From Palimbe it was reported that a wounded warrior had to step over the grass skirts of all the village women who would line the pathway, naked. While moving forward the man had to stare at the women's genitalia, an act which was believed to make his wounds heal quicker.<sup>197</sup> At the feast to celebrate the taking of the heads, women in Kararau, Aibom, and Gaikorobi played merely a passive part. In Kararau, so I was told, the slayer was only allowed to bite into the severed head if “his *waken* grew big” (a reference to a trancelike condition). Occasionally, and still in this condition, he would eat a piece of flesh or a bit of the brain mixed with *kowar* leaves

<sup>196</sup> About the relationship between coconut and head see the myths on pp. 218-221.

<sup>197</sup> Forge (1970: 268) reports from the Abelam: “Formerly, old women believed to be *kutagwa* [‘witches’] were entrusted with the care of wounded warriors, for which they were paid. They were believed to change themselves into rodents and in this guise they extracted spear splinters from the wounds and licked them clean.”

(*kambu nyingi* – to eat human flesh). The act was said to lend him prowess for raids in the future. It was believed that this prowess would also be carried over on to those men who had not eaten any of the flesh.

If women were caught up in a raid, they were usually killed, just as the men were, except, of course, if the explicit intention of the raid was to capture women. Women caught on such forays were later married to men of the village, granting them the same status as other women in the village.

Only rarely did women take part in headhunting raids. – In Aibom, people remembered especially one woman who had killed somebody. The feat had granted her the same status as a man. When she died, she received a ceremonial burial of the kind usually reserved for men.

### *Interpreting headhunting*

Considering the lapse of time since the cessation of warfare and raiding, it is almost impossible to assess the significance headhunting once had in Iatmul culture. One way of at least shedding partial light on headhunting is by considering the coconut and the meaning it had for the Iatmul. Below are three variants of a myth that tell of how the first coconut palm grew from a human head.

The first myth comes from Mindsh:

“The coconut is not just a coconut. It’s a mother’s child. This mother, Kekonda, gave birth to all things. The mother’s name was Kekonda. She bore a girl. When she had grown a bit, the girl was close to death. The mother looked after her, but she died. The mother picked her up and buried her. She mourned deeply for the girl; she wailed until nightfall. Then she went into her house to sleep. Her child appeared to her in a dream and told her: ‘mother, I cannot die for nothing and simply rot away. I’m dead, but only my body shall rot. From my head a shoot will grow. When you tend to my grave, don’t use a knife to cut the grass, pull out the weeds with nothing but your hands. You will discover a small shoot. Don’t cut it. Plant a stick in the ground so that the shoot can grow upward. Later the plant will bear fruit. Wait and see what kind of fruit.’ Thus the girl spoke with her mother while she was



*Fig. 57: Mindsh, my most important interlocutor (1973).*

asleep. When the mother woke up the next morning, she cried. She mourned her child for many weeks and months, until the girl's body had rotted away and a small shoot started growing from her head. The shoot grew, and when the mother went to tend to the grave she discovered a young plant, and said: 'I saw this plant in a dream.' She fetched a stick and planted it in the ground next to the plant. The plant grew rapidly: it became very big in no time.

It bore coconuts. One of the nuts fell to the ground and came to rest on the grave. The people had never seen a coconut; they were afraid of it since it had grown from the body of the dead girl. No one dared to taste its fruit.

Then an old woman spoke: 'You are all young men and women; you have yet to live; I will taste the nut. If I die, you must not eat the coconut, but if not, we shall all eat from it.' Having said this, the woman picked up a ripe coconut, cleaved it apart, and drank its juice; it tasted very good. Then she took a shell, scraped the flesh from the nut and tasted it. It too was savoury. She jumped up and began singing, calling all the men and women of the village to come.

All the people gathered. First, she gave the old men and women some coconut to taste; they ate it and then gave their children some of it to try. By now all the villagers had tasted the coconut and all found it savoury. They called out to the people from all the villages to come; they staged a large feast. At daybreak they distributed the coconuts among all the villages. Each village received one coconut. The people began planting coconuts, building small fences around the young plants to let them grow big and strong until the trees bore fruit. Since then coconut palms have been growing in all the villages.

Before, this plant did not exist. Only when the daughter of this woman died, did a coconut grow from her head. At the time, the pig Tshuigumban wanted to rip out the young plant; but the animal's father, Wolindambui, ordered all the dogs to hunt the pig down and bite it. The dogs chased the pig away when it tried to destroy the young coconut palm. The dogs hunted the pig; they bit it and fought with it just like pigs and dogs are enemies today, and the dogs hunt the pigs."

A second version of the myth was told by Ngu. It was recorded in Iatmul and later translated into Tok Pisin, sentence by sentence, by her son Koliuan.

"This is the story of the coconut. One day a man went to a lake to spear fish. He paddled his canoe on to the lake to spear fish. He was busy for a long time. Then something appeared in the water; it wasn't a human being, it looked like the head of a human being. The head, which we call Nambumuna Yamban, rose to the surface and emerged; it climbed into his canoe and got its teeth stuck into the man's testicles. The man was unable to remove the head, its teeth kept hold of his testicles. The man then said: 'Sorry, but you can't stay here. Why don't you go to that tree standing over there in the grass. It's a breadfruit tree and bears fruit.' The head answered: 'Okay, turn your

canoe and let's go to that tree.' They drove to the shore where the grassland begins and went to the tree. The two, the man and the head, climbed up the tree. The man picked a breadfruit and threw it far away into the grass. He said to the head: 'Climb down!' The head of this spirit-man (Tok Pisin: *tewel man*) climbed down from the tree and went in search of the breadfruit. When he found it, he returned with the breadfruit and climbed back up the tree. The man thought to himself: he didn't take long to find it. He picked a second fruit and flung it even further away, before telling the head: 'There's a second breadfruit; go and fetch it!' The spirit-man, this human head, climbed down, walked through the grass, picked up the fruit, and returned to the tree. The man picked a third fruit and flung it away, this time really far. Again, the head climbed down the tree and followed the breadfruit. But this time he walked and walked until he came across a group of women.

There were only women, not a single man. The women were making bags, nets, and fishing nets. The women were sitting there, working. The head asked them: 'Have you seen a breadfruit?' The women answered: 'No, we haven't seen a breadfruit come this way.' Upon this the head exclaimed: 'Hey, you can't talk to me like that! If you're hiding the breadfruit I'll come and bite you. Be careful, otherwise I will harm you [Tok Pisin: *nongut mi bagerapim yupela*]!' The women were afraid. They brought out the breadfruit which one of them was hiding and gave it to the head. The head picked up the fruit and went back to the place where he had left the man.

After flinging a breadfruit for the third time, which the head had followed until it had reached the group of women, the man performed a *singsing*; the man from the village performed a *singsing* over the stick of bamboo to which he had attached a hook for the purpose of the picking the breadfruit. After finishing the *singsing* he tied the bamboo to a branch of the breadfruit tree, climbed down, got into his canoe and quickly returned to his village.

The head of the spirit-man approached the breadfruit tree and called out: 'Banameli, are you still up there?' Banameli is the name of this man. From the tree came the answer: 'Yes, I'm still up here.' 'I'll leave the breadfruit down here', the head said. Again, the answer came from the tree: 'Yes, leave it there, I'm coming down.' The bamboo disentangled itself from the branch and climbed down. Again the head asked: 'Kwanameli?', and the bamboo answered, 'Yes', shortly before reaching the ground. In the meantime, the head had made a fire. He was surprised and said: 'Oh, the real man has gone; he made a *singsing* over this piece of bamboo and left.' This is what the head thought to itself: 'Oh, what the heck, I'll just kill him.' He made a big fire and placed the third breadfruit in the flames.

Meanwhile, the man had returned to his village. He went to his *kasndu* [mother's father] and said: '*Kasndu*, a spirit man has been fooling with me; this makes me mad. Alone I can't do anything against him, so I've come to



see you. Let's go back and kill him.' The two men returned to the spot and saw the head cooking breadfruit and calling 'Kwanameli', to which the bamboo answered, 'Tuli'. It was answering in a foreign tongue. The spirit man became irate. He picked up the bamboo and threw it far out into the water. The bamboo swam away, calling out: 'Tuli, I'm leaving now.' The two men watched the spirit man roasting breadfruit. When he caught sight of them he was frightened: 'What are the two of you planning to do with me?', upon which the two men started beating him; they beat him until he was dead. They hid the head under a breadfruit tree and went back home to the village.

A few weeks later the man passed by the tree where he and his *kasndu* had killed the head. In the place where they had buried the head, now a coconut tree grew. The palm tree had already borne fruit. The man picked a nut from the tree and returned home where he showed it to all the men and women of the village. The people didn't know what a coconut was. It was the first time they had ever seen a coconut. It had grown from the head of this [spirit] man. The man removed the husk from the nut and opened it, upon which he said: 'I think we'll test the nut first; we'll give a dog some of its juice to taste and some of its white meat to eat.' The people gave the dog a little to drink and a little to eat. They didn't give it the whole nut; half of it they kept for themselves. An old woman rose and said: 'Children, let me first try this nut; I'll drink some juice and eat some of its meat. If I die it doesn't really matter. But you must stay alive. If I taste this nut and something happens, whether I die nor not doesn't really matter. So let me try it.'

The old woman tasted the nut. When, after a few days, she still hadn't felt anything wrong, she exclaimed: 'The coconut's juice is sweet, so is its meat.' The people commented: 'Yes, it's been a few days now and the old woman is not dead; this seems to be a good food.' So the man returned to the coconut palm and collected many nuts. The people removed the husk from the nuts, after which the men tasted some of the nuts: 'It tastes good', they said. They didn't eat all the nuts. The ones left over soon began to sprout. The men planted these nuts in the ground, and now we have many coconut trees. This wasn't always so. It was only after the man had killed and buried the head, which had bitten him in the testicles, that the coconut grew from its grave. This is the reason why we have so many coconut trees today."

The third and last version of the myth comes from Mingu. It was recorded in Iatmul and later translated into Tok Pisin by her husband Kubeli, in her presence.

"Once a man took his canoe out onto the lake we call Wolime-Dshindshime. On the lake he began collecting water lilies. These water lilies have leaves as big as taro leaves. He picked the water lilies and placed them in his canoe. At the root end of one of the water lilies there was a human head with eyes, nose, and ears, but no body; there was only a head. It rose to the surface of the water and bit the man in his testicles, keeping a tight grip on them



Fig. 58: Mingu with her child. (1973).

with its teeth. The man screamed, he screamed, 'aih, aih, aih', without stopping. Then he asked the head, 'What do you wish to eat?', upon which the head answered, 'I want to eat breadfruit.' The man paddled his canoe to a breadfruit tree and climbed the tree. He climbed the tree and began picking breadfruit. He collected the breadfruit and climbed down again. The head was waiting at the foot of the tree. The man took a breadfruit and threw it away, but in no time the head had caught up with the fruit. Then the man made a *singsing* over a breadfruit before throwing it away as far as he could. He threw it as far as Kumbrangai. Far, far away, over

the mountains. The head went after it.

The man waited until the head had passed from sight and then got into his canoe and paddled and paddled and paddled until he reached his village. After finding the breadfruit the head returned to the tree. But the man had gone. The head collected firewood, cutting it small with its teeth. Then it placed all the breadfruit on top of the wood and lit a fire. It roasted all the breadfruits. When they were done the head picked them from the fire and placed them next to the fire, with the intention of eating them.

Two pigs approached the head and said to it: 'Give us a breadfruit!' The head gave them one breadfruit after the next, until only one fruit was left. 'This one is mine', the head said. 'No, it belongs to us', the pigs answered. The two pigs got up and killed the head, really killed it, until it was truly dead, absolutely dead. Then the two pigs left. From the head's brain emerged a coconut tree, after the head had rotted away. It grew from the head's brain. It grew to a large size and carried many nuts. It was actually almost covered in nuts.

About a year later, the man returned to the breadfruit tree, thinking to himself, 'where might the head have gone to, or is it possibly still there?' He took his canoe as far as the breadfruit tree where he caught sight of the coconut tree. 'Where has this coconut come from?', he wondered. He picked the ripe coconuts and placed them in his canoe. Then he paddled back to the village. There an old, a really old woman said, 'I'll taste the nut and eat some

of it. If I die, you must not eat any. If I live, you too can eat it. She tasted the nut; she drank some of its juice and ate some of its meat. She ate and found that it tasted sweet, upon which she sang: 'It tastes very sweet, it tastes very sweet.' So did the old woman sing, and that's the story of the coconut."

The first version of the myth differs from the latter two mainly insofar as in the first variant the coconut grows from the head of a child. In the other two versions, the coconut materializes from an already existing, autonomous and highly aggressive being in the shape of a head that bites the man in his testicles and must therefore be done away with.<sup>198</sup> What the three versions have in common is that the coconut is always associated with a human head.<sup>199</sup>

But, the coconut has even further dimensions of meaning. As we learnt from the bridewealth ceremonies above, a young wife is given a sprouting coconut alongside her dowry. If the shoot is broken off, the young woman will not be able to conceive. In this sense, the coconut stands for female fertility, or, figuratively, for the woman's womb. Furthermore, in the *shipekundi* performed for a woman wishing to become pregnant, mythical coconuts are invoked (see p. 168). Similar notions seem to be at play in connection with giving birth: in Kararau the placenta is habitually placed in a coconut shell.<sup>200</sup> In a myth recorded by Schuster (1969: 154) a coconut explicitly adopts the role, and the meaning, of a womb:

"Wiremange became the wife of the crocodile man and gave birth to two eggs, which she placed into the two halves of a coconut shell. There they remained for a long time before, finally, hatching as two children..."

When the men go on a raid, coconuts acquire a special significance in connection with the "oracle" performed by the women back home in the village (see above). Whether in this context the coconut stands for a head or a womb is difficult to say. In this specific case it possibly even links the two concepts.

During the inauguration of the men's house in Mindimbit, the men who conducted the ceremonies, especially the *sagi* singing, gave the other men ripe, almost sprouting coconuts, and, at a later stage, green, still unripe nuts. To what extent these gifts contained the idea of "heads" is not quite clear. In earlier times, however, the opening of a new men's house required the presentation and exposition of the skulls of slain enemies.

A myth-like narrative from Palimbe<sup>201</sup> tells of how men, during primeval times when there were no women yet, indulged in sexual intercourse with coconuts: "...

<sup>198</sup> Schuster (1969: 152-153) recorded the same myth in Aibom.

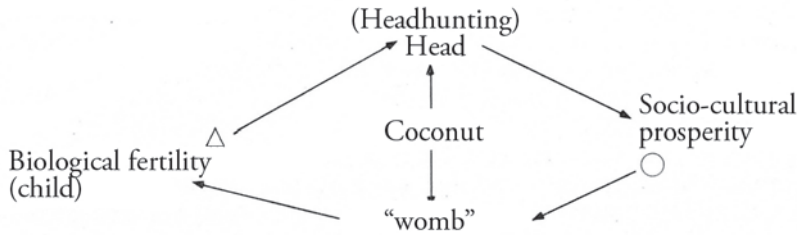
<sup>199</sup> The reverse process, namely that humans (women) grew from a coconut, has been documented among the Wemo (Schmitz 1960: 263-264).

<sup>200</sup> Florence Weiss reports from Palimbe that magic spells, uttered when complications arise during birthing, are spoken over a coconut after which the contents of the coconut are poured over the woman in labour.

<sup>201</sup> Kindly provided by Florence Weiss.

they rubbed the skin of their penises and had intercourse with these small coconuts (Tok Pisin: *ol i save skinim kok bilong ol no goapim dispela liklik kokonas*).<sup>202</sup>

So far, some first hints as to the significance of the coconut in Iatmul thinking.<sup>202</sup> With all reservations in mind, they suggest that the coconut stands for fertility in a general sense of the term, but assigned to two distinct levels: first, to female biological fertility, and secondly, at a socio-cultural level, to the “prosperity” of the community based on successful male headhunting raids.<sup>203</sup>



Albeit, it would be wrong to draw from the diagram the conclusion that, in the end, Iatmul men are merely *mimicking* female parturition and female fertility, respectively.<sup>204</sup> In structural terms, however, one may surmise that the coconut takes over a mediating role between opposing categories such as “head” and “womb”, or men and women. “Socio-cultural prosperity” and “biological fertility” – which we could consider as opposing categories – converge in the sense that they represent aims of both men and women, but at different levels and with reversed signification. The fact that women’s sexuality and men’s headhunting somehow belong together is borne out by a piece of information from Palimbe: when in the night before a raid, a man’s *waken* visits the enemy village and kills the “souls” of people, his wife feels the penis of an ancestor penetrating her at each kill (see p. 216).

<sup>202</sup> The association between head and coconut shows up in a myth about the pottery deity of Aibom (Schuster 1969: 140-157); it includes an additional aspect, namely that of pottery. Pots are regarded as the first ancestress’ asexually fathered children. After the introduction of sexual intercourse (and death?), the ancestress gave birth to a child. After that, the pots remained inanimate (that is, they were no longer “living children”). After the death of the ancestress, a coconut sprouted from her head.

<sup>203</sup> Bateson 1958: 140: “The natives say that prosperity – plenty of children, health, dances and fine ceremonial houses – follows upon successful head-hunting.” Similar beliefs are reported from the Marind Anim (Van Baal 1966: 754): “New life sprouts from the dead coconut as well as from the beheaded enemy. That the names of the victims are given to young children seems to hold the inference that somehow headhunting is believed to promote fertility and well-being [...]. The children are, as it were, the fruits of the headhunt, the tangible proof of its salutary effect.”

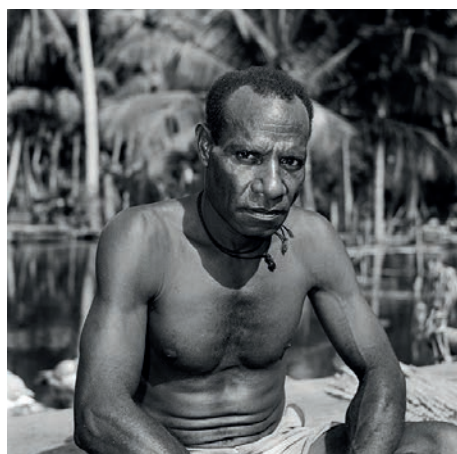
<sup>204</sup> On this, see Bettelheim 1955.

## 11 Women in Myths and the Mythologeme of the Inverted World

Women are excluded from men's ritual space (men's houses) and ceremonies. However, they play a key role in the realm of mythology. Before I go into more detail, I would like to present a selection of myths (in some cases only fragments) as I was told them.<sup>205</sup>

The first myth comes from Kubeli (Boigum lineage of Wuenguendshap clan):

“Once, shortly after the earth had been created, there was a tree. The women [of those early times] we call



*Fig. 59: Kubeli (Anton) (1973).*

<sup>205</sup> At the time of writing of this chapter I only had access to myths collected in Kararau. In retrospect (2018), it needs to be added that a cooperative effort by the Basel Sepik Research Team, such as assembling all major myths collected by the individual members of the team, unfortunately never took place.

*wolinyan*; that's the name we give to all those women; there were no men at the time.

So, they went and felled this tree. I don't remember the name of the tree, but they felled it. Out of the bottom part of the stem they carved a human head;<sup>206</sup> they made the same out of the stem's mid-section. Only the women had this kind of knowledge. When they had finished carving the heads, they erected the stem; at the top of the stem they carved an additional head. Now this man [figure] stands in Kandinge.<sup>207</sup> The women carved two such men.

They lived on a piece of land which, one day, broke apart because all the women had gathered there. They were all standing close to one another, and then the earth broke apart. The women flew off like birds. They had the power to do this [Tok Pisin: *long save bilong ol yet*]. They flew off and only settled again on the Korewori where there was a large tract of dry land. They stayed for a while, a short while, not a year, not even a month, only for a very short time. Then they flew off again as far as the upper reaches of the Sepik, in the mountains. There they stayed. They all gathered there. The women had centipedes [?] in their genitalia [Tok Pisin: *santapik*<sup>208</sup>], down there in the area of the groin. The men were unable to have sex with them. The women gathered there. They looked like European women, with long hair and light skin. They were extremely attractive women; they didn't look like us blacks. They looked really good, but they had many kinds of centipedes [?] and many kinds of ants living inside them [Tok Pisin: *i wokim olgeta samting i stap insait long ol*]. They were unable to have intercourse. When they wished to become pregnant, they climbed to the top of a house, lent on the ridge beam, and spread their arms and legs.<sup>209</sup> There they waited for the wind; when the wind blew, it entered their bodies and they became pregnant and bore children. They killed the boys and threw their bodies away but kept the little girls and raised them.

That's how the story goes. All the people know it."

The two following myths were told by Mindsh on the occasion when he showed us how the mouth bow (musical bow) and panpipe are played. Unlike the above story, they tell of the reversal of gender roles, the men's revolt and, finally, the killing of the women, all in a very drastic way. The flutes which, according to mythology, were

<sup>206</sup> Upon asking, Kubeli added that this part of the stem was kept in Gaikorobi; it was called *wambre*.

<sup>207</sup> The wooden head, allegedly kept in Kandinge, was called Koliamel.

<sup>208</sup> Forge (1970: 267-168) mentions witches (*kutagwa*) among the Abelam: "Witches are always women who have in their vaginas a little creature (kwu) [...]"

<sup>209</sup> Possibly the *wolinagwa* are represented on the men's houses by the female figures which carry the ridge beam at the gable end of the structure.

created by women evidently act as symbols of dominance, in other words: whoever is in possession of the flutes holds sway over the opposite gender.<sup>210</sup>

“This is the story of the long bamboo flutes and this mouth bow here. Once upon a time, when the ground had already become hard and many humans were already living on it, we men didn’t have the knowledge required to make long bamboo flutes. These long bamboo flutes are called *wabi*.<sup>211</sup> In those early days, we men didn’t possess these flutes, nor did we know how to play them. The women built assembly houses, but only for themselves. That’s the way it was then. The women who had children gave them to the men to look after. They had to stay at home and look after the children. When the children woke up and cried for their mothers because they were hungry, the fathers called for the mothers who were gathered in the assembly house. The mothers would come and breastfeed the children. The children would drink and then go back to sleep, after which the mothers would return to the assembly house and play on the long bamboo flutes. That’s how it was, all the time. The men had a lot of work on their hands looking after the children. This is how it remained for a long time.

One day the men got together and spoke: ‘What’s going on here? We’re men, aren’t we? Why should we have to look after the children when that’s really something for their mothers? This is actually the mothers’ task. We don’t want our grandsons and their sons to have to do the work we’re doing.’ All the men had gathered to discuss the matter. The men set off in search of the *masalai* crocodile [spirit crocodile] Abingalimange. That’s what we call it. It is a piece of wood attached to a cord [bullroarer]. You hold it by this cord, then you start swirling in a circle until it makes this ‘mmhmmhmmh’ sound, like a large crocodile. The women don’t know about this crocodile. They know about other things, but not about this crocodile.

The two groups of men [initiation moieties] met to discuss the matter. We call these two groups Yambunde and Bombiande. The men of the two groups spoke for a long time. Finally, they said: ‘This is the right way, the crocodile shall rise up and make all women run away. Then we will kill all of them, yes, kill them all. All the women who have this women’s knowledge must die; we’ll spare only the young girls. When they grow up, we’ll marry them and have children with them. When the girls, who now are still small, grow up they will remember nothing of the power the women once had.’ Thus they spoke and all agreed. They fixed a day for putting their plan into action.

The men observed the women holding a meeting in the ceremonial house. All the women were there. On this day the men moved into action. They split up into four groups, spread out, and went into hiding. They hid in all four

<sup>210</sup> For this there is evidence from different parts of Papua New Guinea, for example, from the Highlands (Berndt 1962: 50-51) and among the Arapesh (Mead 1940: 383).

<sup>211</sup> The same term is also used for specific birds.

directions. Then they said: 'Now this crocodile can arise.' They carved four pieces of wood from which four crocodiles emerged. Then they placed all four next to one another. The leaders of Yambunde and Bombiande spoke: 'Let it begin.'

The voices of the four crocodiles arose together, making the women turn and look around. They heard the voices of the crocodiles which the men were making with their pieces of wood. The women ran off, carrying the bamboo flutes with them. The women fled in all directions. They were afraid. Some fled in one direction, thinking that there were no men there. But the men (who were in hiding) killed all the women, sparing only the two who were each carrying a long bamboo flute. These two women fled again. They ran far, very far, until they suddenly got stuck on a sago palm. The bamboo flutes broke apart. One piece (described as *tong* in Tok Pisin) broke off and landed on a sago leaf rib. The men saw this [and also heard the sound it made]. I will now play the sound it made [Mindsh plays on his mouth bow, *kangan ngau*].

The piece that had broken away had been inside the flute. The men had seen this. They now killed the two women. They cut off the sago leaf rib and took it with them. They peeled the rib and placed a small piece of wood from under it before striking on the skin of the peeled rib [string].

It sounded like the long bamboo flutes used by the women before; upon this, the men commented: 'Oh, this mouth bow has the same sound as these birds [bamboo flutes] that broke apart when the women carried them off and a splinter landed on the sago leaf rib.' They imitated the women. They cut tubes of bamboo into shape and blew into them. It sounded very good.

Now it is we men who have the flutes. We do it as the women did before. But now we play them. The women are forbidden to see them. If they should see them, we would kill all of them. If a single woman or two women were to see them, and we found out that they were secretly watching, then we would kill them. But if they have shell money, they can give it to us. In addition, they would have to kill a pig and distribute the meat among the two groups of men, the Yambunde and the Bombiande. Then we would not kill them.

It would be bad if the two women were to tell all the other women about what they had seen, because the women are not allowed to know anything about the bamboo flutes. The two women would have to kill a pig and give it to the two groups of men as a gift so as not to be killed. In this way they close their own mouths. The men's anger can be appeased with this large feast or with this shell money, if they are prepared to accept the gifts. Then the men cannot kill the women. But the [two] women cannot tell the other women what they have seen, nor can they tell their children about it. When the two women go to the bush to their garden, they cannot say: 'Oh, we saw the men blowing the bamboo flutes.' If they tell the other women what they have seen all the same, and we get to hear about it, then we shall kill them.



We don't care whether they've paid a lot of shell money to the Yambunde and the Bombiande; in such a case, we no longer think about money.

This is the story we men tell each other. We guard the long flutes and the mouth bow.”

The second myth – or, to be more precise, the myth fragment – was also told by Mindsh:

“Once upon a time, when the ground had already become hard and there were many human beings, the men had no knowledge [Tok Pisin *save*], only the women did. Only they had knowledge. They know how to make the long bamboo flutes. They lived in the ceremonial house Seing-gego, that's the name of it. All the women spent their time there, busy making long bamboo flutes. We men only had these little, short bamboo flutes. We lived in the small men's house called little Seing-gego. That is how we lived. We men had no splendid ornaments. We adorned our bodies as the women do today, the type of adornment a woman wears after giving birth to a child: white earth pigment. In earlier days, we men didn't know how to adorn ourselves. The men looked after the children, and the children wet themselves on their father's lap as the small children do today on their mother's lap. This is the way men once lived. The only thing they knew was to play on these small, short bamboo flutes tubes which we call *kolingut*. To support our play, we would beat on a tree and make it sound like a *garamut* drum or a big water drum [? Tok Pisin: *big hul*].

All we men possessed were these two things, together with two *mai*, as the short bamboo tubes are called. The two *mai* were called Mali and Yambunge, those were the names of these two short bamboo tubes. It's all we had, together with a piece of wood we could strike,<sup>212</sup> as well as this short panpipe which we call *kolingut*; that's all we possessed. We would walk with them through the village; we would blow on this flute, and we looked after our coltish children. When the children cried we tried to sooth them with the help of these three instruments. When a child started crying, the men played the panpipe. This one here (Mindsh points to the panpipe) is called Uanoli. He made it. He was the first man to play this panpipe. He looked at his father's mother, *seina yai*; she was dying, so Uanoli played the panpipe for her [Mindsh plays the tune].”

The number of myths in which women play a key role could easily be extended (see for example pp. 147, 174, 197, 218). Here I add a myth which tells of where *kowar* leaves came from, and how they came into the possession of humans. *Kowar* leaves play a prominent role in numerous male ritual acts. The myth was told by Kwapmei (Yagum clan; see Fig. 55, p. 211) in Iatmul and later translated sentence by sentence into Tok Pisin by Mindsh.

<sup>212</sup> This instrument is called *baui*. Personal communication Gisela Schuster.

“Once upon a time a woman called Kipma-uren was living in a hole in the ground. When women left the village to pound and wash sago in the bush, Kipma-uren would appear from nowhere, kill them, and devour them. This is why the women stopped going to the bush to pound sago. One day a really big and fat woman decided to go and pound sago. Kipma-uren was waiting in her hole, looking upwards, thinking to herself: ‘Oh, this is a really fat woman, but nothing to worry. Now she is coming from the village, I can’t grab her yet. I’ll first let her pound and wash sago. Afterwards she will be carrying the palm leaf sheaths [the “tubes” through which the starchy water is channelled into the canoe] and all the other things she needs for washing sago, along with the strainer made of coconut fibres as well as the bag with the washed sago on her head, so she will be heavily loaded and unable to watch her step on the path. I will look out for this woman when she comes back.’ Kipma-uren waited for the woman because she wished to kill her.

The fat woman finished pounding and washing sago and was ready to return to the village. She watched her step on the path carefully [because of the heavy load]. When she passed the spot where Kipma-uren lived, she paid special attention to her step, in order not to slip and fall. The *masalai* woman Kipma-uren rose up and grabbed the woman by her arm. She was startled but said: ‘Okay, okay, I’m carrying a heavy load, so just wait. Let me find a spot to put these heavy things down, then I’ll come back and you can kill me.’ Of course, the woman was lying, but Kipma-uren thought the woman was telling the truth.

The woman put down her load on a dry spot. When returning to Kipma-uren, she took with her a small knife of the kind we call *dshondshiyet*. Kipma-uren planned to kill the woman with a knife, too, actually the same type of knife as the woman was carrying. The fat woman threw her knife. The two women fought with each other. The fat woman was stronger than Kipma-uren. The *masalai* woman said: ‘You win. Wait a little, then you can kill me, but first I have something to tell you.’ The village woman loosened her grip a little. Kipma-uren spoke: ‘When you kill me, and I’m completely dead, carry me to a firm spot of land [unlike the swampy ground in which Kipma-uren otherwise lived]. Cut open my belly and look inside. There you will find *kowar*. There are things inside there with which you can kill people. Many different kinds of plants are in there. Many things are inside my belly, each one has its own name and story to it. Take them all and then you will be as powerful as I was.’

The woman listened and then killed Kipma-uren. She dragged the body to a stretch of dry land. In the hole where Kipma-uren had lived the ground was not firm. She dragged the body to the dry spot of land and said to herself: ‘I’ll cut open her belly and see what’s inside.’ She cut open the belly and saw

everything. Each item was wrapped in a separate bundle [like a parcel, the storyteller said].

The woman left behind the body and returned home with her sago. Then she went to a stream to wash. She took along her child whom she gave her breast to drink from. Only then did she go to the men's house to see her husband: 'You're sitting there all day long, just sleeping. But this *masalai* woman lives by the path that leads to the spot where we pound and wash sago. But now she's dead. I killed her. I left her lying on the path. I cut open her belly with a bamboo knife and saw what she had inside her belly. I closed the belly again and came here. Now you can go and fetch her. Go and fetch her and place her body in front of the men's house. Then open her belly, you will see that inside there is something for each clan, for each single clan. The things she is carrying in her belly are wrapped in separate bundles; there is a bundle for each clan. Everything is ready there, waiting for you.' Those were the words the woman spoke to the men at the men's house.

The men got up and spoke: 'Oh, so that's the kind of woman you are; you can kill, you are no small woman; the other women never returned from this path, and now you claim to have killed this woman.' The woman replied: 'I was not lying. Go, but take with you some poles and a rope. Tie the body to the poles and bring her here; she's very heavy.' Those are the words the woman spoke outside the men's house. The men went to fetch the woman's body and distributed the *kowar* among the various clans.

That's the story how we remember it."

Not only in mythology do women play a significant part. The secret ancestors who founded the various clans were also female, just as were the ones who established the various villages back in mythical times. In turn, all these protagonists are intertwined with the mythology. Mebinbragui, the mythical source of all human beings, too, is described as being female. It is associated with a stretch of land between the villages of Gaikorobi, Yindegum, and Kararau. Likewise, the different men's houses each bear a male as well as a female name; as far as the flutes and bullroarers are concerned, some are male, others are female.

In the context of this study it would be impossible to cover all aspects of femaleness in ceremonial and ritual life. This would have required a study in its own right, for which I did not have time in view of the comparatively short duration of my fieldwork. Suffice it therefore to refer to the pivotal role female beings are assigned with in the religious, conceptual world.

The women are well aware of the myths that tell of the times when they held the place of men, commenting on the fact with statements like, "Yes, we know. In the olden days we were the bosses (Tok Pisin: *bipo mipela bosim ol*)."

Nonetheless, my women interlocutors were proud of the narratives which they regarded as irrefutable facts. In how far this past prominence serves as an intellectual and emotional compensation for their actual role today is difficult to ascertain and can only be

presumed. Still, one gets the impression that women often feel a degree of satisfaction, or fulfilment, when talking about these myths but without ever drawing the conclusion therefrom that this would be reason enough to turn the tables again.

When speaking with male interlocutors it always became clear, how much they appreciated these mythical women and their deeds. At the same time the idea of comparing their qualities and actions to the bearing and conduct of women today seemed to them absurd, but not without hinting at the possibility that the “women” (as an opposite gender category, not in their individual roles as wives or sisters) could well return to their former power if the men should ever lose the power over the sacred flutes by revealing them to the women.

In the eyes of men, the women in the myths represented something more like paradigmatic mothers, certainly not women as they know them from everyday life, let us say, as sexual partners (see p. 188). But the mythological women are by no means always idealized, “good” mothers worthy of veneration (see, for instance, Kamabindshua, p. 147); moreover, from time to time, they are described as frightening personalities, for example, the asexual *woliragwa* who habitually kill the sons they have just given birth to (p. 226), or the murderous Kipma-uren. The female mythological figures are the source of veneration but, at the same time, a cause for fear which makes it difficult to assign them to any specific category.

Felix Speiser, who looked into the role of women as the inventors of ritual paraphernalia in Melanesia (1944), drew the conclusion that these myths were based on a) historical foundations, that is, women’s participation in rituals in former times; and b) on psychological premises, that is, men feeling guilty for having barred women from ceremonial life.

On the basis of a single type of myth it is practically impossible assess the mentioned historical dimension (I am more inclined to doubt its value as the *cause* of the myth’s origin). Above I described the Iatmul kinship system as patrilineal with “cumulative matrification”, but even if the population had been organized along matrilineal lines at some time in the distant past, this does not mean that the people had concomitantly observed matriarchal rule – the fine distinction between the two principles is still often overlooked.

Creation myths of this kind, I argue, need putting into context and viewing in connection with other features of Iatmul culture in order to make sense of them, at least to some degree.<sup>213</sup> Stagl (1971: 67) argued that myths in which women play a dominant role in the primeval age were a hallmark of societies with strict gender segregation. Following Mühlmann, Stagl relies on the mythologeme of the inverted world, “which makes the present status quo appear unsafe, if not even unreal” (translated by N. S.). He goes on to say that one of the functions of this mythologeme was to justify the society’s status quo.

Apart from antagonism between men and women, one has to take a further factor into account that possibly fosters the emergence, or at least the retention, of

<sup>213</sup> The issue here is not directed causal relationships but interdependences.

these kinds of myths: the nature of the environment the people live in. In the case of the Iatmul, one of the main features is the absence of game (especially of large game). Hunting game and headhunting have many things in common, especially with regard of the emotional experience it seems to offer. Among “typical” hunter societies, headhunting is almost never practiced. In fact, headhunting or the ritual killing of human beings seems to be prevalent in horticulturalist societies, as noted already by Jensen (1951: 202-205). He linked the killing rituals among horticulturalists with the killing of the so-called Dema deities, a term he borrowed from the Marind Anim of southwest New Guinea, and the corresponding mythology. He described the practice of headhunting as a re-enactment of the primeval act of killing. Such killings were intrinsically linked to conception of fertility, the emergence and growth of crops, and the promotion of human life. As indicated above (see p. 224) headhunting served men as a convincing counterbalance to the (often highly productive) world of women at the core of which stands their capacity to pass on life to the next generation. Formulated as a hypothesis, one could say that headhunting served as a means to consolidate an insecure male identity. This wobbly basis, which requires ongoing confirmation, covets the image of a stable primeval age in which the conditions corresponded to a situation which could, men dreaded, actually become true in reality – if not defended properly. But then again, the stable primeval age makes the present look even more unsafe and under threat. In addition, this insecure basis is underpinned by gendered practices of upbringing which, according to John Whiting (1958), foster a “cross-sex identity” and cross-sex identity conflicts. The gentle stroking of a boy infant’s genitals by his mother as a means of soothing him to sleep may be considered as one of the practices which results in a close emotional attachment of a boy to his mother. It is through the harsh initiation ritual that, in Whiting’s terms, the boys finally achieve an all-male identity.

Reviewing these three crucial factors with regard to the myths in which women play a dominant role in every respect, helps to explain why these myths make up an important part of (male) Iatmul culture.

### *Knowledge about myths*

According to my male Iatmul interlocutors, myths make up an important part of the men’s body of knowledge. In the early stages of fieldwork, my male interview partners tenaciously claimed that the women had no knowledge of myths. When I succeeded in recording a few myths from women, the men claimed that the women only knew *wundumbu nyanget*, that is, children’s stories. As soon as I had gathered a few dozen myths (some of the variants only as fragments), I was in a position to compare the myths told to me by men with those narrated by women. As the analysis of the myths below will reveal, the men’s myths were not categorically different to the versions told by women. What I did notice, however, was that different women often told me the same myth. A characteristic feature of the women’s mythological knowledge was that they were often not familiar with the names of the acting fig-

ures. Actually, they did not assign great importance to this aspect. Unlike the men: before telling us a “true myth”, *kip*,<sup>214</sup> the narrator would often hesitate before word- ing the names of the mythological protagonists, and when he did so, it was usually in a very low voice.

What we thought to discern was that myths where the narrator refrained from men- tioning any names usually belonged to a clan other than that of the teller himself. However, there were no noticeable distinctions between *wundumbu nyanget* and *kip* (also called *kip sagi*), at least not in terms of content, contrary to what the men had originally asserted.

After collecting numerous *wundumbu nyanget* and *kip*, I was able to elicit the following characteristics:

1. *Wundumbu nyanget* can be told publicly.
2. They can be told and heard by men, women, and children, irrespective of clan affiliation.
3. No clan publicly lays claim to a *wundumbu nyanget*.
4. The names of the acting persons in a *wundumbu nyanget* are normally of little importance.

As far as content is concerned, they refer to creation narratives and stories which deal with what Berndt (following Malinowski) calls, “patterns of conformity and non-conformity, conflict and consistency are developed [...] providing not only a set of moral standards but also a charter for misconduct” (Berndt 1962: 39).

*Kip sagi*:

1. Are only told in secret.
2. They are told by men whose clan owns the respective myths. With very few exceptions, listeners belong to the same clan.
3. Each clan carefully guards its stock of *kip sagi*.
4. The names of the myths’ protagonists play a prominent role because they usually represent secret clan ancestors.
5. In term of content, they differ from the *wundumbu nyanget* insofar as more emphasis is given to the creation myths in conjunction with the secret ancestors from one’s own clan.

In our view the difference between *kip* and *wundumbu nyanget* is above all a ques- tion of perspective and situation. The following example (the myth recounted on pp. 288–305) indicates that it is just about impossible to distinguish between the two narrative forms on the basis of content.

Kubeli, who told the myth about the *Wolinyan* (p. 225), classified the story as no more than a *wundumbu nyanget*. Tellingly, he told us the story one

<sup>214</sup> Bateson (1932: 404) calls the secret myths *kop*.

afternoon when our house was surrounded by hordes of children. He evidently attached no great importance to secrecy. In passing, he mentioned that members of the Yagum clan probably knew the story much better than he did since he belonged to the Wuenguendshap clan. When, some days later, we were sitting down with Wombre and her husband Slabui [of the Yagum clan] – Wombre was telling us myths, with Slabui providing the translations – I asked about the myth which Kubeli had told in merely a cursory manner. I did not get far before Slabui interrupted me quite vehemently, demanding to know who had told me the story. Realizing that I was in a fix, I tried to dodge the question and told him that I heard it in a neighbouring village where the people had indicated that I should preferably ask Slabui for the full version as he, as a member of the Yagum clan, held the rights to the myth. Evidently quite agitated, Slabui told me to shut up, explaining that this story was not a *wundumbu nyanget* but a *kip sagi* and because his wife Wombre was from a different clan she was not allowed to hear it, not to mention her status as a woman. That, of course, ended the conversation immediately, and, due to the now rather tense atmosphere, I decided to leave, telling our hosts that I had arranged meetings with various women to ask them how many fish they had caught that day. But it did not end there: Slabui followed me on my visits, positioning himself in front of each house to keep track of my conversation with the resident woman. After ending my survey, I returned home to the *haus kiap* with Slabui still trailing me. He stayed around until after dark to keep an eye on me, and even returned during the night for a check, before finally calming down. It goes without saying that he never told me the myth.

It shows that while Kubeli described the myth as a *wundumbu nyanget*, Slabui saw in it a *kip sagi*, a secret myth that belonged exclusively to his clan. Later, in a conversation with Koliuan and Mindsh, the following picture of the relationship between the two narrative forms began to take shape: *wundumbu nyanget* are stories that once used to be *kip sagi* but which, at some point in time, lost their secret significance through indiscretion and became “public” knowledge. In such a case the owning clan usually avoids admitting that the now insignificant story had ever belonged to its stock of secret myths. No one outside the clan concerned would ever know, and people would even go to great lengths to deny previous ownership. All the clans painstakingly watched over their secret myths. My interlocutors explained verbatim: *wundumbu nyanget* is a term we use to disguise another story (meaning a *kip*), in Tok Pisin: *em bilong kalamapim tok*.

As far as the case of Kubeli was concerned, I later found out that a leading Yagum man had, shortly before his death and because his own son had been too young, confided his stock of secret myths to his *laua*, who happened to be Kubeli's father. The idea was that the *laua* would later pass on the myths to the rightful owner, that is, the Yagum man's son, as soon as he had come of age. Whether this had actually ever happened as planned remains an open question as Kubeli's father died

many years ago. What, on the other hand, seems to be clear is that he imparted at least some of the secret myths (of the Yagum clan) to his own sons.

Most of the women (and possibly a fair share of the men, too) are not aware that *kip* tend to transmute into *wundumbu nyanget*. When I occasionally asked a woman to tell me a *stori* (the Tok Pisin term *stori* is used for both *wundumbu nyanget* and *kip sagi*) in the presence of her husband, the latter would usually become rather restive and comment that his wife knew no really good stories.

When Sabwandshan set out to tell a myth, her husband Waani always stayed with us. During her recount he would often interject, prompting her to add this or that detail, or reprimanding her for telling the story wrongly. Initially his remarks would unsettle her but then she would regain confidence and tell him: "Give me a break, papa, I'm telling the story. If you have anything to say, you can tell us later." At this point, Waani would usually get up and leave the house.

For quite a while Amblangu insisted that I asked her husband to tell me one or the other myth. I tried, but after several attempts it became clear that he simply did not know any. This evidently irritated Amblangu, prompting her to say (although he was in hearing distance) that her husband was simply too stupid (Tok Pisin: *longlong*) to memorize anything.

Koliuan (see Fig. 50, p. 204), one of my regular and trusted interlocutors, often claimed that his wife knew no *stori*. Moreover, he maintained that her voice would probably wreck our tape recorder! In the absence of Koliuan I once asked Senguimanagui whether she would be prepared to tell me a *stori*. She said she had mentioned to her husband that she would like us to record a *stori* from her, upon which he had answered, she should tell him the story and he would then pass it on to us. – This must have actually occurred so, but Koliuan never told us.

As far as knowledge about myths is concerned one could summarize as follows: not all men have knowledge of *kip sagi* – the only form of narrative that is imbued with power and prestige – and most of them are not interested in *wundumbu nyanget*. On the other hand, all the women know *wundumbu nyanget* (but which hold no prestige value) for the simple reason because they tell them to their children when they cannot sleep at night, or if they are sick or in pain. The women also share *wundumbu nyanget* among themselves, for instance, when making string bags or stringing tobacco leaves to strips of rattan.

Seen from this point of view, we have the seemingly paradoxical situation that, in general, women probably know more *stori* than many a man. This might be the case in quantitative terms, but it in no way relates to the way the Iatmul assess and value mythological knowledge, given that women possess partial knowledge at most. Albeit, it is also rare among men (in Kararau there was one old man) for someone to know how all the myths are interrelated and how they are tied in with the secret name lists; in other words, there are very few "mythologists" with an understanding of the mythological system as a whole.



## 12 Women Who Became Initiated by Men

### 12.1 Initiation as a mark of excellence

After focusing on the more traditional role of women in society so far, I now briefly turn to women who were special in the sense that they had acquired male status. According to my interlocutors, it occasionally occurred in Kararau, but also in other villages along the Middle Sepik, that girls were initiated together with the boys by village elders, that is, they, too, went through the ordeal of scarification and were introduced to the secrets of male ritual.<sup>215</sup>

At the time of research, two women, sisters to be precise, both in their fifties, who had been initiated, were still living in the village of Angerman.<sup>216</sup> The description below is the abridged version of a lengthy conversation I had with them. No changes were made in terms of content. Although the two women spoke Tok Pisin, they gave their account in Iatmul. Their description was translated into Tok Pisin by Mindsh, a classificatory son of theirs. The conversation was conducted mainly with the elder of the two women, as it would have been regarded as impolite to address

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<sup>215</sup> Bateson (1958: 10) writes about the initiation of girls: “It is a simplified version of the initiation of boys and is carried out by the men of the elder age grade. The ceremony is performed on only a very few women.”

<sup>216</sup> Angerman is a strongly acculturated village under complete SDA influence (Seventh Day Adventists). In order to interview the two women, we had to wait until the church service was over. The two women were considered particularly devout (in the Christian Adventist sense of the term) and it took quite some persuading until they were prepared to show us the scars on their backs. They removed their blouses and bras with great reluctance and felt visibly uncomfortable standing there before us – something we never experienced in Kararau.

the younger one. Similar to the situation among younger and elder brothers, the elder sister was evidently the one granted more authority.

“The name of our village is Yanmali.<sup>217</sup> Our father was called Marat. We belong to the Mairambu clan [Nyamei moiety]. My name is Tabu; my younger sister is called Kambu. Our father had no sons, only daughters. Once he ate food with the Kishit and Miwat, as we call the two *alambandi* [initiation moieties]; we also call them Yambunde and Bombiande. He ate pork and chicken; he accepted a lot of food from the two moieties, which meant he was in their debt. He had no son through whom he could have settled his debt [through having him initiated by one of the moieties]. He only had daughters.

So, one day, we were about 11 and 9 years old, he took us to Koliselio [in the Sepik hinterland; it is inhabited by people referred to as Numangi]. Our mother remained behind in Yanmali. Our father didn't tell us what awaited us in Koliselio; he just took us and brought us to the men's house Kraimbit. We thought he was taking us there to wait for our first menstruation although we had no breasts at the time. We were just young girls. The Kishit men took us to an enclosure next the men's house. Our father didn't come with us, he left and went back home. If he had accompanied us into the enclosure, we would have cried because we would have wanted to return home with him. The *alambandi* watched over us. Apart from us there were two young boys in the enclosure. At night there was a big *singsing*. The four men Balus, Sangi, Krugua, and Wabidangul played the long bamboo flute. This is only played during initiations and is called Amuiragwa. Amuiragwa is the most important of all long bamboo flutes.

We thought to ourselves, ‘Why didn't father say anything? – but no need to worry, the men won't kill us.’ Those were our thoughts. My younger sister was still very small, she just sat there and watched, not knowing what was going to happen. But I knew that the *alambandi* were going to cut our skins. When morning came, the *alambandi* began making cuts to our backs and upper arms with bamboo knives. Our two *wau* [mother's brothers], Dangi and Tambeaman, held us pinned down. Tandamali applied the cuts. The man who makes the cuts we call *walalambandi* [*wal* = crocodile, that is, crocodile man]. We were frightened and it was very painful. In addition, we were in a *banis* [Tok Pisin for the enclosure erected for an initiation] surrounded by men we did not know. I cried a little, but the *walalambandi* was able to tattoo my entire back. But my younger sister was still very small; she cried a lot and called, ‘Where's my father, where's my mother?’ She cried so much that the *walalambandi* was only able to do one side of her back. The other side was left untouched. They did not tattoo our chests [unlike the boys].

<sup>217</sup> Yanmali is a joint term used for the villages of Angerman and Mindimbit. It seems that the two settlements were more closely associated in earlier days.

In the evening, when it was already dark, we were allowed to leave the *banis* and were taken to the house of relatives. Inside the house there was again a small enclosure. We had to go inside so that nobody could see us. The women and children pushed some food under the wall of the *banis*, but they weren't allowed to see us. We could talk to them, but not about what we had experienced. Before dawn we were taken back to the enclosure outside.

Inside the *banis* we were shown the crocodiles [that is, the bullroarers]. We held the large crocodile, called Abingalimange, and the small crocodile, Ndshigiwal, in our hands and learnt how to swing them and make them roar [how to produce the typical bullroarer sound]. At a waterhole there was a big water drum called Kumbiandima. The men threw the drum into the water, causing a loud bang. However, we were too small for this, the water drum was simply too heavy. Our two *wau* gave us each a name while we were still in the enclosure. I was called Yauoliyelishe, my younger sister Olimbangeyelishe. My *wau's* kin still call us by these names today.

In the *banis* we had to eat a lot of sago so as to become fat. The *alambandi* told us many things and they showed us all the long bamboo flutes. We stayed there for roughly six weeks. The men of the two *alambandi* warned us never to tell the women and children about what we had seen and experienced in the *banis*. The men beat us on our feet with the rib of a coconut leaf as a way of reinforcing their warning.

Then the enclosure was torn down and the *alambandi* presented us to the women and children. We were now *tagwambandi* [initiated women]. When we left the *banis* we wore a necklace, *sanya tandambe*, and a black grass skirt reaching down to the ankle. Only women who have been scarified are allowed to wear this kind of grass skirt. The women and children admired us greatly and performed a *ngusora*<sup>218</sup> [they splashed the sisters with water]. Now our father was in a position to repay what he owed the *alambandi*. He organized a large feast to honour the Kishit who had initiated us. We were now part of the Miwat. He presented the *walambandi* with an especially large gift.

When we returned to Yanmali, the Kishit men in Yanmali said: 'We, too, could have initiated these two girls. Now they have marks on their skin ([which the men of Koliselio have applied]. Now we must repeat this act [the girls' initiation, in Tok Pisin, *mipela mast bekim*, we have to reciprocate]. Thus they spoke and went to fetch our brother's wife [same mother, but different father], called Kambakimbi. They took her to the *banis* where the men cut marks into her back. We, too, were there in the *banis* to supervise our sister-in-law. The men of Yanmali showed us the long flutes and allowed us to swing the bullroarers. Initially our father wanted to have us initiated in Yanmali, but the men of the village refused. So, he took us to Koliselio. But then the men of Yanmali changed their mind, so they decided to initiate our

<sup>218</sup> This is a kind of *naven* ceremony.

sister-in-law. We were allowed to look after her and give her food. After this, our father, Marat, staged an additional large feast.

Our father's sister as well as our mother had been initiated back in the early days. My father, the most significant man of the Mairambu clan in Yanmali, later told me all the myths and also entrusted me with the [secret] clan names. My younger sister doesn't know them [our translator Mindsh commented on this: 'If I happen to forget one of the myths, I'll go and ask her, she seems to know more than I do.']

When we reached the age of marriage, our father said to us: 'It's time you went to Ambianmeli [Angerman village apparently consisted of two localised moieties called Yanmali and Ambianmeli corresponding to Nyamei and Naui in Kararau]. We both married our *yanan*. My husband is from the Tshui clan, my sister's husband from the Sameangut clan (both Abianmeli, or, as Mindsh called it: Nyau).

We never told our children what we had seen and experienced in the enclosures in Koliselio and Yanmali. That knowledge will probably die with us. In the early days, when there were still men's houses [by 1970 there were no men's houses left in Angerman; a new one was built in 1972], we used to go there and chat with the men. We also took part in the men's *singsing* [Mindsh added: 'The two only had the *skin* of men; in actual fact they are women and no different from all the other women'].

In the *banis* in Yanmali we got to see more than in Koliselio. The Numangi only have the long and short bamboo flutes, along with the water drum. But we on the Sepik also have this one great ancestor [who appears as a masked figure]). His name is Miwatdimi. This ancestor [the mask] makes a sudden appearance in the *banis*, scaring the initiates because they are not yet strong enough. After all, they haven't passed through the full initiation yet. Only seeing this ancestor makes them really strong. Only then will they be able to kill people on a raid. Miwatdimi joins the men on raids. If your own village is attacked, it is Miwatdimi who protects the village. He's a very powerful ancestor. The Numangi don't have this ancestor. But we saw him."

The two sisters in Angerman seem to have been the last women to have been initiated in place of boys. In ceremonial terms, they had male status. This was, of course, very unusual for women, and it appears that the only reason why the two sisters enjoyed this privilege was because their father had been a leading figure in his clan and had no sons of his own. All our interlocutors, men and women, insisted that there was no other circumstance under which girls were initiated. In this case it had been the father's decision, exclusively.

## 12.2 Initiation as a means of stigmatization

Apparently, that is, according to my interlocutors, all the other cases in which women were scarified in the context of male initiations had occurred after women had pried on the secrets of men and had – as a form of punishment, so to speak – been forced to undergo the pain of initiation.<sup>219</sup>

This also seems to have been the case with Gurumbo of Palimbei.<sup>220</sup> Although I originally had planned to speak with her only about the initiation itself, the interview with this roughly sixty-year-old woman, which was conducted in Tok Pisin, developed into a life history account, making it practically impossible to carve out the initiation and describe it as a detached event. So, I decided to render just about the full account in its original form. Gurumbo recounted various episodes from her life, albeit not in chronological order, but as they came to mind. This jumping back and forth in time makes it hard to follow her story but, owing to its impressive narrative structure, I decided to render a more or less unedited version.

“My name is Gurumbo and I am from the Lenga clan. My father had two sons, but my brothers are dead now. They died young. As a young girl I went to Madang. A *masta* and his *missis* took me there with them.

At the time I was out on the Sepik with some other girls [in those days, Palimbei was situated on a dead arm of the river]. We were cutting *pitpit* [Tok Pisin for an edible kind of cane] and eating it. Then a boat came, carrying a *masta* [‘master’, a white man] and a *missis* [a white woman]. It stopped, upon which the two whites wanted to take me with them. I wept and cried: ‘Ay, father, they want to take me away!’ The two answered, ‘You mustn’t cry, you are our child now. We won’t do you any harm, our intentions are good.’ That’s what they said before taking me with them to Madang. There I stayed there for eight years. Masta and Missis did not want to let me go. They said: ‘You’re our daughter now.’ But, in the end, they decided to go back to their country. I cried and cried, didn’t stop crying. They let me return, so I came back to my village.

Whilst living with Masta and Missis I helped them in their work. They used to give me a letter and send me to Bongu, after which I would return. Then they sent me to Kabiang. We went to Bogadim and Apmambu [?]. I’ve been to all the places where there are white people [Tok Pisin: *mi raun long olgeta stesin*]. They used to give me a letter and send me to all different kinds of places. Once they wanted to send me to Rabaul, but I refused. But Masta insisted and, in the end, I went to Rabaul and Salamaua. When I returned I told the Missis that I needed a rest. Missis said: ‘Okay, take a rest, I’ll send you to Korogu to get some rest.’ Masta stayed at the station.

<sup>219</sup> See also p. 208.

<sup>220</sup> Florence Weiss kindly arranged the interview with Gurumbo for us.

Missis and I then went to Salamaua, to Bogia, and to Madang. We travelled a lot, even as far as Aitape. In those days there were already quite a few whites in Madang. One day, the two said to me: 'We're going back to our country and want to take you with us.' 'No, Missis, you can't take me with you. The people there would kill me.' That's what I said and cried. Missis answered: 'Nobody's going to kill you, but if you like, we can send you back to your village.' I cried a lot, but in the end, the Masta's boat took me back to the village.

After returning to my village, I got married quickly. I had three sons but they all died. So my brother gave me two of his. They now live in Wewak and are about to get married. They told me: 'We're going to build a house and will then come to fetch you.'"

In response to my question concerning the scars on her upper arms and back, she replied:

"Those are the scarification marks from my initiation. I was still a young girl, when one day, I went to collect *lolo* fruits [Malay apple] near the men's house in Tigowi. I climbed up a tree and tried to hit a branch using a fish spear. I threw the spear and climbed up the tree. At that moment I saw two men blowing the long bamboo flutes in the men's house. They were just blowing the flutes [that is, there was no ceremony going on]. They had not erected a fence. I saw them playing the flutes which made me feel bad. The two men finished playing and put the flutes aside. I wanted to climb down and had already thrown down my spear when a man saw me and called to the others. They came and held me and asked, 'What are you doing here?' I answered, 'I didn't see what you were doing in the men's house.' 'You're lying', they exclaimed, 'we saw you.' Then they took me away. Now I have these scars on my back.

In those days I had no breasts yet. I saw a men's house secret which only men are allowed to know: the flutes. They dragged me to the enclosure [where, apparently, Gurumbo was raped by the men; she never specifically mentioned this, but I heard this on various occasions in Palimbe as well as in Kararau]. In the enclosure, *banis*, they cut these tattoo marks into the skin of my back. I stayed in the *banis* for two months until the wounds had healed.

The tattoos were cut into my skin by one man alone, whom we call *abarwayaban*. My mother's brother held me during the process. He took care of me. We would sit together amidst the smoke in the men's house. We sat next to each other. He took care of me. When I left the enclosure, I gave him three [Australian] dollars for what he had done for me. – I was the only one in the *banis*, there were no others being initiated. I now belong to the age group called Tshitngeli.

When the men dragged me to the *banis*, my father said to them, 'Do as you think right.' My mother cried a lot. She belonged to the Yapmai-Wuenguande clan and was from Tigowi. At the time I was in Tigowi with my mother.

At night I was allowed to return to my mother's house, but she was not allowed to look at me. She wasn't permitted to light a lamp or make a large fire. She gave me food. Before dawn broke I had to return to the enclosure. Whilst staying in the *banis*, I learnt how to swing the large and small crocodiles [bull-roarers] in order to make them roar. My *wau* gave me a name, Yautnyauleshe. Apart from that, the men showed me the long and short bamboo flutes. They said, 'You can never tell the women and children about what you've seen. If you do, the men's house to which you now belong will collapse and you will have to give us pigs and betel nut. Do you want that to happen?' I answered, 'I will not say a word to anyone.'

When I finally left the enclosure, my *mbambu*, that is, my mother's mother, performed a *singsing*. She called me 'Rain'. This is what she sang:

*Gambi mai glesek, gambit mai darega wandi glesek*

In the morning rain falls like fruit from a tree. In the morning rain falls, they say, like fruit from a tree.

*Nyan kunak wandi glesek*

Watch over the child, they say, like over the fruits of a tree.

The men gave me a tiny cloth skirt [meaning, they were making fun of Gurumbo]. But it was much too short, and I was very ashamed. I called for my big sister and she gave me a grass skirt. I put it on and left the enclosure. My father gave the men who had initiated me a pig, which they ate. Later, my elder sister married the *abarwayaban*, that is, the man who had cut my tattoos. At the time he was cutting my back, my mother wept bitterly. When I left the *banis* she took me to Palimbe.

Oh, Missis, sorry, I think I want to go back to Madang. I will write a letter and send it to the Masta and ask him and the Missis to come and fetch me. I would like to go away again. – However, I am no longer young, and I could get lost. I long for those two people. I miss the Missis like my mother who gave birth to me, and the Masta like my father. The two used to say, 'This is all yours' that's what they told me. I could take what I wanted, for example, tobacco – anything I wanted. Now I often think to myself, why did I marry so early? – I shouldn't have returned to Palimbe so soon.

Today I am a Catholic. When they took me to the *banis* I was still a *kanaka* [that is, not yet Christianized). Afterwards I was allowed into the men's house when the men played the *garamut* [slit gongs]. When the men had their discussions, I would sit among them. I was also allowed into the *banis* whilst they were initiating the young boys.

I didn't marry of my own free will. It was my husband's wish. He was my half-brother. My father and his father called each other brother. My husband wanted to marry me. I didn't want him as my husband. I cried and said to him, 'What about our fathers? They called each other brother – and now you want to marry me?' He answered, 'That doesn't matter, you're from a different

village.’ But I insisted, ‘It’s wrong for us to get married; it will cause problems and a lot of bad talk in the village’, to which he answered, ‘I have spoken to the people; I want to marry you.’ – ‘But I don’t want to marry you’, I said. His answer was, ‘Yes, I know you don’t like me, but I want to marry you.’

So, in the end, I married him. We quarrelled a lot, we even fought with each other. Even after just having married, I laid into him. We fought and quarrelled like this all the time. In the end my husband moved to Chambri where he married another woman. I remained here alone.”

Even from the relatively short conversation with Gurumbo it became clear what a marked impact the initiation and the sexual assault had on the woman’s life. Even though the initiation had lent her, at least outwardly, male status, she remained an outsider in the village community. Unlike the two sisters in Angerman, she was paid no special respect for what she had suffered, neither from the men nor from other women.

It never became clear what kind of work she was asked to do while staying with Masta and Missis – actually a Chinese couple. She astutely avoided all my questions in this direction. Conceivably the couple had taken Gurumbo – then still a young girl – with them on account of her conspicuous scarification marks. From our conversation I got the impression that she had been employed as a prostitute, but then again, I might be wrong. Possibly she was really something like an adopted daughter to them, but I tend towards the former interpretation.

Taking Gurumbo’s life history into account, the act of initiation takes on quite a different tinge. While in the case of the two Angerman sisters one could see it almost as a mark of distinction, in Gurumbo’s case the action has more of something like an act of branding to it, with devastating consequences for her further life.

A case similar to the fate of Gurumbo is that of Marionagui of the Nangusime clan of Aibom.<sup>221</sup> The woman, now around the age of fifty, made rather a distraught impression and evidently did not like to talk about her initiation, preferring to leave it up to her classificatory brother Askame to do the talking. For this reason, the account below is not told in the first person.

“Two men, Noguandi and Manange, were in the men’s house where they were busy instructing a couple of freshly initiated boys, *suambu alambandi*, on the secrets of the men’s house. Some women were passing the men’s house on the main path, when the men, particularly Noguandi, shouted out that some of the women, most notably Marionagui, had cast a glimpse into the men’s house and seen the *mbandi* [i.e. the novices]. This was not true; Marionagui had not seen anything. Still, the men grabbed her and dragged her off into the men’s house of Tangurumbit, where she was raped. Then they scarified her back in the enclosure of the men’s house. She didn’t remember who applied the cuts; many men held her down, and several different men made the cuts to her skin.

<sup>221</sup> The interview with Marionagui was kindly arranged by M. and G. Schuster.



Some of Marionagui's classificatory brothers – her real brothers were still only boys at the time – then stormed the enclosure and retrieved the young girl who had barely reached the age of puberty. They took her to the men's house Nangurumbit to which they belonged. There Marionagui remained for a month until her wounds had healed. She was never shown any flutes or bullroarers. All they said to her was, 'You were devoured by the crocodile, that's what happened to you. Never tell this to any woman or child!' The act of fetching Marionagui from the enclosure that belonged to the men's house of Tangurumbit, led to a major conflict in the village. Marionagui had not seen anything, and the men actually knew this, but still, it led to a serious dispute and even to fighting between the men of the two men's house communities. In the end, the *luluai* and *tutul* intervened and brought an end to the conflict. The dispute was settled with an exchange of betel nut and shell rings, but not before the Tangurumbit men had demanded a pig for [Marionagui's] initiation."

According to Askame, the fact that she had been initiated had no effect on the bride wealth paid for Marionagui when she got married later. Since she was a firstborn child the amount was substantial anyhow. However, despite having undergone the ordeal of initiation, Marionagui was never given the right to join the men in the men's house when they performed a *singsing*, that is, a ceremony.

What actually prompted this rather unfortunate initiation – which in fact comprised not more than the act of scarification (and the act of rape) – is a matter which the people of Aibom were never quite clear about. Apart from the account above (Marionagui and Askame maintained throughout that she had "seen" nothing) there were two other versions in circulation: according to the first, Marionagui had climbed a tree to collect *lolo* fruit and had, accidentally, caught a glimpse of what was going on inside the men's house; the second story held that Marionagui had initially been (illicitly) tattooed by a group of women upon which the men had decided to scarify the girl a second time, as a form of punishment, so to speak.

In comparison to Gurumbo, Marionagui had been fortunate in the sense that her brothers had come to her rescue and freed her from the enclosure, giving her at least partial solace, while Gurumbo had been initiated in a different village altogether where she had little to no support from her kinfolk (at least not from men of her father's clan).

### 12.3 Memories of an earlier women's initiation

Up to here we have heard the testimonies of four women all of whom were scarified by men. Below I add a further account; it is from a woman called Gaunamak, roughly between sixty and seventy years old, from the Nangusime clan of Aibom who, compared to the four women above, experienced the ordeal of initiation under different circum-

stances. Whether we are dealing with a form of earlier, independent women's initiation in the Aibom area (possibly also in Malinge/Palimbe) is difficult to ascertain today.

During the interview with Gaunamak, two younger women from Aibom joined us to serve as interpreters.<sup>222</sup> They demanded that no men should be present during the interview. For the sake of comprehensibility, I render the account in the first person. However, the description required a few rectifications, especially as far as the sequence of events is concerned.

“My name is Gaunamak and I am from the Nangusime clan. My father's name was Askame; he had an elder brother. I was the youngest of our sisters. When I was still a young girl – however, I already had breasts – there were a few men who wanted to marry me. There were especially two who wanted to marry me. I was afraid they would rape me [Tok Pisin: *stilim long rot*]; my brothers had the same fears, which is why they sent me to the enclosure [*banis*] for women [the women's initiation was allegedly called *sayambe*]. For, when a girl has been tattooed, no man can rape her; there is a strict taboo on that. My mother didn't want me to go to the *banis*, but my brothers insisted and I, too, wanted to go because I was afraid of these two men.

They'd built an enclosure in Sowimeli's house. Apart from me, there were two other girls in the enclosure; their names were Mungundaua and Gainimbit. Sowimeli was Gainimbit's stepfather. In earlier days, there was an enclosure especially for girls which was erected in a dwelling house. Asangumeli of the Yagum clan in Malinge was responsible for cutting the skin. My mother was from Malinge which is why they chose a man from that village to do the work. Asangumeli was the son of the *yau*.<sup>223</sup> In the *banis* the girls only received cuts around their nipples. This kind of tattoo is referred to as *mun-yalis*. The other two girls were tattooed by men from Aibom. The wounds were dressed with resin and our skin daubed with white earth. The scars on the women's breasts were made by the small crocodile, *tagwawaal*. The scars on the backs of men come from a large crocodile.

We had to remain in the enclosure for one year. We made string bags and played on the mouth bow to pass time. Our mothers brought us food but we were allowed to see no one. That's how we spent our time.

When the year was up we should have gone to the men's house where the men's large crocodile was waiting to bite our skin [reference to scarification on the back]. My mother's brother gave each of us a name while we were still in the women's *banis*. He called me Wiganweiyelische. Sowimeli was waiting to send us to the men's enclosure. He had even already taken betel nut to the men's house. From there we heard the call of the large crocodile [the sound of the bullroarer]. Hearing this, the women and children ran off to the forest.

<sup>222</sup> I am grateful to M. and G. Schuster for arranging this meeting.

<sup>223</sup> Despite various attempts, we were unable to clarify the exact kin relationship between Gaunamak and Asangumeli.

Sowimeli didn't like the call of the large crocodile which is why, in the end, he didn't send us to the men's house.

While we were still in the *banis*, Sowimeli died, upon which the enclosure was torn down. Upon leaving the women's enclosure we were adorned. We had cut our hair and covered our bodies in red paint. We were wearing new grass skirts and an ornament called *penyo*. When we emerged from the *banis*, the women, in particular our mothers, performed a *singsing* called *wolimambi*. The men have a similar *singsing*, called *kabel*. When we climbed down the ladder from the house, they performed yet another *singsing* called *mbalkundi*. We then had to climb back up the ladder and down again.<sup>224</sup>

After I had left the women's enclosure no man could ever assault me again. Later I married Kasagui; I became his second wife. But his first wife soon left him.

Back in the days of our ancestors, it was common for women to be initiated.<sup>225</sup> When the men's house of Tangurumbit was still standing, some women set off to gather a certain type of reed [*nglai*]. This reed is used for making the women's enclosure. The only place where *nglai* grows is this lake called Nobanmalisat, near the men's house of Tangurumbit. The men didn't like to see the women collecting *nglai* next to their men's house and scolded them. But some of the men exclaimed: 'The women are our elder sisters, we could give them a few long bamboo flutes for them to play.' So, the men gave the women of the Yagum clan the flutes of the Yagum clan, called Salabama. Some of the women, who knew how to play them, played on them. Then they gave the flutes back to the men and went on to initiate the girls. The women who had played the flutes had never been initiated. They were given the flutes because they knew how to play them."

So far Gaunamak's account, which, unfortunately, remains patchy on some important points. In how far the women's enclosure was used to perform actual puberty ceremonies as we know (or at least knew) them from the southern hinterland of the Sepik remains an open question. Unfortunately, the procedure as a whole and the "deeper" meaning of the event, which was evidently carried out in two stages (stage 1: in women's enclosure, scarification of the breast region; stage 2: in men's enclosure, scarification of the back) remain obscure. By the same token we were unable to ascertain why only some of the girls, but not others, were initiated.

<sup>224</sup> This was probably also a *naven*.

<sup>225</sup> See also Hauser-Schäublin 1995.

## 12.4 Imitating male initiation scarification

It appears that, time and again in the past, young women envied men for their scarification marks. Some young women in Aibom and Yentshan had other women apply cuts to their skin in emulation of their male peers.

Langdimba, a woman of roughly thirty from the Nangusime clan of Aibom, told me that, as a young girl, she had asked another girl to tattoo her back in the same fashion as the men [Tok Pisin: *bihainim ol man*]. She had it done, but outside the village, on top of the hill near Aibom. Instead of *gwat*, the traditional resin, she used oil from the mission store to rub on her wounds. She used to hide her scars from the eyes of men under her blouse. However, some men saw the tattoos and warned her that this may cause trouble in the village. But nothing happened, and after she had given birth to her first child, the men no longer took offense at her scars.

When asked what her husband thought of her tattoos, Langdimba responded, “He said nothing, after all, he too has tattoos on his back.”

In the early days, women in Kararau used to tattoo each other’s faces by making small cuts to the skin and then rubbing them with soot to create shimmering, bluish patterns. Around thirty to forty years ago, the men threatened to fetch all women with a tattoo to the men’s house and punish them. Upon this, the women fled to the forest where they began rubbing their skin with nettles until the blood ran down their faces, but at least the tattoos were no longer visible. As a matter of fact, one never sees an old woman with a tattooed face, unlike young women and girls who seem to have picked the old tradition up again. Facial tattoos never had any deeper meaning, but simply served as a form of embellishment, my women interlocutors maintained. The fact that it was difficult to acquire information on this topic in general, suggests that most people had no clear recollection of the past times, and if they did, they were unwilling to talk about them.

### *Conclusions*

In summary, I wish to point out three findings:

1. Traditionally, fathers could have their daughters initiated if there were no sons available. Girls subjected to an initiation under these circumstances gained the respect of men and women alike. In actual fact, they often attained powerful and high-ranking positions – which is unusual for women – on the strength that they had become the owners of their fathers’ ritual knowledge.
2. At the same time, women were occasionally subjected to the ordeal of initiation as a form of punishment, that is, for having revealed a male secret or seen something they should never have laid eyes on. The ordeal, which included the acts of rape and scarification carried out in a special enclo-

sure, represented without doubt a traumatic experience for the women concerned. Women initiated under these circumstances enjoyed no special respect. On the contrary, they served as forbidding examples of what happens to women who are too inquisitive.

3. To what extent certain villages carried out independent women's initiations is difficult to ascertain today. In the Iatmul hinterland (among the Sawos and Numangi), people still celebrate puberty rites for young girls (first menstruation feasts).<sup>226</sup> Possibly, the Iatmul once performed women's ceremonies which, in terms of content and procedure, were comparable to male initiation. However, since one of the "purposes" of scarification was the extraction of female, or, to be precise, maternal blood from the bodies of initiates (Tok Pisin: *rausim blud bilong mama*), subjecting girls to the act of scarification would make little sense, at least not from this perspective.

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<sup>226</sup> Schindlbeck (1981) described a women's initiation among the Sawos of Gaikorobi. During the initiation, women burnt patterns into the skin of girls. Sawos (Neuguinea, Mittlerer Sepik). Einbrennen von Mustern in die Haut. *Encyclopedia cinematographica*, vol. 11.



*Part Four*  
*Self-Portrayals*





## 13 Life Histories of Women and Men

### 13.1 Life histories of women

While, up to now, my accounts of women and their relationship with men have, by and large, been descriptive in nature, I now wish to complement this perspective by adding a selection of life history accounts by senior women and men as told in their own words.

I begin with Kwapmei (see Fig. 55, p. 211), a roughly sixty-five-year old woman from the Yagum clan. She is married to Kamangali of the Wuenguendshap clan. Kwapmei is a so-called *bikpela meri*, that is, a senior woman who enjoys deep respect among both men and women.

“This is the history of my life. I will tell of the times when I was still a young, playful girl as well as of the times when I got married and had children. Now I am an old woman.

My mother was called Lumbranda, my father’s name was Kambanaut.

When I was a little girl – and, believe me, that was a very long time ago, I am now the oldest woman in the village – I used to play in the village and the nearby forest. We used to go out to the forest and cut fronds from *limbum* palms out of which we made sleeping baskets. We used to fix the fronds to the ground with the help of strips of rattan. We made real sleeping baskets. We lined the ground with twigs and crept into these sleeping baskets to sleep. We played being adult women and men. We also had another game: a boy or a girl would run off, and another child went in pursuit. When the latter

caught up with the escapee, he or she would touch him and then run off, with another boy or girl in pursuit.

We played many other games, too. For instance, we girls used to take a small chunk of sago from the house to the forest where we would bake cakes from it which we would then give to the boys, telling them, 'Now you are our husbands!', upon which the boys would reply, 'And you are our wives!' We played husband and wife, as if we were married. But it was only a game. In the evening we would return to the village and to our parents to eat and sleep. The next morning, we were off again to the forest to play. There's a patch of forest down by the Sepik called Pundangau and a further stretch of wood immediately behind the village called Pampandshai and Torongen. These were the woods where we played.

When I grew older and approached the age of marriage, I fell in love with a young man. He was a few years younger than me; I still like him today. I wanted to marry and move in with him. There was a time when the men of the village were busy carving two *garamut* [slit gong] in an enclosure next to the men's house. They had erected the enclosure to stop the women from seeing what they were doing. Inside the enclosure the men worked on the *garamut*. It was at that time that I fell in love with Kamangali. I wanted to move to the house of Kamangali's parents. I had chosen a special day for my move. I waited until noon, then came the afternoon, and when the sun set I went to bathe, adorned myself, packed all my belongings in a string bag and hid it under the house. I climbed up the ladder and went back inside where I sat down with my mother and my brothers and chatted for a while. Nobody knew of my plan, I kept it to myself.

In the dark of night, I crept out of the house, fetched my string bag and went to Kamangali's house. I climbed the ladder to the house, went inside, and sat down with Kamangali's mother and father and also Kamangali himself. Nobody objected that I had come to stay in their house. This meant we were practically married. But the people remarked that Kamangali had not yet been initiated. His skin was yet without scars, but I had already moved in with him.

So, the men decided to initiate Kamangali straight away. And because they had already built an enclosure, *banis*, for working on the *garamut*, they decided to initiate Kamangali in the same enclosure. One of the drums was male and called Yambundongumban, the other was female and called Gumadnda. The men went to fetch Kamangali and took him to the enclosure where they cut his skin. I looked after him. I saw to it that he had enough food. Kamangali was inside the *banis*, but I prepared food for him, together with his sisters and his mother.

After spending some time in the enclosure, his *shambla* said, 'That's enough, he now may leave the *banis*, his wounds have healed, and the scars

look good.’ Those were the words of his *shambla*. They then took a clay pot called *nimbuan* and made a spoon out of a coconut shell for him to eat sago pudding. They crumbled some red earth pigment into a second *nimbuan*, mixed it with water, and applied the red paint to his body. Then they led him out of the enclosure. On the dancing ground (*wombuno*) in front of the enclosure they had driven a long bamboo pole into the ground. Kamangali was wearing an adornment made of long grass [reeds?] which his *shambla* had prepared. He was made to stand next to the bamboo pole. A few strands of his skirt [called *yipmangawi*] were attached to the pole, holding him in position.

The women hadn’t seen how the men had cut the marks into Kamangali’s skin. While he stood next to the bamboo pole, his sisters and his mother performed a *singsing* in the course of which each one of them gave a tug to the bundles of grass hanging down over his behind. This went on for quite a while; it lasted until sunset. This marked the end of the ceremony. Finally, Kamangali was allowed to leave the enclosure and the men’s house.<sup>227</sup>

On the same day, his *shambla*, his *wau*, made from a piece of bamboo a kind of hook which they placed on his shoulders; upon this they gave him a name. His sisters performed a *singsing*. They were proud of their brother.

After this, Kamangali was allowed to go home, but we were prevented from having intercourse because his father had not yet paid bridewealth. We were not allowed to be close, not even walk through the village together, until his father had paid my family the arranged bridewealth. Then we were free to have intercourse. We travelled in the same canoe together and shared meals. This is how I lived with Kamangali until I became pregnant. I gave birth to our first child, Namui. When Namui had learnt to sit and was already taking her first steps, Kamangali left us to go and work on *stesin* [for station, a stint of indentured labour]. I had to look after the child on my own. Six years later, Kamangali returned to the village; by then Namui was already a big girl. Kamangali took a second wife, Karabindsha. Now we all live together.”

<sup>227</sup> Roesicke (1914: 511; translation N. S.): “The candidates were shorn of their hair, daubed with red pigment, adorned with a special kind of skirt, and made to stand against a round fence made of mats attached to bamboo poles and decorated with bundles of grass [...]. The other men then retreated while the women and small girls approached the candidates from behind; moving backwards in dance steps, they let the skirt’s long strands of grass glide through their hands, one after the next in succession. This marked the end of the ceremonies and, from then on, the freshly tattooed men were allowed to move freely about the village.” Roesicke’s report also contains a photograph showing the initiates tied to bamboo poles. This begs the question whether the bamboo poles with the initiates tethered to them are making reference to a specific myth which tells of how, in the primeval age, men were hiding in bamboo canes. The women cut down the bamboo upon which the men emerged and were taken by the women as husbands.

Uemanoli, about fifty-five years old, is from the Mairambu clan.<sup>228</sup> She is married to Kandshingau, her third husband, from the Yamandane lineage of the Mairambu clan.

“When I was a little girl, all the children of my age, that is, both boys and girls, used to play in this patch of forest we call Molimbandi. That’s where we often went to play. One day we went there to collect fruits of the *limbum* palm. We collected many of these fruits in the forest called Molimbandi. We peeled them, tossed them all together and then wrapped them in leaves. We had brought clay cooking pots with us to cook them. We built a smoke rack, lit a fire under it, and smoked the fruits. Then each of us girls appointed a boy who was to be our child. The plan was to perform a *singsing*, and each time we staged this *singsing* we appointed boys as our children. My friend Yandalimange had such a child for whom the *singsing* was to be staged. His name was Barambange. I appointed Gowi as my child. He’s still alive today.

My friend and I performed this *singsing* together. The fruits we had cooked and smoked in leaves, this bundle is called *mendshan*. We placed the *mendshan* on the shoulders of our children, took up position behind them, and performed this *singsing*. This boy Barambange stood in front of us and sang this funny song. He knew this funny song, and we joined in. We girls played women, that is, mothers watching over their children. We said: ‘We’re the mothers, you are our kids.’ We were proud of our children; we performed this *singsing*. We mothers imitated biting into the *mendshan* lying on our children’s shoulders. We played this game time and again throughout the day.

Suddenly we saw an elderly man approaching our playground. We had not observed him but he must have been watching us for quite a while. He called to us: ‘Hey, you over there, luckily I saw what you were doing; do you play this game often? You just wait, I’ll go and tell the men in the village what you were doing’, threatening us [because the children had been imitating an adult ceremony]. We were scared and ran off into the forest. After the man had discovered us, he didn’t come any closer but simply called out to us in a

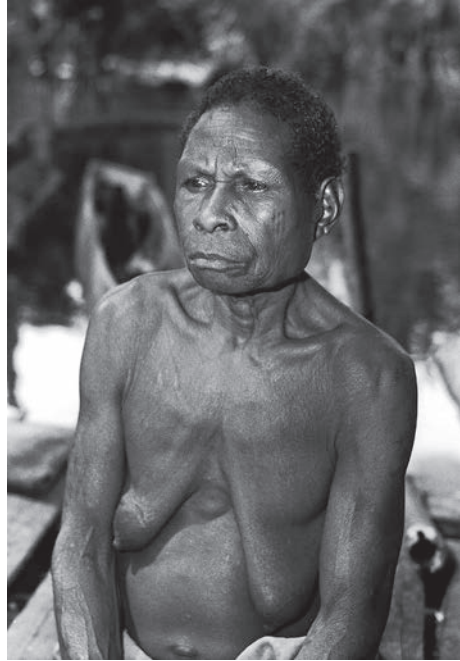


Fig. 60: Uemanoli (1973).

<sup>228</sup> For the most part, this life history was already published in Hauser-Schäublin 1973.

loud voice. After we had ran off to the forest we realized that he was standing on the other side of the stream and that he didn't have a canoe. 'Oh, this man has no canoe, so he can't catch us and give us a beating', we said to ourselves. The man went back to the village and told the other men what he had seen. They were waiting for us, ready to give us a good hiding. We were really scared and decided not to go back to the village, at least not for the moment, so we waited. We waited until it was dark, and then crept back to the village, in ones and twos. All the men and women were already asleep. But upon daybreak, the men summoned us. They exclaimed: 'We know what kind of games you play. One of these days we'll fetch the large *aban* mask from the men's house and all the men will beat you.' They scolded us severely; we didn't know what to say.

One day we went back to the forest to play. We girls collected bamboo shoots; we made a fire, placed the shoots on the fire, peeled them, and then ate them. By chance, some boys joined us. They sat down with us and we shared the shoots with them. Then the boys said: 'You are women, make sleeping baskets; in the meantime, we'll go in search of wood to make spears, then we'll come and surround you and throw our spears at you. You'll flee the sleeping baskets and run off to hide (the [children were re-enacting head-hunting raids]). That's how we'll play.' We played this game on several days.

Then, suddenly, men from the village appeared. They had with them an *aban* mask [mask figure also used for punitive actions]. Some of the men started beating us, others went in pursuit of the other children; we were almost surrounded but we were able to escape into the tall grass. Some boys fell into the water, others escaped to the forest. We hid in the forest and in the tall grass, others hid in the bushes along the riverbank until sunset. We waited until dark before returning home.

When I was a bit older – it was the time when our fathers killed some men from Timbunke – some men of the Nyaula people came and said I should marry Ambagumban. I was scared. At the time I was living with my grandmother. I was terribly scared. The Nyaula men grabbed me and let Ambagumban rape me. After that the Nyaula men suggested I marry Ambagumban. Then they took me with them. These men made all the decisions; they tried to persuade me. In the end I went to Ambagumban's house and married him.

We were living in Kwedndshange at the time. Ambagumban's elder brother, Bendmbange, was the *tutul* in those days. I soon gave birth to a child, but it died a short time later. My husband, too, died, so was I was alone again. When the war came [WWII] I married again, a man called Tshuimeli. I bore him a child, Wanyo. But Tshuimeli also died. Later I married Kandshingau who is still my husband today. I bore him a son. His name is Wutnaban."

Ngu, a widow, is between fifty-five and sixty years old. She was married to Sangi of the Boigum clan.

“When we were kids, we used to play a lot. We played in the village and in the forest. In the patch of forest called Trugumeli, we girls often prepared sago pudding and ate it. We girls played on our own. We took coconuts, sago, and cooking pots with us to the forest where we prepared sago pudding the way we had seen our mothers doing it. As soon as the pudding had cooked we called for the boys and invited them to join us for a meal. When men passed us in their canoes, we used to sing witty songs. We always sang witty songs when men were around whilst we were cooking sago pudding.

When the floods came during the rainy season, we often used to play in the water. Near the village there were two trees which we used to climb, right to the top. The girls climbed one tree, the boys the other. We would sing witty songs to each other and then jump into the water. We often did this.

When I reached the marriageable age, all the girls of my age got married. Only I remained single. The people asked me whom I would like to marry. I answered: ‘I love Dshengendimi.’ But Dshengendimi was away on a *stesin* [colonial station] and not in the village. But I loved him. I told the people that I loved Dshengendimi but he was away on a *stesin* with his parents. That is also where he died. I heard here in the village that Dshengendimi had died, so I remained single.

Shortly before the war [WWII] I again named a man I wished to marry. His name was Wutbure; he was Dshengendimi’s elder brother. We got married, but then the war broke out. A plane flew over our village and dropped a bomb which killed Wutbure. Now Wutbure was dead, and I mourned him for a long time. I mourned until the war ended and the Japanese left the area. Then my brother asked me whom I would like to marry. I named Sangi. We married and lived together but then Sangi, too, died, so now only I am left.”

Kanayagui (in this study also referred to as Kamabindshua) is about seventy years old. She is from the Tshui clan. She is the principal wife of Kama (Mairambu clan), the most prominent man in the village. Kanayagui and Kama live in Kwedndshange. They never had children. Kama’s second wife, too, remained childless.



Fig. 61: Ngu with her son (1973)

“When I was a little girl, we often used to play in the forest. We collected *limbum* palm fronds and made sleeping baskets out of them. Then we crawled inside. The boys would come round and perform a *singsing*, that is, a ceremony which usually adults stage after finishing some task. We picked *limbum* palm fruits, wrapped them in leaves and placed them in the fire, like we do with sago. When the boys performed their *singsing*, we used to beat them [probably in imitation of the ceremonial mock fights adults occasionally staged, for instance, to celebrate the return of a successful headhunter; these are *naven* ceremonies]. Then we girls also put on a *singsing*.



Fig. 62: *Kanyagui* (1973).

When I was a little older, I got married. I didn't marry the man because I liked him, no, my mother persuaded me to marry him. Kama then left the village to go and work on *stesin*. He was away for five years. When he returned, we got married. On the occasion, my father and my brothers adorned me with shell ornaments, all-over. My father's clan had to pay a large bride-wealth. I got to keep all the ornaments I had been decorated with, that is, the *talimbum*, the *kina*, as well as the *skin torosel* [tortoise shell]. Later, when my husband's brothers got married, it was me who paid the bride-wealth for their wives. I bought many, many women in my time. They're all dead now, I'm the only one left. I, too, will die one day, but at the moment I'm still here.”

Ngaunamak, about sixty-five years of age, is from the Boigum clan. She is the first wife of Yaknabi of the Emasa clan.

“When I was a little girl, I had two brothers, one elder and one younger. When we were a little older, our mother died. Our father took us to a bush village called Mangendshangut. There we lived with a [classificatory] mother, the sister of our deceased mother, to be precise. She took care of us. We stayed there for many years. When we had almost grown up, our father came to fetch us and brought us back to Kararau. Here in Kararau I often played with girls of my age.

One day, my [classificatory] child [son] said to me: ‘Let's take the canoe out on to the lake tomorrow to collect water lilies and catch a few fish. We'll paddle around in the canoe, we might even come across a small crocodile.’ So, the two of us drove out on to the lake where we spent a few hours before



Fig. 63: Ngau with one of her daughters (1973).

we actually did stumble across a crocodile. Kamangali speared the crocodile. He called two men who were nearby for help. Their names were Meliame and Kamembange. With their help, Kamangali finally killed the crocodile. Then we drove to the little island in the middle of the lake where rattan cane grows wild. The men cut strips of rattan cane and used them to tie up the crocodile's legs and snout. I was proud of my son and performed a

*singsing* in the canoe. Then we loaded the crocodile into the canoe and drove home. Our fathers came and cut up the crocodile before distributing the meat to many men and women. We too got some of the meat.

When I had grown up, people said to me: 'You're a woman now, it's time you got married.' Then the villagers assembled all of us unmarried women before the *tutul* and *luluai*. I was asked to provide the name of the man I wanted to marry. I named Yaknabi, and Yaknabi's sister spoke the name of my brother, in other words, we had an exchange marriage. I went to stay with Yaknabi, while his sister moved in with my brother. My husband's sister never had children. She is no longer alive. I, on the other hand, gave birth to many children. Today they have all grown up, except for two who died young. But all my other children have survived."

Woliragwa is only a few years younger than Ngaunamak. Woliragwa of the Korbmuï clan was married to Yaknabi's elder brother. When he died, she married Yaknabi. She was very loyal to Ngaunamak and respected her position as principal wife without reservation.

"I was still very young when my mother died. I remember nothing of her. My father raised me. At the time we lived with his brother, Yangubaru. Yangubaru's wife used to cook for me and my father. She took care of us. I was still very young when we lived at my father's brother's place. One day, Yangubaru said to my father: 'I think you've been sleeping with my wife. Leave my house immediately and look for a new place to stay. You can settle down in some other place. I'm not prepared to look after you any longer.' Those were the words he spoke to my father. My father picked me up, put me in a *limbum* sheath, and that same night we left the house and got into the canoe.

My father placed a smouldering piece of firewood next to me [against the cold of the night]. The fire kept me warm so that I could sleep in the canoe. My father drove to Timbunke. Another of my father's brothers, Kindsheran,





Fig. 64: Woliragwa (1973).

heard that we had been forced to leave Kararau and felt very sorry for us. He cried and had a message delivered, telling us to return to Kararau. My father thought about it. Then we got back into the canoe and drove back to Kararau. My father got himself a new wife whose husband had died and left her on her own. She gave birth to several sons. I was the eldest sibling. My brothers Wolimo, Timuai and Kudshali are all younger than me. Two boys died, as did their mother. Father looked after us all.

When I was still a little girl, I and the other young girls often played games. For instance, we said: 'Let's perform some ceremonies like the *singsing* we saw the men performing in the village.' We built small huts

in the forest. We climbed up *limbum* palms to collect fruit which we then peeled and wrapped in leaves. After that we built a smoke rack, placed the leaves on top, and lit a fire underneath. The leaves with the fruits inside we call *mendshan*. We use the same term, *mendshan*, for sago cooked with grated coconut. When the boys came they took small twigs from bushes and used them to decorate themselves. We girls, too, adorned ourselves with leaves. Together we would then stage an elaborate *singsing*. Each girl appointed a boy with whom she performed the *singsing*. We girls played the part of grown-up women who were proud of their sons and showed this by staging a *singsing*.

But we also had other games. For instance, some of us kids would hide in the forest, while the others had to come and look for us. After finding us, we would switch roles, and the others went to hide in the forest.

We often played in the forest. One day, we girls were in the forest, without knowing what the men in the village were planning to do. For the men had said to themselves: 'These young girls have now become women. It's time they got married. At present they are out playing in the forest. We will ambush them; then each one of us will select the girl he wants to marry.' This is what the men had in mind, but we knew nothing about their plans. We were playing in the forest when suddenly these men appeared from nowhere. They went after the big girls, seized them and then raped them. I was still one of the small girls. We were scared and ran off into the forest. Some of them got to the canoes, others ran through the forest back to the village.

Towards evening the older girls and the men returned to the village. The matter was settled, and each girl was now practically married. I was there, I saw this ambush. My father said to me: 'You got away this time. I don't want any man to attack you. It would probably be better if you considered choosing a man you would like to marry. Then we will name this man you want to marry.'

In the days that followed I thought about the matter quite a bit and, in the end, I called the name of the man I had chosen: it was Yaknabi's brother. We got married, and soon afterwards I gave birth to a child, a baby girl. Shortly later, my husband died, and I was left on my own. Upon this, I married Wabi [Yaknabi] whom I gave three children, all boys. One little girl died shortly after birth. Now all my children are grown up."



Fig. 65: *Dshangu* (1973).

Dshangu (Sameanguat clan) is about sixty-five years old. She is from Tigowi. She prefers to keep to herself and rarely mixes with other women (nor with men, of course). She often talks to herself and certainly does not comply with the standard female norm.<sup>229</sup> She is married to Gowimbange (Semai clan).

"I got married at the time when the government set up this station in Ambunti. I got married in that same year. I married Moimban of Tigowi. We spent two years together, but then Moimban killed a man during a raid. His name was Tshali.

The government arrested Moimban and took him to Rabaul where he was sentenced. I got a message from Rabaul telling me that Moimban had died. This meant, I was on my own. I had no children. We had been married only a short time when Moimban killed an enemy and left me on my own. He died in Rabaul.

I mourned Moimban for five years. After five years I married Panda, Moimban's younger brother. He had been married before, and there was a lot of talk in the village until he finally left his first wife. Panda and I often quarrelled and fought. We didn't like each other. We lived in constant conflict for many years, until I finally left him. I came to Kararau to stay with Gowimbange. We've been living together for many years now."

<sup>229</sup> See also p. 191.

Amblangu is the youngest participant in this life history survey (see Fig. 28, p. 53). She is just on forty and is a member of the Mandali clan. Her husband's name is Kisaman (clan Wuenguendshap); he appears to be very much under his wife's thumb. Amblangu has very strong ties with her brother Waani (whom she calls Marcus).

"I will now tell you our story, that is, the story of my brother Marcus and me. We were young children when our parents died. We had no one to look after us; we were all alone. Our elder sister, too, had died. We went to live with relatives who took care of us. Marcus fell ill; a woman had made him sick. His eyes were all swollen, he was very sick. He was unable to eat and unable to sleep. He was very ill. Then Marcus said one day: "Let's move to our mother's brother in Kararau [the children were living with patrilineal relatives in Kwedndshange]. That's what Marcus said. But I was still very small. I was afraid and cried, so I said: 'Oh Marcus, let's stay here. There's no need to move to Kararau.' But he answered, 'I don't want to stay here.' He took his canoe and drifted down the river to Kararau. Sangi, our mother's brother, asked: 'What's happened, what made you come here?' He took Marcus to his house where he looked after him. Then Marcus passed word to me to come and stay with him: 'Sister, come here, too!' So, I got into my canoe. I was crying all the way to Kararau. Our mother's brother then took care of us.

I was very young when my mother died. I can hardly remember her.

From then on, we stayed with our mother's brother. Later, we both went to school. When I was a little older and knew how to cook and bake sago cake, Kamangali said to us [Kamangali, Marcus, and Amblangu had the same mother but different fathers]: 'You come and stay with me! I want you to live with me. You can both stay with me. I worry about you.'

Our *wau* answered: 'Oh, the two are not old enough yet', upon which Kamangali replied, 'My sister [Amblangu] is old enough to bake sago cakes and cook.'

Our mother's brother wept and said: 'The two are not old enough yet. Your sister does not yet have breasts. But your elder brother now calls for you, so you can go and stay with him.' Those were our mother's brother's words.

Later we became Catholic.

One day Marcus said to me: 'You stay here, I want to go to Manus.' He packed his bags and travelled to Manus. I stayed at school with [Pater?] Lucas. Lucas asked me: 'Would you like to go to a convent?' I said: 'Yes, I would like to go and work with the sisters.'

But our *wau* objected: 'No, you can't go to the convent. Your brother's not here, he knows nothing about this. You may not go.' I answered: 'I don't care, I want to go.' I remained firm. Our mother's brother had nothing more to say.

Together with Bibia I went in Father Bekrum's [?] boat to Timbunke. We stayed the night there, waiting for the aeroplane that would take us. We went

to the forest in search of bamboo shoots. We roasted them over the fire. Then we heard the plane. We left the patch of bamboo and ran back to the station. The father said: 'The bishop has arrived. Get on the plane. So, we got on the plane which took us to Wewak. The bishop then took us to the convent in his car [in Tok Pisin, the convent was referred to as *baniis*].

There we were instructed. We stayed there for two years. I wanted to become a nun Tok Pisin: *mi laik kisim kros*], but Marcus said: 'You cannot become a nun! Think of me, come back to the village. We are not many people [in our clan], we are the last two of our family. I worry about you.'

I said: 'It doesn't matter what I want. I shall return to the village.' I wrote a letter to the sister. I told her that I was going back to the village.

So, I returned to Kararau. I went back to Lucas's school for two further years. In 1957, I got married. My brother was still in training in Wewak hospital. He was at a school for doctors [that is, he was training to become a medical orderly].

I got married and gave birth to Emerita. I gave birth in Timbunke. My brother came to Timbunke in the mission boat, Marova. He was happy about my baby. He prepared bottles of milk which he gave to the baby to drink. He helped Emerita a lot. He gave her milk to drink. We stayed in Timbunke for a while.

Marcus sent us to Mindimbit. He brought us to Mindimbit where we lived with Windshimbu, Marcus's elder brother. He looked after me and my child. When Emerita had grown a bit, Windshimbu brought us back to Kararau. I am still here today."

### Comments

The life histories of the eight women have much in common but also differ on some points.

Childhood, especially the games played in childhood, is described at length. In some cases – at least in terms of quantity – the period of childhood is given more space and emphasis than the remaining course of life.<sup>230</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the women often describe the same games, albeit with varying accuracy.<sup>231</sup> Three areas stand out on the strength of particularly strong human ties: Kwapmei offers a detailed account of the time her partner and later husband passed through initiation, a man she admired throughout life.

Woliragwa speaks of her father and the way he looked after her, in almost loving terms, Amblangu indicates her, even in Iatmul terms, deep relationship with her

<sup>230</sup> Before the interview I provided the women with a rough guideline as to the nature of the questions: what was it like when you were a young girl, when you were growing up, when you got married, and, later, when you had children? Tell me about your life and how it has developed!

<sup>231</sup> All my interlocutors assured me that today's children neither know nor play these games any longer.

brother (possibly based on the circumstance that they had lost their parents at a very early age), while her husband appears to play a quite subordinate role in her life.

The period of selecting a partner in marriage is given much attention almost throughout, with the exception of Amblangu (on a later occasion, Amblangu reported that she had written a short letter to Kisaman, asking him whether he wanted to marry her). Several women emphasized the birth of their first child, evidently a milestone event in their lives. Otherwise, marriage and family life are given comparatively little attention, with the exception of consequential events such as divorce or a husband's death.

### 13.2 Life histories of men

I now come to the life histories of a number of senior men which I will then compare to the accounts offered by the women.



*Fig. 66: Yaknabi (1973).*

Yaknabi, about seventy years old, is from the Emasa clan. He is married to two women, Ngaunamak and Woliragwa:

“All my forebears lived in Timbunke. I am from the Emasa clan. We all belonged to the same clan, but we had a large dispute about a woman. Our fathers started this dispute.

My father, Tshuimbange, had intercourse with his brother's wife. Her name was Tralalimange. She was behind this conflict and the reason why my father and some of his relatives left Timbunke. They broke off ties with the people of Timbunke and came to Kararau.

When my father's brother found out that my father was having intercourse with Tralalimange, Tshuimbange became scared, so he and

[another] brother and some other men fled the village and came to Kararau. I came to Kararau with my father.

There was a huge dispute back then in Timbunke. We were all sleeping in the same house at the time and didn't realize what was about to happen. One morning, the sun had barely risen, a group of men blocked all the entries to our house and set the house on fire. Outside they were waiting for us, armed

with spears. The men started shooting [spears] at each other. We were just kids, so we boys ran off and hid, while the men fought with each other.

The house was on fire and my grandfather was still inside. There was no escape for him, because all the entrances were already burning. He was peeping from a small window. At that moment, my mother's father, his name was Guandia, grabbed a small ladder and lent it against the small window [the "women's door"]; this allowed my grandfather to climb out of the house.

The house was burnt to the ground. It was not a small house like the ones we build today, no, it was a very large house. The fire spread to the other houses and many of them were burnt to the ground. We fled to a clan we call Semai. Bewen and Wabisaun are the names of the two men who took us in.

Then my father spoke: 'Let us move to Kararau. There they have a men's house to which we [the men of the Emasa clan] belong. So, let's go to Kararau.' So the men spoke. It was afternoon when we left Timbunke. We climbed into the canoe and drove upriver, until we reached a spot where a *baret* [stream] flows into the Sepik. This place is called Peso. We spent the night there in a small garden hut.

Two men, Wandan and Kalamali, came to see us in that little hut, and we spent a further night there. The next morning my father gathered some yam that was growing in the garden there. We roasted the yam and ate it before getting back into the canoe and continuing our journey up the Sepik.

When we arrived in Mindimbit and Angerman the people had already heard what had happened. An old woman from Angerman had seen us leaving Timbunke. Her name was Mindshimbo; she was worried about one of her [classificatory] children, a man called Sinsimbange. He had left Timbunke with us. Mindshimbo wanted this child of hers to come and stay with her in Angerman. When we drove past the village, some men from Angerman came to us and spoke: 'We want you to stay. We don't want you to move to another village.' They had brought with them shell money, tortoise shell, and betel nut. They wanted us to accept the shell money and the betel nut; this would have obliged us to stay in Angerman. They brought these things with them in their canoe out to us on the Sepik. But our fathers said: 'No, we want to go to Kararau. In Kararau there's a men's house to which we belong. Its roof still withholds the rain [meaning, the house is still in good shape because there are people to maintain it]. It is still standing.' Those were the words of our fathers, so we left Angerman.

Then we came to Mindimbit; there men there, too, wanted us to stay. They said: 'Our ancestors once came from Timbunke; we want you to stay.' – But Mindimbit and Angerman are villages close to Timbunke, and the danger of a conflict, or even a war, erupting was too big. For that reason our fathers wanted to continue upriver to Kararau.

By the time we reached the place called Kwedndshange – in those days the people of Kararau lived in today's Kwedndshange – the men of Kararau had also heard what had happened in Timbunke. The men of the Kraimbit men's house said: 'We want to take in the people of Timbunke.' So, they came towards us in two canoes as far as Kamenimbit.

They met us at the boundary between Mindimbit and Kararau, at a place called Mimbindshambit. They tethered their canoes to ours. We boys jumped into the canoes of the men of Kararau.

Together we drove to Kararau where we went ashore.

The men of the Kraimbit men's house, to whom we too belong, brought shell money and tortoise shell, and said: 'We shall follow the law of our ancestors and keep you here.' They gave us the shell money with the words: 'Now you must stay here; now you belong to our men's house.'

However, Yimbange and his brother soon went back to Timbunke. Only my father and a second man, Wanda, stayed in Kararau. They never returned to Timbunke. My [classificatory] brother Rimbu, Wanda's son, and I stayed together for a very long time. Rimbu has been dead for a quite a while, now only I am left.

When I had grown a little, the men tattooed my back. From then on they called me *mbandi* and I was allowed to wear a *mal* [loincloth]. When I grew up, I went to Marienberg. Then I returned to the village. I was still a young man at the time. A married woman fell in love with me and came to my house. But I sent her back to her husband, telling her: 'I don't want you, you're already married.' But the woman didn't give in, so I fled [Tok Pisin *ronawe*] to Tigowi. But the woman followed me there, too. I took her back to her husband. I thought to myself: 'There are quite a few married women in Kararau who would like to marry me. I think I better go *stesin* again [here implying indentured labour].

I went to Salamaua in Morobe District. This *masta* [white employer] there gave me the job of recruiting boys and young men in many of the area's villages. Then the *masta* sent me to a large mountain to work in a gold mine. I worked there, but then I'd had enough and didn't do what the *masta* said. So, he sent me back to Kararau. When I got here, my elder brother had married. I thought to myself: 'Earlier on, when my brother was still single, I didn't want to get married, and sent all the women away again. I went to Tigowi but many women from Kanganamun followed me there; this led to quite a lot of trouble.' That's what I thought; upon this I married Ngaunamak. Ngaunamak bore me three children before the war had started [WWII].

I'm not a man of today. I'm a man who experienced the early times. When I'm dead, the people will no longer say of my children, 'That's the family from Timbunke.' All my children were born in Kararau.

Many men, who now would be about my age, are dead. Only Kama and Gowi are roughly my age.

I have seen many things, including raids. I went on headhunting raids with the men. I stood at the rear end of the canoe. I saw men from another village killing a man called Werake who belonged to the men's house of Muintshembit. The men of Timbunke killed him.

One day the men of the Muintshembit men's house gave *kowar* to the [mythical] pig Tshui and the [mythical] crocodile Kabak. They gave Tshui and Kabak *kowar*. They were planning a raid on Mindimbit. We, that is, Kama, Gowi, and I, were still boys, so we stood at the back of the war canoe. We all hid in the undergrowth near the mouth of the Korewori, the river that flows into the Sepik from Kapriman. There we hid in the bushes along the river bank. Then a man called Mangen left Mindimbit in the company of his pregnant wife and his four children. They drove out on to the Sepik. We sprang from our hiding and killed the man, his wife, and the four children, including the unborn baby in its mother's belly. We killed them all. Then we returned to Kararau. But then the men of Mindimbit decided to take us to the government's court for this. The *kiap* [District Officer] came from Ambunti and arrested all the men who had helped to kill the Mindimbit man and his wife and children. Among the men who had killed these people was a man called Kambanaut. The *kiap* came in a small ship; he took the suspected men back with him. They got as far as Tambunum where they had to spend the night. The *kiap* had arrested four men. One of them was Kambanaut; he was from the Yagum clan. This man had a strong *waken*, a particularly strong *waken*. This *waken* we call Yamaniaban. With the help of this *waken*, Kambanaut was able to open his handcuffs during the night. He escaped from Tambunum, alone. It was the flood season, so he jumped into the water and swam to the house of relatives in Tambunum who gave him a small canoe and some food for the journey.

He paddled up the Sepik river. In the morning he passed by Timbunke and travelled as far as the headland called Peso. There he turned into the *barret*, which he followed until he reached Kararau.

The three other men, Paundima, Sinsembange, and Masendimi were taken to court by the *kiap*.

But the *kiap* didn't take the four men away without resistance.

On the occasion [that is, when he came to arrest the men] he travelled up the Sepik in a pinnace.<sup>232</sup> The *kiap* and his men fired upon our village

<sup>232</sup> I was able to read the final and detailed report sent to the Government Secretary in Rabaul on 9 August 1924 by District Officer John Walstab thanks to the research conducted by M. and G. Schuster in the government archives in Canberra.

The last raid on Mindimbit must have occurred in early 1924; however, the raid described here by Yaknabi must have been a few years before that. It appears that Yaknabi is blending two raids



and destroyed it. He killed a man called Dshangui, making all the men and women flee the village. Some went to Aibom, others to Mangendshangut, to Wagenge. Yet others hid in the bush near Kamenimbit, near a small stream called Yame. Nobody stayed back in the village.

The *kiap* then took the four men away and stood them in front of court. We didn't go back to the village. The *kiap* then let us know that we could return to the village since he had now caught the culprits. So, finally, we went back to the village. Then the *kiap* visited us and instated a *tultul* and a *luluai*. After that, the good times began.

Later, the men took me with them on a next raid. Together with the men of Tigowi, we raided a village out in the bush, called Mewi. Yagendimi of Tigowi killed a person of that village. We went home and organized a large *singsing*. The Kararau men spoke: 'The men of Tigowi killed a person, we came away empty-handed. We must go on another raid.' So, we again went on a raid in the course of which we killed a man and a woman. We came home and celebrated with a *singsing*. I, too, was part of that raid.

In those days we already had a *tultul* and a *luluai*. The *kiap* lived in Ambunti, but he never heard about these raids. Otherwise, we would have been up in court.

The men said: 'No other village must ever hear about this raid. If another village got to know, they would report us to the *kiap*.' All the men agreed, so no one ever got to hear about it. We performed a *singsing* and killed a pig. We ate it, and we were all very proud.

A little later, the men of Kamenimbit went on a raid in the Numangi area.<sup>233</sup> They attacked the village Yembembi where they killed several people. None of these men were afraid of the *kiap* although they knew that raiding had been forbidden. People from another village told the *kiap* about this raid. The *kiap* came and arrested all the men who had been part of the raid. They were sent to jail.<sup>234</sup>

Today the young men of Kararau know nothing about these early raiding days. But I witnessed those times; three times I took part in a raid. I saw how they cut off an enemy's head. I know how to sharpen a spear. I also know the *singsing*. I have kept all this knowledge."

Kama (see p. 205, Fig. 52, 3rd from right), who is about seventy-five, is from the Kandshene lineage of the Mairambu clan. He was a well-known figure in the villages of the lower Middle Sepik. He was versed in all ceremonial matters, and no

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on Mindimbit in his account. The measures undertaken by the administration described here refer to the last raid in which only one man was killed.

<sup>233</sup> This raid took place in 1927. The Numangi area denotes a region north of the Sepik.

<sup>234</sup> According to a written report, seven men from Kamenimbit were executed in Ambunti by hanging.

ceremony was ever performed without first consulting Kama.<sup>235</sup> His first wife's name is Kanayagui.

"My father's name was Saramane. When I was a little boy, we used to spend most of the day in the forest. When I was a little older, we built a *tige* [a ceremonial house for young, not yet initiated men]. We spent a lot of time in the *tige*. Later, the men took us to the men's house and tattooed our backs.

The Nyaula, who live up the Sepik river, once brought a young girl of around six to Kararau. The men gave us the girl after we had paid them shell money. I looked up towards the gable of the men's house and then drove my spear into the girl.

Young men like me, who already wore tattoos, were allowed to accompany the older men on their headhunting raids. Together we went to Mindimbit where the men [of the two villages] fought against each other. Later, the Mindimbit men attacked our village in a payback for our raid on their village. They killed five people of Kararau and a man from Kamenimbit, making a total of six. They killed all six and took them with them to Mindimbit. We took revenge on the men of Mindimbit but only killed one man. After this had happened, Kiap Tenshen [Townsend?] came to Kararau and punished us for this raid. There were no more raids after that.

From then on, the people of Kararau got on well with the people of all the other villages. We organized joint mask *singsing*, we performed *mbal* (a special kind of ceremony to mark the completion of a task, such as the construction of a house); we celebrated many joint feasts. We were now all brothers, grandfathers, and mother's brothers [the term "brothers, grandfathers, and mother's brothers" is a reference to the positive rapport between the local villages].

Kiap Walis [Walstab] gave us laws and told us, 'From now on, raiding is forbidden. You must live together like brothers and sisters.'

A little later, men came to the village to recruit boys [here in the sense of "labourers"]. Men of the age of Karagame were the first to go *stesin* [that is, signed on as indentured labourers). When they returned, other men took their place, and by the time these men came back, some of the men in Kararau had learnt to speak Tok Pisin. Before that nobody could speak Tok Pisin; Kangrumbin was the first to speak the language. He was Kabuseli's father."

Gowimbange, who is about the same age as Kama, is from the Semai clan. His third wife's name is Dshangu. In terms of mindset, Gowimbange is still deeply rooted

<sup>235</sup> The circumstances under which I interviewed Kama were rather difficult. As my stay in the village was rapidly coming to an end, I had to decide whether to forego recording his life history or to breach Iatmul etiquette by flouting the period of courtesy normally expected when dealing with a respected elder, between making a first, tentative request and actually implementing the action. The fact that I chose the latter is borne out by the brevity of the account which was rather "disappointing" – not only for me but probably also for Kama.

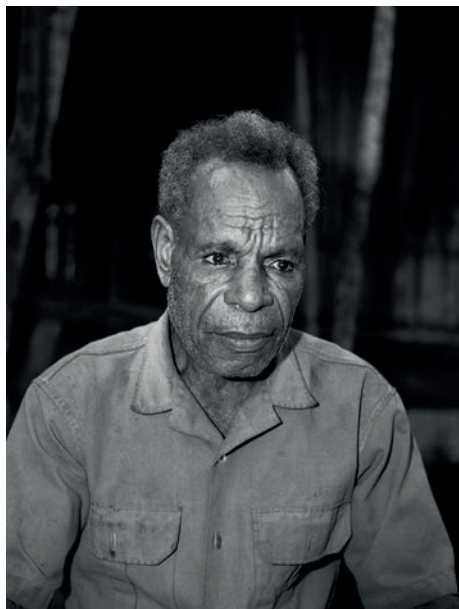


Fig. 67: Gowi (1973).

in the traditional culture. We often got the impression that he was barely aware of the cultural and social change going on around him, or, at least, that he was unwilling to take notice of it. Among the senior generation he was also the one who took most offense to today's children's carefreeness and the young people's lack of respect towards traditional village culture.

“Kama and I are two of the old men from our age group who are still alive. We are from the olden days. When the men of Palimbe attacked Kararau, they killed many people and burnt down all the houses. Our mothers and fathers left the village and fled to Kamenimbit. At that time, Kama was born. He was born in Kamenimbit. Later on, the people

returned and built a new village in Kwedndshange. That was when I was born, in Kwedndshange. Kama and I grew up together; we spent a lot of time together; we often watched our fathers going on raids.

When we were a little older, the men took us with them. We used to stand at the back of the war canoe. We drove to Mindimbit where we hid in the bushes along the river bank. We saw a man from Mindimbit called Sanowi leaving the village; he had his entire family in the canoe with him. He paddled out on to the Sepik. We emerged from our hiding and killed Sanowi and his family. Only his canoe remained. We killed him, his four children, and his wife. We brought them back to the village. We staged a *singsing* and blew the signal horn [to indicate to those at home, how many people had been killed]. We returned to the village.

The *kiap* came to Kararau in his ship. When he arrived, our fathers and grandfathers rose up against him; they fought against the *kiap* who killed a man with his gun. His name was Dshangui. The *kiap* went back [to fetch reinforcement], but he planned to return. So, our people left the village. Some went to the village called Mangindshangut, others drove to Aibom, yet others fled to a small stream near Kamenimbit called Yame. Kararau was left deserted. We stayed away from the village for a time. The *kiap* came to the village in search of us. Then he announced: ‘The fight is over, you may return to the village.’ This was his message to us and when the message reached us we decided to go back to the village. The *kiap* carried out an investigation in

the village, after which he took four men with him. Their names were Paundima, Sinsembange, Kambanaut, and Masendimi. The *kiap* took these four men with him.

They spent the night in Tambunum. During the night, two men, Kambanaut, and Masendimi, were able to free themselves and flee. The people of Tambunum gave each of the men a canoe with which they paddled up the Sepik. The men of Timbunke discovered one of the men and killed him. This was Masendimi. Kambanaut was paddling along the opposite river bank which is why the Timbunke men didn't see him. Kambanaut returned to Kararau.

Only Sinsembange, the father of Asenau, and Paundima were taken to Rabaul. There the government killed them.

Later the mission came to our area. The days of war were over. It was around that time that Kama and I were initiated. We had no marks yet on our backs. Then the men made the cuts to our backs. Our blood dripped to the village ground. This is what we do to make the village and ourselves strong. This was the way we used to do it.

At around the same time, a *masta* came to the village to recruit boys [labourers]. The *masta* also bought us, that is, Kama and me. We went to Rabaul to work on a *stesin* for three years. When I left the village, I was already married. I had a small daughter and a second child was well on the way. Then I left the village to work on *stesin*. When I came back three years later, I fathered a further child, later a fourth one. One daughter died, so I was left with three sons.

Now there were no more wars. There was also less conflict and less sorcery. We had many laws now. Before that we had many wars, many conflicts, and plenty of sorcery.

When I went to work on *stesin* for the second time, I had two quarrels in Angoram. Sometimes we also fought against the men of Kamenimbit, and against the men of Tigowi and Timbunke. But these were not serious fights.

Back then, when I was still a young man, my father got me two women at once. He paid bridewealth for the two women on the same day. One of the women left me again after a short while, the other stayed.

When the Japanese came and occupied our area, my wife died, and I was left on my own. When the war ended, this Nyaula woman fell in love with me [his present wife Dshangu]. She came to Kararau. But the Nyaula followed her and took her back. But she objected and insisted that her marriage was to be dissolved; then she moved in with me and we got married.

Before that she had already been married twice.<sup>236</sup> Her first husband was called Moimban. In those days there lived a man called Sari who had a repu-

<sup>236</sup> Gowi talked to me about his life immediately after the episode described on p. 191. This is possibly why he gave such a detailed account of his wife's earlier life.

tation as a sorcerer. Sari planned to kill this woman. One night, it was a full moon night, Sari appeared at the house of Moimban and Dshangu. He positioned himself on the mound of a coconut palm that belonged to Moimban. Dshangu was inside the house working on a fish trap. Suddenly she saw Sari standing on this mound. She saw him clearly. Moimban was sleeping in his sleeping basket. She went to wake him. Moimban rose and picked up an axe. He told Dshangu, 'You go to the other exit, I'll take this one. When he sees you climbing down the ladder he will come to you. At that moment I'll kill him with this axe.' The *sanguma* man Sari realized that the moon was shining bright; he observed Dshangu [climbing down the ladder] but then he ran off, Moimban in hot pursuit. He followed Sari as far as his house. Moimban said: 'You just wait, tomorrow I'm coming to get you.'

The next morning Moimban wasted no time. He picked up his axe and went to Sari's house where he called for him to come outside. Sari climbed down the ladder upon which Moimban struck him with his axe and killed him.

The *kiap* arrested Moimban and took him to jail to Rabaul. There Moimban died.

My wife's second husband was Moimban's younger brother. His name was Panda. He beat her often, and the two fought all the time. One day Dshangu had had enough. She left him and came to stay with me, after which I married her. This woman and I are still together.

My children are now all grown up. My wife and I, we provided the bride-wealth for the wife of our eldest son. We also paid the bridewealth for the wife of our second son. Our youngest son left his wife and went to Rabaul. She waited three years for him but he didn't return, so she left the house and went to stay with another man. When our son finally did return, he married the daughter of the man to whom his wife had moved [the daughter of this man's first wife]. We haven't paid bridewealth for this woman yet. We're still trying to get the money together for this woman."

Gaii, who is about sixty years old, is from the Yamandane lineage of the Mairambu clan. Being the eldest of his lineage, he is a highly respected man in the village.



Fig. 68: Gaii (1973).

“When I was still a young boy – but I was already able to understand what was happening – the Germans came in a ship. I saw it although I was still very young at the time. We brought them [the people on the ship] yam, sugar cane, and bananas. Our parents provided them with these things. In return they received knives and axes. Father Krisben [Kirschbaum], a German, built the first mission station in Marienberg. The Pater also came to visit us. At that time I was still running around naked [that is, Gaui had not yet been initiated] but I already knew how to plant taro, sugarcane, and beans. In those days there was still war [headhunting raids]. Our fathers went to Kanganamun and killed two men, Andikabak and Tsibulabra. The men brought them to the village and there was a large *singsing*.

When I was a little older and already able to shin up betel palms, our fathers went on a headhunting raid to Mindimbit. Then Kiap Tenshen came and established a station in Ambunti. Kiap Plentsholi [?] came up the Sepik and recruited boys [labourers] for the first time. His boat was called Larm. After he had purchased the first boys, our fathers raided Mindimbit. The men of Mindimbit and Kararau had quarrelled about a woman; our fathers had brought her to the village. The Mindimbit men killed one of our old fathers and two brothers. The men were called Korogi, Samiangbange, and Kongin-ish. The men of Mindimbit had killed first. Now the Kararau men paid them back for it. They killed two girls and two boys, their father, and their mother who was pregnant. This family was from Mindimbit. The mission got to hear about this raid. Some people had told Father Krisben in Marienberg about it. People from Timbunke, Mindimbit, and Angerman told the Father about it.

When the *kiap* came to the village, there was a fight. Kama, his brothers, and his mother were arrested. Father Krisben had gone downriver only as far as Mindimbit and had then sent the *kiap* from there. The *kiap* and his policemen were armed with guns. They took the village by surprise at night. We had no time to run away and hide. The men called out, ‘War has broken out.’ The *kiap* arrested Kama and his brothers and his mother. When morning broke, our mothers fled with us to the forest. We heard rifle shots. In the morning, the men spoke to Andimali, Marap, and Kengen. All three were of the Mairambu clan and from Mindimbit: ‘We feel sorry for Kama, really sorry for him’, to which Andamali replied, ‘I’ll get Kama and his brothers back.’ They gathered up the men who had killed people during the raid on Mindimbit. The Father took them with him. He put them in handcuffs. There were four men, Sinsen, Paundu, Masendimi, and Kambanaut; the *kiap* wanted to take them to jail [in Marienberg].

They spent the night in Tambunum. During the night, Masendimi and Kambanaut succeeded in opening their handcuffs, and fled. It was the flood season; the water was high. The *kiap* fired at them with his rifle but missed.

The people of Tambunum gave each of the men a canoe, but Sinsen and Paundu were taken to jail in Marienberg.

Masendimi and Kambanaut paddled up the Sepik. The men of Timbunke discovered Masendimi and killed him. Only Kambanaut returned to Kararau.

When the flood had receded, the men of Kararau undertook yet another raid on Mindimbit. They killed a man called Sanowi. He was from Mindimbit. This time the *kiap* came in a big ship. There was a big war with the *kiap*. It was Kiap Doertish [?]. Kiap Tenshen said to us: 'You can no longer kill. I sent the Mission; four men were sent to jail. Now you have killed again; for this you will be sent to prison.' Those were Kiap Tenshen's words. There was a big war. The *kiap* and his policemen surrounded the village. In those days we lived in Kwedndshange. He had brought with him one hundred policemen and many men from Mindimbit and Angerman. They killed three men from Kararau and one from Kamenimbit. The name of the man from Kamenimbit was Yambraban; the men from Kararau were Siblige, Kireman-ge, and Dshangui. These men were all shot. After that we left the village.

Some of us went to a place near Kamenimbit, to Yame. But a man by the name of Tubashendu, who lived in Mamali [a Kamenimbit settlement on the Krosmeri] but was originally from Kamenimbit, discovered us in Yame. He told the men of Mindimbit who, in turn, told the *kiap*. The *kiap's* plan was to surround us there, but some people from Kamenimbit warned us and we left our hideout the same night. We fled to Yindegum, others went to Aibom.

A man called Numbiandima, the father of Wangen, was worried about his *laua*, Gowi, and his sister. Gowi's parents had taken him to Aibom. Numbiandimi was worried. He exclaimed: 'I'm okay; I have enough to eat and a house to sleep in. I'm alright. But what about my sister and her child? I haven't heard anything from them.' So Numbiandimi set off and went on foot to Gaikorobi and then to Yentshan. There he asked his clan brothers: 'Have you heard anything of my sister?' The people replied: 'No, we haven't heard anything yet.' So Numbiandimi went back to Yindegum. He was very worried and it kept him up all night.

At dawn he said to himself: 'I'm not worried about myself, I can die.' He took a small string bag. Numbiandimi did not smoke, he only chewed betel. He put some betel nuts in his string bag and cut a thin piece of bamboo which he filled with lime before closing it at the top. He grabbed four spears and a knife and put them in his canoe. We were still all asleep, including our fathers. Nobody knew what Numbiandimi had in mind. Only his mother was aware. Although it was still dark, she had already risen to go and fetch water from the stream. She saw him and called out: 'Angurabi [Angurabi is possibly Numbiandima's second name].' 'Yes', he answered. – 'What are you doing?' – 'I'm worried about my *laua*, I'm going to see him and find out how

he's doing; I'm going as far as Kamenimbit; there I will turn back. Whether the enemy [the *kiap* and his policemen] finds me is all the same to me because I have no children.' Those were his words to his mother. The woman went home and woke her husband: 'Ai, Yangende, wake up! This man has just left in his small canoe. I asked why he's leaving. He said he was worried about his sister. He asked me to tell you this.' The father was worried and called out: 'Hey, you men in the village and in the bush, a man has just left us.'

Angurabi steered his small canoe through the sago swamp until he reached the *baret*. The policemen were in a long boat which was far too big for the stream. They got stuck at the mouth of the *baret*. The stream was too winding so that the large canoe could not pass. A policeman called Tomi, who was from Marara, placed himself at the mouth of the *baret*. The policemen clashed with Angurabi at one of the stream's bends. Angurabi's spears were lying lengthwise at his feet in the canoe. He slowly approached in his canoe. Then he grabbed his spears and jumped from the canoe on to a floating island of grass. But the island wasn't strong enough to carry him. He flung his spear at the policeman from Marara, but he was able to dodge it, upon which Numbiandimi threw a second spear. The policeman and Numbiandimi grappled with each other. The policeman got hold of Numbiandimi. He beat him and didn't let go.

Soon the people of Kamenimbit came running, shouting, 'Don't beat each other, stop fighting.' The policemen took Numbiandimi to Kamenimbit. Kiap Doertish arrived in Kamenimbit in his boat, arrested Numbiandimi and took him to Ambunti.

Upon this some men went to see Kiap Tenshen. Tenshen said to them: 'You can no longer go on raids. Go back to your village.' Doertish also brought back Numbiandimi. He appointed men as *luluai* and *tultul*. All the people returned to the village. They took all their spears and broke them in two. They placed them on the ground to show that, from now on, the days of raiding were finally over.

Upon this, they [the officers of the colonial administration] exclaimed: 'This hat belongs to you [referring to the hat given to the appointed village headman]. But the man they had appointed answered: 'There are quite a few big men in the village [Tok Pisin: *bikpela man*], give the hat to one of them. I don't want it.' But they answered: 'You're strong, strong enough to assert yourself against the other men.' The man replied: 'Yes, I am strong. If I wasn't strong I wouldn't have gone to the *kiap*. But I am strong, so I went to see the *kiap*.' Those were the words the man of Mindimbit spoke to the *kiap*. The *kiap* exclaimed: 'So, we agree.' The *kiap* brought him to Kararau in his ship.

At the time, Mandangu [who now lives in Timboli], Kokombe, and I had gone to a place near Kararau in search of bamboo shoots. We placed them on



the fire and roasted them until they were nice and brown, then we ate them. We stayed near the spot where we had tethered our canoes. I turned around and my eye caught sight of the *kiap*'s ship which had a piece of cloth tied to the top [possibly a white cloth as symbol of peace]. I called to the others: 'Hey, *dsholi*, come quick.' We jumped into our canoes and paddled back to our people. We told them, 'The *kiap* is coming!' This scared the men of the village.

Bumbubum, bumbubum, the men began striking the *garamut* [slit gong]. They struck the signal for war. They erected a fence [possibly out of shields, a very strong fence. Behind it guards were ready with their spears. The *kiap* berthed his ship and called out: 'I have come to you but I have not come to fight.' Upon this, the men emerged from behind the fence. The *kiap* climbed from the ship and entered the village. Our mothers had fled with us children through the forest to Gaikorobi. We heard that it was safe to return, so we went back to the village. The *kiap* said there would be no more war. So, we returned to the village. Some of the men had gone to Aibom to tell the Kararau people who had fled there that it was safe to return to the village. All the men, women and children returned to the village. From then on, life was good again.

Around that time, Kama and Gowi were initiated. The two were in seclusion in the *bani*s [enclosure] and were waiting for their wounds to heal. Then the *bani*s was removed, and the two emerged. After that, the men went on a raid against Timoi, a village located deep in the forest. After the raid they returned to the village. The men staged a large *singsing* which we watched. After the *singsing*, the men of Kamenimbit went to Mogomote.<sup>237</sup> Before that, the men of Palimbe had killed Yindemaui and Kalamangau of Kamenimbit. It was only after that that the men of Kamenimbit went on a raid against Yambemi and Mogomote and killed many people.

The people of Tigowi told the *kiap* about this raid. The *kiap* arrested all the men who taken part on this raid. He also took with him the severed heads of the men, women and children who had been killed. The *kiap* seized one hundred people and took them away.<sup>238</sup>

Around the same time, the men of Tambunum went on a headhunting raid against Masandane. These men were also arrested. The men of Yamanimbu, Dshapanaut, and Kamboek undertook a raid on Dshama. These men, too, were put in jail.

<sup>237</sup> According to a report by the Australian authorities of 19 June 1928, this raid took place in early November 1927. Fifteen men, eight women and one child were killed.

<sup>238</sup> According to the government report, thirty-three men were arrested. Seven of them were executed in Ambunti by hanging.

The station at Ambunti was now finished and the *kiap* resided there. He put all the men who had participated in the raids in jail. After that there was no more headhunting.

At that time, I was already wearing trousers, or else I wore a piece of cloth. Then the men cut the tattoos into the skin of my back. The *shambla* gave me a *sipmbi* [loincloth], a pair of trousers, and a piece of cloth. Afterwards I was afflicted with two wounds to my feet; they were large wounds. On a visit to the village, a [medical] patrol saw my wounds and took me to Ambunti. There I learnt to speak Tok Pisin. I stayed there for six months. I saw the men who were locked away in prison. I was in hospital for a long time, until my wounds had dried. The *kiap* then spoke to the doctor: 'I have no boy (servant). I would like to keep this man as my boy.' The doctor said to me: 'The *kiap* wants you to be his boy; you can work for the *kiap*.' That was okay with me.

I worked for the *kiap*. I served at his table. I served him food in dishes from which the *kiap* then ate. A man from Kamboek prepared the food and I placed it on the table. After the *kiap* had eaten, I cleared the dishes and the remains from the table. That's what I did while I lived with the *kiap*.

One day the *kiap* said to me: 'The two of us are going to Rabaul.' So, we went to Rabaul. I stayed there for twenty-five years.<sup>239</sup> I looked after the *manki masta* [probably meaning the *kiap*'s son).

We also stayed in Manus at a government station.<sup>240</sup> It was there that the *kiap* died. I was with him when he died. An important doctor came to Manus from Rabaul and inspected the body. The *kiap* was buried in Rabaul. The government officers checked the money the *kiap* had managed. There was nothing missing. They gave me fifteen [or fifty] dollars. That's the amount of money they gave me. I told them: 'I could continue working for the government, maybe for the police.' So, I worked for the police for two years. The government gave me fourteen dollars. After that I worked for BP [Burns Philp, an Australian store chain]. I worked on their ships. I painted the ships with new paint. I travelled from Buka to Rabaul and back. I also loaded and unloaded the ships.

I have seen a lot in my life. I saw the ships of the Germans coming up the Sepik. Among the crew was a very big man, Wasge [probably Roesicke], he was a very big man from Germany. After them came the Australians.

They wanted to load goods, cargo, into their ship, but the entire cargo fell into the water. The men who had done this were sent to jail.

<sup>239</sup> How accurate this reference is, is difficult to say. But, given that Gowi did not travel to Rabaul before 1930 and left the town again latest at the outbreak of the Second World War, he probably did not spend more than twelve years in Rabaul

<sup>240</sup> This is an abridged version of this part of his account.

I worked for the government. I was still young at the time, but I already had hairs on my skin. I worked in Lagane. The men of Lagane had shot a *masta* from Germany. I travelled to Lagane with another *masta*. We shot the village to pieces. The *kiap* heard about this and came to the village where he appointed a *luluai* and a *tultul*.

I went back to work on a ship. I had been working on *stesin* for twenty-five years when the war broke out. Meluantem, our village *luluai*, told Kiap Tenshen that I had to come back to Kararau. Tenshen sent a letter. The *masta boy* [foreman] called for me; I left the ship and went ashore and went to the office: there they told me that the *luluai* had asked me to come home. I said: 'I have many things here which I first have to pack.' I got into a police car and we went to fetch my belongings. We drove to the place of a Chinese man where I kept my suitcase. This man's name was Laus. After fetching my suitcase, I was ready.

We heard that the first [Japanese] plane had landed in Aitape. The *kiap* said to me: 'Hurry! This mission boat Pingale [?] is ready for sail.' It took me from Rabaul to Madang. In Madang there was a ship which planned to sail up the Sepik river. The *kiap* helped arrange my journey on the boat. It took me as far as Marienberg. From Marienberg I travelled on to Angoram where the people asked me, 'Has war already broken out?' I replied: 'Yes, the first bombs have dropped on Rabaul. I saw it with my own eyes.' The Japanese landed near Lae and walked to Kopar on foot.

War had come. The *kiap* gathered all the men in Pagui. I went to Pagui with the *luluai*. The *kiap* gave me the village book [which contained the census figures collected by the *kiap* on each inspection tour]. He said to me: 'When the Japanese come, don't give them this book. If you do, they will know how many men, women, and children live in the village. The women and children shouldn't stay in the village, only the strongest men. They can provide food for the Japanese. Hide this book well!' Those were his words. I kept the book. I still have it today. The war broke out. The *kiap* came to us down the Sepik. We took him up the Korewori river from where he went to Moresby.

Around that time, I got married. I married my first wife.

The Japanese came to the Sepik. I married my second wife, Dangunbragui's mother. Today she's a teacher. She teaches in Tambunum. With this second wife I fathered Dangunbragui.

I got married for the third time. This woman had no children. She died. I married a fourth wife. She, too, had no children, and died. My fifth wife is still with me today. She's from Timbunke. Two of my wives were from Timbunke, one of them died, the other is still alive.

One hundred Japanese came to Timbunke.<sup>241</sup> A man from Timbunke called Kala, one of the old big men, sent word to Marui, to Hamertas [?], with the following message for the Australians: ‘Hamer and Kabes [?], come to us, ask the Australians to kill the Japanese.’ Those were Kala’s words.

The Japanese came to Kararau. I was made a captain. The Japanese gave me a number with four figures, Kamangali one with five figures. We were now captains. I went to Timbunke with the Japanese. We went ashore. The villagers had already packed all their things [meaning, they were about to flee the village]. But the Japanese tied them up and placed them in a row. They were all wearing handcuffs. Then the Japanese shot them. They took their rifles – tatata, tatatata – and mowed them down. They killed about one hundred men.

The men of Palimbe and Malinge as well as the Nyaula, these men helped the Japanese. They took everything with them: knives, axes, sleeping baskets, mosquito nets, woollen blankets, everything. They hid near Timbunke. They abducted all the young women, ssssst – and they were gone! Minde and I gathered the old women and young children. As soon as we had them gathered, we climbed into the old canoes [the Palimbe and Nyaula had taken the good ones] and took them to Kararau, up the *baret* to Kararau. The councilor said to the old women: ‘Come and stay here. If you have a [classificatory] brother here in the village, go and stay with him; if you have clan relatives, go and stay at their house.’ All the people in Kararau took in women and children. Only the young, good women of Timbunke had gone, ssssssst, forever.

An important man among the Japanese, Shogikakat, spoke to us: ‘I want one of the village captains to go to Timbunke. We are expecting new Japanese [troops] and there is no one there to help them.’ Those were Shogikakat’s words. But the men replied: ‘We’re scared. We don’t want to be killed by the Japanese.’ So they spoke.

Mindange said to me: ‘Why don’t you go?’ Shogikakat asked me: ‘Would you like to go?’ I said: ‘Yes, I’ll try.’ So, I went to Timbunke where new Japanese troops would be arriving. I took with me ten old women. Together we caught fish for the Japanese, we collected *kango* greens (an aquatic plant). We gave these things to the Japanese. We washed sago and gave it to the Japanese. I reported everything to the Japanese big man. The people of Tambunum helped me to gather food for the Japanese.

Oh, there were many, many Japanese in Timbunke. The men who live further up the Sepik [(meaning Palimbe and Nyaula)] had taken all the young women. They exclaimed: ‘Gau is now in Timbunke; he’s the headman of Timbunke and the boss of all the old women.’ That’s what they said. They wanted to come and fetch the old women, but I told them: ‘No, you’ve

<sup>241</sup> Sterr (1950: 192-195) contains the report of a nun who describes the time of the Japanese occupation of Timbunke and the escape of the resident missionaries.

taken enough women; I need these women to help me gather sufficient food for the Japanese.’

I worked like this for a long time. I stayed in Timbunke for eight months. At the beginning of the ninth month, the war ended. Masta Tom came to Burui. The men of Timbunke took me to court. I went to jail in Pagui for three months, and for three months in Angoram. When the six months were over, I went back to the village. The *kiap* said: ‘The matter is now settled.’

The government paid the men of Timbunke money for all the things that had been destroyed in the war.

I spent six months in jail. I’m okay with that, it’s hardly worth mentioning.

When I returned to Kararau I married this woman. Then the men of Timbunke once more took me to court, claiming, ‘This woman is married; this woman already has a husband.’ That’s what they said. But the woman answered: ‘I don’t want to stay with my husband. I want to marry Gaii.’

I was proven right in court. After the woman had said, ‘I don’t like this man from Timbunke; I want to marry Gaii’, the *kiap* decreed: ‘The woman is free to marry Gaii.’

Around that time, in 1946, the war ended. A company came to fetch me for work. I worked in Mobo [?]. On the upper reaches of the Sepik there were people whom neither our fathers nor the Australians had ever visited. The Australians only ever went as far as Ambunti. But I went further up the Sepik. I went to Bukabuge where I worked in the forest with a *masta* called Masta Pio. This *masta* said: ‘Gather leaves from the trees!’ So, we gathered leaves from really strong trees, we took samples of their bark, and, when the trees flowered, we also picked some of their flowers. We put everything into containers. I did this work for six months in the area of the May River. Later, the Australians built a station there.

Then I returned to Kararau. I never went back to work on a *stesin*. Now I live here in the village.

That’s how my story goes.”

### Comments

The life histories of the four men have many points in common.<sup>242</sup> Personal childhood experiences tend to be backgrounded in favour of the wider social contexts they lived through. Yaknabi, for instance, provides an account of the conflict between his father and his father’s brother, and the consequences this led to. He evi-

<sup>242</sup> Before the interviews, I offered the men the following guidelines: tell me about the time when you were a little boy and when you were initiated. Tell me about the days of raiding, but also about the time when you got married, and about your life as an adult man.

<sup>Only</sup> Gaii offered his account in Tok Pisin. The others were recorded in Iatmul and later translated by Koliuan.

dently tries to provide an accurate report. The same goes for Gai's description of the Japanese occupation of Timbunke during the Second World War.

Headhunting is a topic in all four life histories, although the descriptions of the raids differ in terms of detail. Three of the four men took part in raids themselves, but their accounts contain little to no personal impressions. The confrontations with the Australian patrol officers (*kiap*) which resulted from the raids are addressed by all four men. As far as details are concerned – for example, whether two or only one man was able to free himself from the handcuffs and escape – the accounts differ. Likewise, in several narratives the two separate raids on Mindimbit are blended and described as a single event.<sup>243</sup>

All men refer to their time working as indentured labourers outside of the village (working on *stesin*), although only Yaknabi and Gai indicate what type of work they actually did. Especially Gai is very detailed in his descriptions, not only with regard to his experiences during the war but also concerning his work on different *stesin*.

All four life stories make reference to male initiation, usually – at least this is the impression one gets – as a way of expressing the fact that they had attained full male adulthood. In connection with his initiation, Kama had to kill a captured child with a spear – an act he mentioned almost casually, but only after I had interposed a question.

As far as the choice of spouse is concerned, only Yaknabi speaks about his personal experiences: as his elder brother had not yet married and because he had been chased above all by married women, he left the village for a while. Gowimban's account focuses to a large extent on his wife's earlier life and how her first husband had killed a *sanguma* man (sorcerer) who had stalked her at night. A possible reason why Gai talked so extensively about his wife – the only one of the four – was the fact that, immediately before recording his life story, we had witnessed a visitation of his wife by her deceased brother.

### 13.3 Comparing the life histories of women and men

The women's and men's life history accounts differ on some important points. While the women's life stories often refer to personal experiences and offer rich descriptions of the games they played when they were children, the men's narratives usually relate to wider social contexts: those of men's activities, the relationships between clans and villages, their interactions with the colonial administration (in the course of "pacification" efforts and the Second World War), and their work on *stesin*. Their accounts convey images from their village's history. Although, with one exception, all the women narrators had personally witnessed the times of inter-village warfare as well as the Japanese invasion and occupation, none of them make reference to these historical events.

<sup>243</sup> A comparison of the oral accounts and the official reports by the colonial authorities would be beyond the scope of this study.

The difference between the way women tell a story and the men render an account is probably best borne out by the narratives of one couple, Woliragwa and Yaknabi, respectively. Woliragwa tells of how her father and his brother quarrelled about a woman, upon which she and her father were forced to leave the village. In connection with their departure from the village, she hardly mentions the external circumstances and ramifications, instead she concentrates on the relationship between herself and her father and how he had cared for and kept her warm at night.

Yaknabi, on the other hand, who lived through a similar, probably even more dramatic experience, gives a detailed account of the corollary events of their escape, for instance, how the men of the adverse party burnt down their house and how his grandfather, trapped inside, was nearly killed. In addition, Yaknabi describes their escape from Timbunke and the journey by canoe to Angerman, Mindimbit and on to Kararau almost like a reporter. Only in passing does he talk about himself and how he and some other boys from Timbunke were forced to hide.

Probably the most prominent feature in the women's life history accounts is their focus on personal experience, with little to no reference to the wider social context. To piece together a village history from their accounts would be virtually impossible. In exchange, they provide first-hand insight into the lives of individual women. All the women, albeit to varying extents, tell of how they used to play and of the easy, carefree life of childhood. By comparison, none of the men spoke about their childhood in detail. All the women's life stories emphasize the time of partner selection and courtship, and by no means merely in the sense of a listing of facts. Moreover, the women often spoke freely about their emotions and feelings experienced at the time: for instance, Uemanoli on the rape she was made to suffer, the love that Kwapmei felt for Kamangali, Kanayagui who was talked into marrying Kama by her mother, or Dshangu who left her husband to marry Gowimbange. Only two of the men make specific reference to the time of their marriage: Yaknabi, who seems to have been very popular among the women, especially the married women, and Gowimbange, who talked in length about his wife's earlier life.

Overall, the women's life history accounts illustrate how important close personal relationships are (daughter-father; husband-wife; [classificatory] mother-[classificatory] son, brother-sister), an aspect that is almost absent in the men's narratives. I think it would be correct to say that while the men make an effort to render a more distanced, "objective" perspective, the women's narratives are marked by subjectivity. The self-portrayals seem to confirm the findings of the fishing survey: the women tend to move in a relatively small circle of people with little to no "outward" bearing, while the men are inclined to forfeit this more intimate circle in favour of wider, more institutionalized social bodies. Accordingly, in their accounts the women communicate their personal experience and perspective, while the men clearly relate to the village community as whole (thus offering extracts of the history of their village) and forfeit the level of personal relationships. In this sense they deemphasize "inward orientations" in favour of "external relations".





*Part Five*  
*The Relationship Between Men and Women*  
*in Myths*



## **14 Gender Relationships as Described in Myths and the Way in Which These Are Narrated by Men and Women**

In this last part of the study, I turn attention to the way the relationship between men and women is depicted and represented in Iatmul mythology. I began the study with a description of the socio-economic and religious roles of women, as witnessed by an outside observer committed to impartiality to the best of her ability. It was followed by a selection of life history accounts in which women talked about their lives (self-portrayals) in their own words. I now take closer look at Iatmul myths in their capacity as shared reflections on the subjectively experienced world (in the widest sense of the term) which are handed down from generation to generation as relative givens and pertain to the culture as a whole. Without asserting to be able to comment on the overall relationship between myths and historical processes, the following inquiry sets out from the assumption that an investigation of a series of individual myths (selected from a larger corpus) may well provide some new and revealing insights into the relationship between Iatmul men and women.

In the context of the analysis, I have attempted, as far as possible, to segment the myths into separate functions, that is, following Propp, the actions decisive for the

course of the plots and carried out by (differing) agents.<sup>244</sup> It would be beyond the scope of this study to come up with a completely new, detailed method of analysing myths. Instead I have relied on ideas developed by a number of eminent scholars (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 1958, 1964, 1967, 1971; and Propp 1968 among others) towards a synthesis which, admittedly, is far from final or definitive. Difficulties arose above all in applying the suggested methods systematically to the complex narrative material.

I begin a myth which was presented to me in five variants. I recorded them from three men, Mindsh (Yamandane lineage of the Mairambu clan; see Fig. 57, p. 218), Kubeli (Boigum lineage of the Wuenguendshap clan; see Fig. 59, p. 225), and Kabuseli (Yagum clan), and two women, Sabwandshan (Yamandane lineage of the Mairambu clan; see Fig. 26, p. 52), and Wombre (Wuenguendshap clan). As Wombre only speaks Iatmul, her husband, Slabui (Yagum clan), translated the *stori* into Tok Pisin. In order to compare the five versions, I present them next to one another. Owing to this and for the sake of clarity, the individual sections (referred to above as “functions”) were modified to fit in with the storyline of the respective variant.



Fig. 69: Wombre (1973).

### Function I: The men build a men's house (exclusion of women)

*Mindsh:*

“Kolimbange is a kind of bat.<sup>245</sup> There are small ones and big ones. The big ones we call *kimbui*, the small ones *kwandshe*. This is their story. Once, all human beings lived in Mebinbragui; that is where we all come from.”

“Kolimbange, who is also human, said: ‘I wish to have a small men's house.’ We'll call it Kimbui Kolimbit. He went on: ‘I want us to build a *hausboi* that goes by this name.’ All the men went to fell trees to make the posts. When they had finished, they carried the posts to the spot where the men's house

<sup>244</sup> Propp (1968: 21): “Function is understood as an act of a character [“*dramatis personae*”] defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action.”

<sup>245</sup> In Tok Pisin, the fruit bat, or flying fox, is referred to as *blakbokis*, smaller bat species usually as *liklik blakbokis*. For the sake of brevity, I shall here simply use the term “bat”.

was to be built. They marked the spots where the posts would come to stand, and then drove them into the ground.”

*Kubeli:*

“Once upon a time, the men built the men’s house Kimbuiambit. They worked on it the whole time.”

*Kabuseli:*

“The men began building a men’s house, the men’s house Kosembit. They all worked on it.”

*Sabwandshan:*

“This is the story of the men who built a men’s house.”

*Wombre:*

“Once upon a time, the men wanted to build a men’s house; they sunk the posts into the ground.”

## **Function II: Continuing the construction of the men’s house**

*Mindsh:*

“Then the men applied rattan cane to it. They tied everything with rattan; it had different colours [it was painted]). The rattan was not applied to just any part, in each case it was used for a post assigned to a specific clan or clan ancestor [probably meaning the rattan was painted in clan-specific colours). The men fastened the rattan in the name of their clan or their clan’s principal myth. In this way the posts were secured with rattan; then the men painted the posts.”

*Kubeli:*

“One day the men went to cut rattan cane which they used for mounting the *hausboi*’s beams.”

*Kabuseli:*

“One day they went [to the forest] to cut rattan.”

*Sabwandshan:*

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*Wombre:*

“When this work was finished, they began cutting rattan and *limbum*. They went [to the forest] to gather and cut rattan and *limbum*. When they had finished, they laid out [what they had cut] on the ground. Then they went

home to sleep. The next day the men wanted to go and fetch the rattan they had prepared but when they looked it was no longer there. The rattan and *limbum* had gone back to the forest [as though it had never been cut]. A female bush spirit had carried everything back [to the forest]. The men looked at each other and asked: 'Who put everything back? Yesterday we prepared the rattan and *limbum* and readied everything to come and pick up today.' Those were their words. So, they began cutting new rattan and *limbum*; they readied everything and then went back to the village to sleep. This woman came and took everything back to the forest [that is, put it in its original place again. The next morning the men came, only to find that everything they had laid out on the ground was gone, and that everything they had cut down was back hanging on the trees. Once again they began cutting rattan and removing bark from the *limbum* palms, and once again they laid out everything on the ground, but this time they left a man in hiding. They said to him: 'You stay here and watch who takes the things back the forest.' With these words the men sent the man to his hiding place before returning to the village to sleep. The spirit woman got up and set out to take all the rattan and *limbum* back to the forest. She arrived at the place where everything was lying ready and began with her work."

### Function III: Contact between men and women breaks down

*Mindsb:*

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*Kubeli:*

"Upon this, the women stopped giving their men food. They no longer cared for their husbands. None of them gave their husbands any food. When the men returned from cutting rattan in the forest, they went home to their wives, but they were not given any food."

*Kabuseli:*

"In the men's house there lived a woman. She never left the men's house and never went to see other women."

*Sabwandshan:*

"After starting work, they did not return to their wives and children. They no longer went to fetch food at home and no longer sat down with them. They all remained in the men's house. There they kept a woman they had captured (Tok Pisin: *kisim pinis*) and taken to the men's house. She cooked for all the men and was responsible for their wellbeing. The men kept this woman hidden. No other woman had ever seen this woman in the men's house or even

knew about her. So things carried on for a while. The men worked on their assembly house. They said to the woman: 'You may never leave the house, not even to defecate. You must stay here. We're now going to the forest to collect rattan.' After saying this, they left."

*Wombre:*

"Then the man jumped up and grabbed her [the spirit woman]. He tied her up and said: "So, it was you who did this. It meant a lot of work for us.' He held her and then took her to the men's house. There all the men had intercourse with her. She remained in the men's house while the men went back to work. This woman cooked for all the men. When they came back from work, they ate what the woman had cooked for them in the men's house. They didn't go back to their wives and children, no. But the women kept on cooking for their husbands; they left their food standing, waiting for them; but then the food rotted and they had to throw it away. So it went on, day for day."

#### **Function IV: The women are curious; they discover the men's secret**

*Mindsb:*

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*Kubeli:*

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*Kabuseli:*

"A [village] woman sent her child up a coconut palm to fetch coconuts. A coconut fell to the ground and rolled into the men's house. The child wanted to fetch the coconut and entered the house. But the woman who lived in the men's house had taken a fishing spear, speared the coconut [from the upper floor] and hauled it up. She was busy preparing sago pudding for the men. The women became aware [of the woman's presence in the men's house]. When the men went to cut rattan the second time, the women made sure that all the men had left, and then said: 'Probably there's a woman living in the men's house.'"

*Sabwandsban:*

"A [village] woman approached a coconut palm which was standing near the men's house, with the intention of fetching down a coconut. She threw the coconuts to the ground, while counting how many. The woman in the men's house threw her spear and so stole a coconut. The village woman climbed down from the tree and counted the nuts. She realized: 'Oh, one is missing.'"

She climbed back up to fetch a new one. The woman went back to the village where she told the other women what had happened: ‘I went to fetch coconuts but two of them were stolen. How could that have happened?’”

*Wombre:*

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**Function V: The women send a small girl to the men’s house to find out what the men’s secret is all about.**

*Mindsh:*

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*Kubeli:*

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*Kabuseli:*

“The old women spoke: ‘We’ll send a young girl to the men’s house to fetch fire.’ So they sent a young girl who climbed up [to the upper floor of the men’s house]. The women watched the girl climb to the top. She saw the woman [in the men’s house] who asked her: ‘What do you want?’ The girl answered: ‘The fire in my house has gone out.’ The woman gave her fire and she carried it off. When she arrived at the bottom of the ladder, the fire went out, so she climbed back up again. The woman again gave her a new firebrand. The girl climbed down again, and again the fire went out. So she went up a third time to fetch fire. She looked closely at the woman. Then she went back to the women and told them: ‘Women, in the men’s house, there is a woman. All the men take food from her and sleep with her.’ The women got together and discussed what needed to be done.”

*Sabwandshan:*

“The women sent a girl, who had an ulcer on her behind, to the men’s house to fetch fire. The girl climbed to the upper floor of the men’s house where she discovered a woman, and thought to herself: ‘Ah, the men are secretly keeping a woman we have never seen.’ The girl took some fire and climbed down the ladder. When she reached the ground, the fire went out, so she climbed back up the ladder and said: ‘The fire’s gone out.’ The woman answered: ‘I gave you fire, the piece of wood was burning brightly, why did you put it out?’ She scolded the girl but gave her fire a second time. The girl went back to the women and told them: ‘Hey, you women, there’s a woman staying in the men’s house. I saw her.’ The women asked: ‘Is that true? – The men are holding a woman there, that’s why they never come home to talk with us or



to eat. It must be so, the men have a woman in the men's house. They forbade us to enter the men's house [Tok Pisin: *ol i tambu long mipela* – this could also mean, that's why they shun us].”

*Wombre:*

“The women decided: ‘When the men go to work, we'll send a young girl who has an ulcer on her skin to the men's house.’ They sent the girl. She climbed up the ladder to [the upper floor] of the men's house where she saw the fire burning on the ground floor. But she climbed to the upper floor. There she saw the woman who asked her: ‘Why do you come to the men's house, you never used to come here?’ The girl answered: ‘I've come to fetch fire.’ The woman took a firebrand and gave it to the girl. She took it and climbed down again. At the foot of the ladder the fire went out. So, she climbed back up, wishing to see the woman again. When she got there, the woman again gave her fire, and scolded her. The girl climbed down and went to the other women. She gathered them together and said: ‘There's a woman in the men's house. She cooks for them and they eat with her. They no longer come to us for food.’”

**Function VI: The women kill the woman in the men's house  
(the men's secret is revealed)**

*Mindsh:*

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*Kubeli:*

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*Kabuseli:*

“They [the women] dragged the woman down and said to her: ‘Come, we have something for you.’ They dragged her down, where all the women had gathered. Then they brought out a razor, a razor of the kind our grandfathers once used; we call it *tie*, it is made of bamboo. They cut off the woman's hair. They kept on cutting until one woman cut her skin. ‘Ihhh!’ the woman cried. The woman who had cut her said: ‘Sorry, I didn't do it on purpose.’ They kept on cutting her hair, then they began cutting her all over until she fell to the ground and died. They cut her up, threw her remains into two cooking pots, and prepared sago pudding. They placed the pots [with the sago pudding] in front of the men's house.”

*Sabwandshan:*

“The women picked up razors or just normal knives and axes. Together they went to see the woman and told her: ‘We’ve come because we want to cut your hair.’ They spoke to her like this, until she sat down. One woman began cutting her hair. Then another woman grabbed an axe and cut off her head. All the women joined in killing the woman. Then the women took two coconuts and began grating them. They took the [woman’s] upper jaw and lower jaw and threw each one separately into the pots. They tipped the grated coconut and the sago into the pots, cooked everything, and made from it sago pudding. Then they prepared two bowls of sago pudding, one for the men of the Kishit, one for the men of the Miwot [moieties]. They left the two bowls for the men and then went back to their houses.”

*Wombre:*

“Then the women said: ‘Tomorrow, when the men have gone to work, we’ll call for this woman to come down and we’ll cut her hair. Then we will kill her.’ Those were their words. The next morning, when the men had left for work, the women set off to the men’s house and called for the woman [who lived on the upper floor]. She came down; the other women cut her hair; then they cut her skin and killed her. They prepared sago pudding, they split her head in two and placed each half separately into two pots with sago pudding; these were for the two initiation moieties. Then they covered the two sago pudding pots with wild taro leaves.”

**Function VII: Unaware of what had happened, the men eat parts  
of the slain woman**

*Mindsh:*

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*Kubeli:*

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*Kabuseli:*

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“When the men returned from cutting rattan in the evening, they looked for the woman, but she was nowhere to be found. There were only two pots of sago pudding standing there. The men said to themselves: ‘Let’s have some food.’ They ate until they found a jaw bone in the one pot; in the other they soon came across the upper jaw. They asked themselves: ‘Hey, what on earth

have we been eating?’ They inspected the gruel with their spoons and then exclaimed: ‘Oh, we’ve been eating a human head!’”

*Sabwandschan:*

“When the men returned to the men’s house, they found the pots with the sago pudding. They sat down and ate the sago pudding. The men [of the one moiety] suddenly came across a jaw bone. They threw it to the ground. The men [of the other moiety] found the upper part of the jaw. They, too, threw it to the ground.”

*Wombre:*

“Shortly afterwards, the men came home in their canoes. They washed and then fetched the pots with the sago pudding. They got together and began to eat. They ate the sago pudding in the course of which they came across one part of the woman’s skull in the pot. They picked it out and threw it to the ground. The men of the other moiety found the other part of the skull in their pot. They, too, threw it to the ground. Upon this, the men said: ‘It is now time that the women faced our law [Tok Pisin: *dispela ol meri i redi long dispela lo bilong mipela*]. We cannot continue building this men’s house.’”

### **Function VIII: The men construct flying devices (The conflict with the women escalates)**

*Mindsb:*

“The men took what was left of the rattan cane and made out of it something that looked like a bat. They built wings and a body until they finally had a complete frame (*lage*). They built a frame for each man and each boy, but not for the girls. No matter how many sons a man had, he built a device for each one of them. All the fathers did this. Only the children who were still in their mother’s womb and had not yet been born did not receive such a contraption from their fathers. The fathers built a device, even for the boys who still needed their mother’s milk.”

*Kubeli:*

“The men took the rattan and made from it devices in the shape of bats. They worked until all the bat frames had been built. They were so big that a man had room inside. Men who had sons also constructed frames for their boys.”

*Kabuseli:*

“Then a man called Kolimbange stood up and said: ‘Gather all the rattan and bring it here!’ Then the men went to sleep. The next morning the men brought their sons with them. They claimed: ‘We no longer want to have sex

with our wives lest they give birth to boys.' The girls remained behind with their mothers. All the men got down to building rattan frames, one for each man and each boy."

*Sabwandshan:*

"The rattan cane was ready. The men used it to build frames in the shape of bats. This kind of bat we call *kumbui*. The men worked on these frames which were so big that a man could stand inside. They also built such devices for their sons."

*Wombre:*

"Thus the men spoke. They ripped out the rattan [which they had used for constructing the men's house] and laid it in the sun to dry. Then they began building frames in the shape of bats. They made them from this rattan. They looked like bats. If a man had two sons, he built three frames, one of them for himself. If a man had four sons, he built five frames, and so forth. Each boy also received a frame of this kind."

#### **Function IX: The men fly off in the shape of bats, after destroying the men' house.**

*Mindsh:*

"One day, the men said to the women, 'Why don't you all go fishing together, or go to the forest.' The men sent the women away, so no woman was left in the village. Some women gathered their nets and traps and travelled to a nearby lake, others grabbed their knives and axes and marched off to the forest.

When they had left, the men got out their bat frames, climbed inside, and tried flying in them. They all practised flying in these frames; they flew over the men's house. The women who were out on the lake or in the forest looked up and saw these birds, upon which they commented: 'Oh, we have no bats around here, so what kind of birds are these creatures?' The women went back to the village to ask their men. In the meantime, the men had climbed out of their frames and hung them up on a post or somewhere inside the men's house. Then they all gathered in the men's house and pretended nothing had happened. The women came back and asked: 'Hey, you men, what kind of birds were these black creatures. We've never seen anything of the kind; they were black from top to bottom; they were flying around when we saw them; where does this bird come from, and why is it flying around here?' That's what the women asked their men. They replied: 'We don't know what kind of birds you saw.' Those were their words. But the women kept on asking, until they finally forgot about it again. Time passed. One evening the men gathered and exclaimed: 'Tomorrow we'll send the woman away again; then

we'll leave the village.' That's what they decided. The next morning the men sent their women away. The men kept their sons by their side, while the girls followed their mothers. Some went fishing, others went to collect firewood. When the sun had risen above the treetops, the men climbed into their 'bat devices' and rose up into the air. They flew along the front of the men's house and destroyed it; then they flew to the back of the men's house and destroyed that, too. Then the men spread out and flew off in all directions. Some went towards the place where the sun rises, others to the place where it sets. These places we call Lengau and Kumbrangau; some flew to Mebinbit and Kumbiambit. When the women returned to the village, they looked around and said: 'Oh, there's not a single man left in the village, they have all gone away. Sometime ago we had an inkling, but when we asked them, they replied: "Oh, we know nothing." They were lying. The men have left in the shape of bats. Now we no longer have any men.' Upon saying this, they felt sad and wept for their children."

*Kubeli:*

"When all the bat devices were finished, they marked a day. On this day, the men climbed into their bat frames; early that morning, they flew up into the air. Kolimbange had forgotten all about the arrangement and had eaten some sago. When the men flew away, Kolimbange also tried to rise up into the air in his device. But he was very heavy, really very heavy. In the meantime, all the men and boys had risen to the top of the gable of the men's house Kumbiambit. They gripped the gable and pulled at it until it broke apart and crashed to the ground; then they went to the other end of the house and tore at the gable, until the whole Kumbiambit men's house had crashed to the ground. Upon this, they flew off. Some of the men went to Lengau, singing: *Lengau, Lengau, Kumbrangauiat, Kumbrangauiat*. So they sang and flew off."

*Kabuseli:*

"When they had finished their work, Kolimbange said: 'Tomorrow the lake will be full of fish. You men must keep your sons by your side and send only the women to catch fish.' The men then discussed their plans in the men's house Kosembit. When morning broke, the men uttered a spell to make the lake fill up with fish. The women noticed the many fish and called to one another to spread the news. The men told the women to go fishing, so all the women drove out to the lake. Meanwhile the men brought their sons to the men's house. They all climbed into their contraptions and flew up into the air, like bats. We call these bats *kumbui* and *kwandshe*; the former are male, the latter female. The men distributed the frames to their sons. Some of the boys had just been born, others had just learned to walk, yet others just learned to talk. But for these boys, too, the fathers had built frames. The

men's house was full of men, boys, and these bat frames. They looked towards the lake where the women were busy spearing fish. When the fish retreated to deeper waters and swam off, the men took off into the air. Brm, brm, brm, brm. They rose up into the air and grabbed the figure on the gable [of the men's house], holding it tight and pulling at it, until a piece of the men's house broke off. In the meantime, the women had returned to the village in their canoes. They looked around and asked: 'What's going on here, what's all this noise?' When the men flew off, they called out the names of the different directions they were heading for: 'Mebinbrag, Mebinbrag, Kumbianbrag, Kumbianbrag, Lengauiat, Lengauiat, Kumbrangau, Kumbrangau.' Then they flew off in all directions. Two men of the Nyau moiety picked a leaf from a breadfruit tree and took a flower we call *moe*, adorned themselves with them, and rose up into the sky, shouting: 'Waiko, waiko.' That's the call of a bird. Then they built two frames in the shape of *kwandshe* bats, took some coconut fibre we call *dshuanga* and wrapped it around the frames. Upon this they flew off as *kwandshe*. All the men and boys had now flown away, leaving only the women in the village."

*Sabwandshan:*

"All the men gathered, together with their sons. The women and girls were disregarded. The men decided to leave the village the next day. Until then they were forbidden to eat any kind of food. But one old man was hungry. He took some fresh sago and put it on the fire. He only ate a little bit of it. When morning came, the men decided to take off. They called out the names of the directions they wanted to head for: 'Mebinbitna, Mebinbitna, Kumbrangauiat, Kumbrangauiat... .' They called out the names of the directions, and flew off."

*Wombre:*

"The men uttered a spell to make many fish appear in the water. After finishing the *singsing*, many fish indeed appeared in the water, so the women set off to the lake in their canoes to spear fish. All the women were busy spearing fish. The men and their sons climbed into their 'bat frames'. When all were ready, they rose up into the air. They grabbed the top of the men's house gable and pulled at it until it broke off. Then they went to the other end of the house, grabbed the gable figure attached to it and pulled at it until it too broke off. They flew along both sides of the men's house, pulling and tugging at the walls, until the whole men's house collapsed. Then they flew off. Some flew to Mebinbit, others to Kumbrangau [Wombre recites the *singsing* in the Iatmul version: Mebinbit, Mebinbit, Kambiambit, Kambiambit, Lengauiat, Lengauiat, Kumbrangauiat, Kumbrangauiat], some flew to Yambun, others to Woliagwi. Those are the names of the four directions. So, they all flew off."

**Function X: Kolimbanche ignores the men's rules and is forced to remain behind***Mindsb:*

"The next day, two girls left the enclosed initiation ground [Tok Pisin: *banis*]. In earlier days, the girls, too, were scarified [meaning, they were initiated]. This took place in an enclosure. On this day the two girls left the enclosure and went down to the water to wash. At that moment, they saw this man called Kolimbanche. This man had started all this and was also responsible for the construction of the men's house. On that morning he had had a bite to eat and had, therefore, become a bit too heavy [to be able to fly away with the other men]. He was sitting on a branch."

*Kubeli:*

"Only this man Kolimbanche was too heavy. He was clinging to the fronds of a sago palm, unable to fly. He wanted to take to the air, but was unable. He got stuck near a waterhole, a waterhole which otherwise the women used for bathing. He remained there."

*Kabuseli:*

"Kolimbanche, too, was left in the village. 'Why must I remain behind?' He tried to fly a bit but then crashed into a sago palm. Next to this sago palm was a waterhole which the young women usually used to bathe in. He tried to fly on, but failed. Upon this he said to himself: 'All the men have gone, there is nobody left here to provide offspring.' He had crashed into this sago palm where he remained sitting. He stayed there for a long time."

*Sabwandshban:*

"This old man, too, wanted to fly off with the others, but he was unable to do so. His testicles were too big, they were really swollen. This stopped him from flying off. He crashed into a sago palm and got stuck on one of its fronds. All the men had flown off, now only this old man was left."

*Wombre:*

"But one bat, its name was Kolimbanche, this man (that is, this man in his 'bat frame') had eaten a little sago that morning. This had made his wings heavy, forcing him to hang on to a sago palm. He clutched a sago palm frond and remained seated there."

**Function XI: Kolimbange establishes contact with two women***Mindsb:*

“The two young women approached the place where he was stuck. They bathed in the water. Kolimbange picked a fruit off the tree and threw it at one of the women. She was startled and said: ‘Hey, sister, why did you hit me?’ The other woman replied: ‘That wasn’t me.’ The two kept on talking and washing themselves. So Kolimbange again picked a fruit and threw it at the other sister. She, too, was startled and said: ‘Sister, why are you hitting me?’ The sister answered: ‘That wasn’t me.’ Then the two looked around; they looked up the tree and discovered the man sitting up there. The two called out: ‘Oh, there’s man sitting up there.’ The sisters went back to the village to fetch a small ladder. They leaned it against the tree on which Kolimbange was sitting. He climbed down. The sisters took a basket, or a bundle of coconut fibres, or some large leaves, to cover up the man so that no other woman would see him. Hidden like this, the two women took Kolimbange back to their house.”

*Kubeli:*

“There came two women, two sisters. They both wanted to bathe there. They undressed, wishing to wash themselves. Kolimbange picked a small fruit off the sago palm and threw it at the leg of one of the women. She was startled and exclaimed: ‘Why are you hitting me, you’re not a man so as to hit me?’ So the elder sister spoke to her younger sibling. She answered: ‘It wasn’t me. I think the fruit simply fell off the tree.’ The man stopped throwing fruit, and simply remained hidden in the crown of the palm tree. When they came back to wash on a later occasion, he took a handful of fruits and threw them at the younger woman, hitting her hard. She, too, was startled and asked: ‘Why are you hitting me, you’re not a man.’ The elder sister replied: ‘It wasn’t me.’ Then they saw this man, he was no longer hiding. He was sitting at the top of the palm tree. They looked at him and said: ‘Wait, we’ll fetch a ladder.’ So, they went and fetched a ladder and also a hood to hide him under. They leaned the ladder [against the tree] and he climbed down. The elder sister held him in her arms. They wrapped him in this hood and took him back to their house.”

*Kabuseli:*

“In the meantime, the women had been looking for men but had found none. So they slept with dogs and gave birth to dog-children. When, one day, two women came to bathe near the sago palm, Kolimbange picked some fruits from the wild sago palm and threw them at the elder of the two women. She was startled and said to the younger one: ‘You’re not a man, you can’t hit me like that.’ The latter replied: ‘No, it wasn’t me.’ When the two women



went there to bathe the next time, the man threw some fruits of the wild sago palm at the younger woman. The two women looked around and soon discovered the man. One of the women called out: 'Look, there's a man sitting on a tree.' Upon this the women fetched a ladder and a rain cape, which we call *magenyoli*, it's this long rain cape. The elder woman carried Kolimbange, who was hidden under the *magenyoli*, to her house. The younger one carried the ladder."

*Sabwandshan:*

"Two young women approached the sago palm because they wanted to bathe there. The man took some sago palm fruits and threw them at the genitals of one of the women. She was startled and exclaimed: 'You're not a man, you can't hit me like that.' The other answered: 'No, it wasn't me.' The two continued to bathe. Once more the old man picked some wild sago palm fruits and flung them at the genitals of the other woman. She, too, was startled and said to her younger sister: 'You're not a man, you can't hit me like that.' The younger sister answered: 'It wasn't me.' The two women looked around and then discovered the man in the tree because he had moved. They told the man: 'Stay there!' The two women went back to the house to fetch a ladder and a *yor*i [rain cape, also used as sun shade]. They carried the things back to the sago palm. They climbed up the palm tree and brought the man down safely to the ground. The man was clinging to the backs of the two women. They put on the rain cape so that nobody would see the man concealed underneath. The rain cape reached down to the women's thighs. The women carried him back to their house where he lived with the two women."

*Wombre:*

"Two women used to wash themselves at the river where this sago palm was located. There was a water hole there. The two women always bathed there. Kolimbange watched them. He took a fruit of the wild sago palm and threw it at the genitals of the elder sister. She said to her younger sibling: 'Sister, you're not a man so that you could hit me.' The younger sister answered: 'It wasn't me, I didn't hit you.' The two women talked to each other like this, before going back to the village. The next morning, they came back to the waterhole to wash. Again, Kolimbange picked some fruits off the wild sago palm and this time threw them at the genitals of the younger sister, who said to her elder sister: 'You're not a man, you can't hit me like that.' The latter replied: 'It wasn't me.' Then the sisters saw in the water the reflection of the man sitting at the top of the sago palm [Tok Pisin: *tewel*]. They went home to fetch a ladder. They returned with the ladder and leaned it against the palm tree. The elder sister climbed up to fetch him and came down again, carrying him on her back. From there the two women took him home."

**Function XII: Kolimbange stays with the two women und fathers two children***Mindsb:*

“Time passed. Kolimbange had intercourse with both women [Tok Pisin: *maritim*]. The elder sister became pregnant and gave birth to a son. The younger sister became pregnant, too. She also gave birth to a son. But they told the other women nothing about this. Only at night, the boys and their father were allowed to leave the house. They would go down to the river to bathe. This continued so, until the boys had grown up.”

*Kubeli:*

“They kept him in the house. They cooked food for him. The man didn’t leave the house. No one saw him, he remained in the house all the time. The other women had no husbands, they only gave birth to dog-children. This is how they lived. But the two sisters lived [with this man]. The elder sister became pregnant. She was pregnant and gave birth to a son. The other women came by and asked the younger sister: ‘Where’s your sister?’ The younger sister answered: ‘She has a large ulcer on her leg. She can’t walk, so she’s staying in the house.’ That’s what she told the women, who all thought she was telling the truth and therefore no longer asked. The woman stayed in her house. The man performed a *singsing* using some earth for the purpose. He rubbed black earth on the [child’s] skin who then grew up in no time. He grew up very quickly and was now a man. Upon this, the elder sister showed herself again; she walked through the village. The other women came to her and asked: ‘Ay, what’s wrong with you, have you given birth to a child?’ – ‘Oh no, how could that be, we have no men [in our village]. I don’t want you going around telling lies.’ Those were the words of the elder sister. Now the younger sister became pregnant. She stayed in the house, and again the village women came by and asked the same questions. The elder sister replied: ‘She has a large ulcer on her behind, so she’s lying in the house at the moment. She’s unable to come outside and walk around.’ In this way the elder sister lied to the other women and went in search of food for her younger sister. So, time passed until the younger sister gave birth to a child, a boy. Again the man, Kolimbange, performed a *singsing* during which he rubbed black earth on the [child’s] skin; he did this again and again, day and night, until the boy had grown into an adult man.”

*Kabuseli:*

“They took this man to their house where they lived with him. The older woman gave birth to a child, a son; later the younger one also gave birth to a son.”

*Sabwandshan:*

“He had intercourse with both women [Tok Pisin: *maritim*]. After a while, one of them became pregnant and gave birth to a boy. The two women forbade the father and the son to leave the house. After all, all the other husbands had left, so the women only gave birth to dog-children. The women had intercourse with their dogs. But these two sisters had found this man, and they hid him from all the other women. When the boy had grown a little, the other woman became pregnant and also gave birth to a son.”

*Wombre:*

“They kept him hidden there, so the other women would not lay eyes on him. All the women only gave birth to dog-children. They had intercourse with their dogs and bore dog-children. The adult male dogs had intercourse with the women. That’s how they lived. This man, Kolimbange, fathered a boy with the elder sister. The other women asked the younger sister: ‘What is your sister doing, she’s never seen in the village these days, and stays at home all the time.’ The younger sister replied: ‘She has an ulcer on her backside, so she prefers to stay at home.’ So the younger one lied while her elder sister was pregnant. The elder sister gave birth to a boy; when he had grown a little, the mother weaned him. Then the younger sister became pregnant and the elder one procured food for her. She did all the work for her younger sister as she couldn’t leave the house, lest the other women found out that she was pregnant. So the pregnant woman hid away. She, too, gave birth to a son. They lived like this, until the boys had grown up.”

**Function XIII: All the women enter into relationships with the three men***Mindsh:*

“One day, the two women said to the other women: ‘We have something to tell you, let’s all meet.’ So, all the women gathered. The two sisters called for their two children and adorned them. Then they climbed down from the house with them. The mothers climbed down the ladder with their sons, so did their father. All the women looked on, and were pleased [Tok Pisin: *amamas*, that is, they probably performed a *naven* ceremony]. The women moved in on the young men, all speaking (excitedly) at the same time. The two young men as well as their father had intercourse with all the women, resulting in many children. Earlier on, the men had left the village, turned into bats [Tok Pisin: *turnim olosem*], and flown away. Now there were many men again, and they all had their families in this place we call Mebinbragui.”

*Kubeli:*

“They appointed the fifth day; they prepared themselves for the day. They brought out their adornment. In the night, Kolimbange stepped out of the house. It was dark, but there was a moon. He built a strong house ladder and also a gangway big enough to perform a *singsing* on. Then he cut open the shoot of a *limbum* palm and prepared a decoration [a curtain of slit leaf strips] for the house, before returning to the house. At noon the next day, they got the *singsing* going. Kolimbange went ahead with his two sons. They followed on his heels. The two women came last. They climbed down the ladder, then up again; this is how they performed the *singsing*. The other women all saw this; they threw their dog-children to the ground and began shouting, ‘Oh, this man is mine, and this man is mine’, all at the same time. The three men had intercourse with all the women, resulting in many children; so now there are many people again in this village.”

*Kabuseli:*

“Kolimbange said to his wives: ‘Go and cut some shoots of a *limbum* palm and repair the ladder to the house; then go and tell the other woman to gather here.’ The women did as they were told and called for all the women to come. They came and sat down in front of the house. They saw the adornment on the house and asked: ‘Why have you adorned the house?’ The sisters replied: ‘Oh, just for fun, it has no real meaning.’ At midday, the father called for his two sons and together they climbed down the ladder. They were singing whilst climbing down. The women shouted all at once: ‘Oh, that’s my man; and that one’s mine.’ The sons clung to their father. But Kolimbange, their father, gave them some *kowar* and the spell to go with it. The two young men had intercourse with the women. So now there were many again. Kolimbange passed on all the *singsing* and all the [mythical and ritual] knowledge. Then Kolimbange went away.”

*Sabwandshan:*

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*Wombre:*

“They built a large house in which they wanted to hold a ceremony. Their idea was to present their two sons and their husband to the other women. After building the house they prepared for the ceremony. Then they called for all the women and told them that there would be a ceremony. The women gathered in front of the house. They erected a fence. When noon had passed, the ceremony to celebrate the three men began, the two sons and the father. They climbed down the ladder, singing. The village women were sitting on the ground, holding their dog-children in their laps. When they set eyes on

the men, they threw their dog-children away and began tugging at the men, at the two sons and the father. They pulled them to and fro. Then the men had intercourse with all the women. After that the village once again had many men and women.”

### *Comment*

Before looking at the different myth versions in more detail, I first want to comment on the way in which the narrators relate to their versions of the myth; in most cases, the relationship remains quite fragmentary.

The reason why Mindsh told us the myth was because he wished to tell us the myth about the origin of bats and this man's, Kolimbange's, power, who was both man and bat. Kolimbange, he explained, was the father of all humans; in addition, he went on, novices, after going through the whole initiation ritual, were dressed in a *sipmbi*, a loin cloth made from the skin of the *kumbui* bat. So, evidently, there is some kind of ideational link between this myth and initiation, even though Mindsh, for example, did not relate the *sipmbi* loincloth used in initiations to the men's "bat devices" mentioned in the story.

When Kubeli told us his version, he too did not provide any explanation concerning the specific details of the myth. Kabuseli's motive was to introduce us to the figure of Kolimbange and tell us about his power. Kolimbange is regarded as the primeval ancestor of the Yagum clan to which Kabuseli himself belongs. Dogs also rank as ancestors of this clan. From time to time (although not in connection with this myth), Kabuseli identified with Kolimbange by speaking of the mythical ancestor in the first person.

Sabwandshan wanted to tell us her version because the myth so drastically exemplifies the topic of gender antagonism, something which she felt strongly about – at least this was the impression I got after the intensive conversations we had. I assume she told me the sixth version of the myth, which I deal with below, for the same or a similar reason.

I was unable to find out more about Wombre's motive for telling me her version.

### *Formal aspects*

#### *With regard to function I:*

Right from the start, the male narrators mention specific names.<sup>246</sup> All three make reference to the name of the men's house. While Mindsh and Kubeli give the same name (Kumbiambit is evidently a contraction of *kumbui kolimbit*), Kabuseli suggests the name of the men's house he belongs to. Mindsh is also the first to mention Kolimbange. The two women narrators never mention any names.

<sup>246</sup> For the Iatmul it is important that every being, every object of significance is given a name.

*Re II:*

In this section, the storyline runs parallel in all versions. What is striking is that Mindsh, who is a gifted sculptor and builder, describes the work on the men's house in almost affectionate terms. Sabwandshan leaves out this passage altogether, while Wombre introduces a *wundumbu* woman, a female bush spirit, who wilfully undoes all the men's hard work.

*Re III:*

In this section, the storylines presented by the men and women narrators being to drift apart quite markedly. Mindsh makes no reference at all to the dispute between the men and women and to the woman in the men's house. Kubeli passes the blame for the dispute on to the women and their refusal to provide food for their husbands. Kabuseli mentions a woman residing in the men's house, but without specific reference to her capture.

Sabwandshan speaks of a woman who is being held captive in the men's house. Wombre got the story of a female bush spirit already rolling in function II; now the woman is being held captive in the men's house.

*Re IV:*

In consequence of function II, Mindsh makes no reference to this plot line; neither does Kubeli.

Kabuseli and Sabwandshan's narratives run parallel. Wombre leaves out this detail.

*Re V:*

Here, too, Mindsh and Kubeli forego this plot line, while Sabwandshan, Kabuseli, and Wombre provide parallel storylines.

*Re VI and VII:*

In these sections, the versions provided by Sabwandshan, Kabuseli, and Wombre follow almost corresponding storylines.

*Re VIII:*

Mindsh and Kubeli pick up the story again here. Mindsh offers no explanation for the action in this function. Kabuseli mentions Kolimbange for the first time here.

The storyline is the same in all versions.

*Re IX:*

Mindsh, a manually skilful man, is the only one who has the men testing their new devices.

Kubeli mentions Kolimbange here for the first time. However, he does not refer to the "trick" the men use to make the women leave the village so that the men can take off in their "bat devices".

Kabuseli offers a special detail with regard to the bats' departure, thus offering an explanation for the emergence of two different types of bat.

Sabwandshan, too, does not mention the "trick" the men use to send the women off to work; nor does she refer to the destruction of the men's house.

*Re X:*

Kubeli and Kabuseli offer no explanation as to why Kolimbange cannot fly. Again, Sabwandshan does not mention the name Kolimbange; Wombre names him for the first time.

*Re XI:*

How Kolimbange and the two sisters come into contact is described in the same way by all narrators.

*Re XII:*

Mindsh and Kabuseli have little to say about this function, leaving out most of the details. They do not mention that the village women practised intercourse with dogs instead of with men and that they gave birth to dog-children, nor do they elaborate on the fact that Kolimbange is kept hidden away by the two sisters.

Kubeli and Wombre's storylines are almost identical here, except for the fact that only Kubeli refers to Kolimbange's magical powers. It is through these powers that the boys grow up in almost no time.

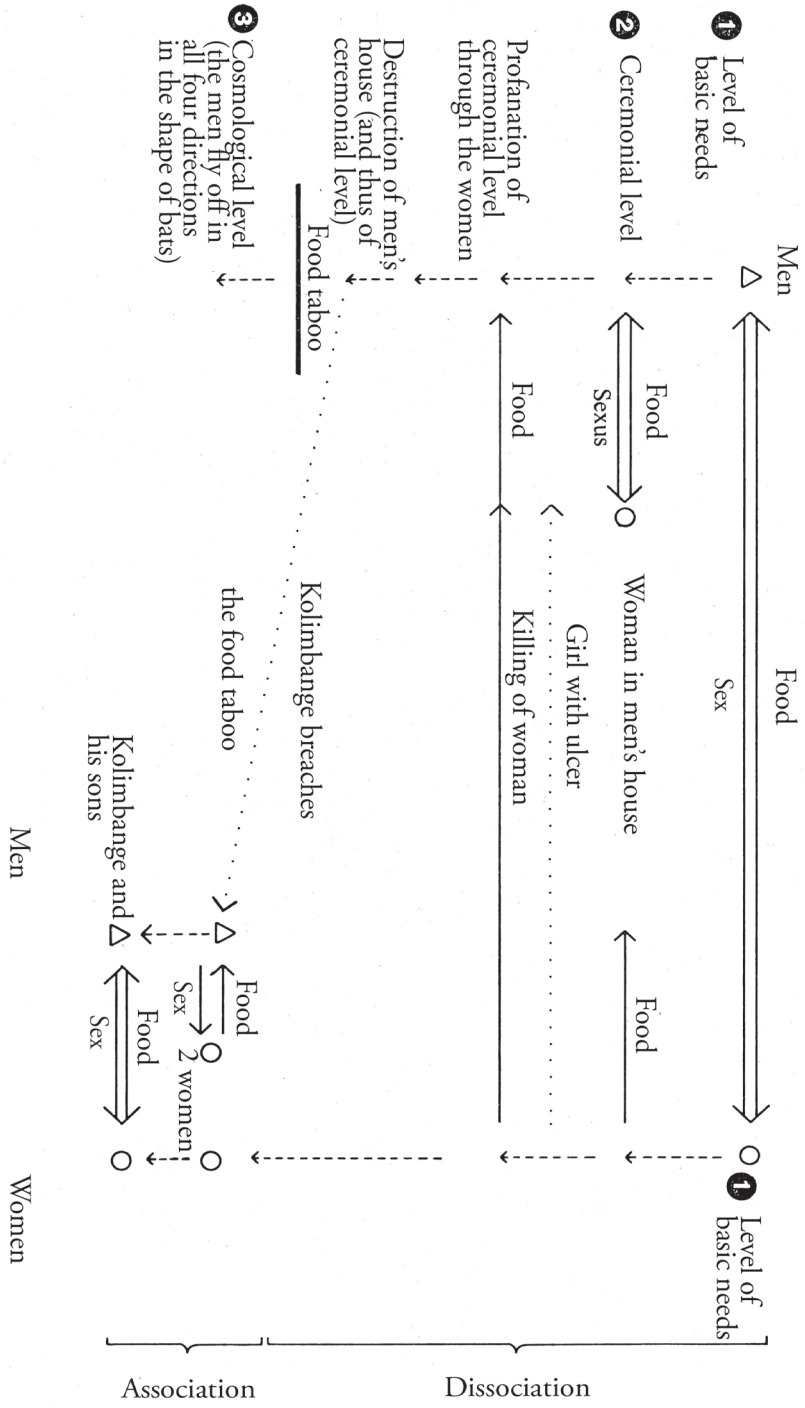
Sabwandshan does not flesh out how the two sisters lied to the other women.

*Re XIII:*

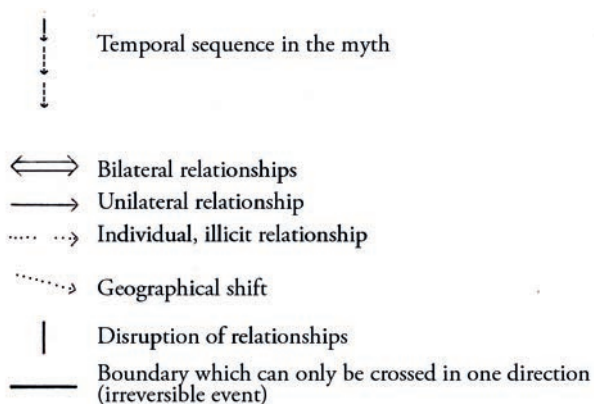
Here too, Mindsh and Kabuseli make no reference to dogs. Kabuseli confers on Kolimbange great powers which he passes on to his sons. Then Kolimbange leaves the village for good.

Kubeli, Sabwandshan, and Wombre provide matching versions of this last section.

The objective of the table on the next page is to render visible the myth's structures in terms of gender antagonism. Primarily this meant separating the genders into discrete spheres, that is, a male and a female sphere. Implicitly this suggests that, according to Iatmul thinking, the world is divided into a male and a female sphere, respectively (into male and female things). Although this sharp division into oppositions could be considered as somewhat arbitrary, it in many ways fits the Iatmul and their "disposition to think in oppositions and dualistic categories" (Schuster 1973: 477; translation N. S.). Running transversely to the male and female spheres, I have sectioned the world into discrete levels, beginning with the "economic level", followed by the "ceremonial level", and finally the "cosmological level". The first level, representing the productive and reproductive bases of the local community, is shared equally by men and women, albeit without specifically taking into account the social configurations that come with it. The "ceremonial level" relates to the





*Key to Symbols*

men's ritual life, signified here by the building of a new men's house. The construction of a new men's house is probably one of the most challenging ceremonial tasks men face. This ceremonial level is an exclusive male sphere, as is the next level, the cosmological level. The threshold between the two comes in the form of strict rules of conduct, specifically, the compliance with food taboos and taboos governing sexual behaviour. The cosmological level comes into effect when the men depart from the village in their "bat devices". At the beginning of the myth, the relationship that normally connects the male and female spheres is implicitly addressed: the exchange of food and sex. In the table, this relationship is indicated by arrows pointing in both directions. Food and sex are the links between men and women. – It is only when this interrelationship is disrupted – the men build a men's house and thus segregate themselves from the women – that the male and female spheres fall apart. The exchange of food and sex, which, until then, has kept men and women together comes to an end, and the men transfer these responsibilities to a single woman who resides in the men's house (ceremonial level), creating a rift between husbands and wives. The intermediary between the male and female spheres, that is, the female go-between who is the first to enter the male sphere, is a girl afflicted by an ugly ulcer. The discoveries the young woman makes there leads to the death of the "secretive" woman in the men's house at the hands of the other women. The killing comes in stages. The act of hair cutting, which Leach identifies as the execution of a socio-sexual change in status (Leach 1958: 153), is factually a pre-stage to killing. But possibly it merely refers to an action that leaves open two options: to kill the woman, or to befriend her. Evidently the village women choose the former. By killing the woman in the men's house, the women step out of their traditional sphere ("level one") in a dual sense: first, the act represents a violation of the ritual sphere, by definition a prerogative of men (the ban on entering the men's house); secondly, through the act of killing the woman with whom the men had shared sex and food, is turned into food herself prepared by the women the men had ignored. Unsuspectingly, the men consummate the sago pudding and, therefore, the woman's bodily essence. Thus, the

men fall prey to their wives' ruse and revenge which leaves no space for reparation or reconciliation. As a consequence, the men decide to destroy the men's house, leaving them with a last refuge: the cosmological level. Entering this sphere is only possible by complying with the strict food (and sexual) taboos. Kolimbange, who flouts this rule by consuming food – the resource which, under normal circumstances, links men and women – does not make it to the cosmological level, leaving him dangling in a sago palm instead. As it turns out, Kolimbange is the key mediator in the myth; he acts as a broker between the disrupted male and female spheres. His role is that of conflict resolution, thus preventing the irreparable disruption of men and women by establishing a new relationship with the latter – the two sisters – from which, in due course, two boys emerge. The sequence of events from function I through function IX is marked by growing dissociation, while functions XI to XIII are distinguished by increasing association. Between dissociation and association, we have a transitional phase (function X) which, in structural terms, acts as a kind of intermediary. For a moment, Kolimbange himself lapses into the female domain: he is unable to fly and strands at a typical female site, their bathing place, so the two sisters have to carry him to the house. Through the act of sexual intercourse he is able to reconstitute the traditional male sphere as a counterpart and balance to the female sphere. However, only after he and his two sons have slept with all the women in the village, and the latter have discarded the dogs which they had temporarily integrated into the female sphere is the old order between men and women re-established. The unfolding conflict is not depicted consistently in all versions. Mindsh, for example, skips important passages (for instance, the woman kept prisoner in the men's house), probably because, when telling us the myth, his eye was actually on explaining to us how bats came into being. The reason for the conflict between men and women as told by Kubeli (the women refused to provide food for the men because they had started building a men's house) is structurally in accordance with the three other myth variants – as borne out by the table above and the link between food and sex therein.

### *Conclusion*

The myth, rendered here in five different variants, describes gender antagonism and its ramifications clearly from a male perspective, although some leeway, or interpretive scope, remains given. Still, the way the conflict is resolved suggests a male approach to conflict resolution or, put differently: this myth is inherently a male product. The reason why I ventured this hypothesis should become more evident from the (counter)example I present below.

A few days after recording the myth from Sabwandshan, she called for me and insisted that I also hear the myth in which it is the women who desert their husbands, and not the other way around. In fact, the new story is nothing but yet another variant of the previous myth, but this time with a clearly women's bent.

**Function I/II: The men build a men's house / Contact with women is restricted**

"This is the story of the men who build a men's house. When they began work, they told the women to bake as many sago cakes as they could because they were now planning to really get down to work (that is, they would not be returning home to their wives for quite a while). They took the sago cakes and got down to work. They cut rattan and felled trees. All the men joined in on the work."

**Function III: Partial disruption of relationship between men and women (the men no longer provide their women with meat)**

"From time to time they went to the bush to hunt pigs. They would kill it, cook it, and eat it straight away on site. They would eat the whole pig, leaving nothing for the women and children, no, they ate everything."

**Function IV: One single man retains a relationship with his wife**

"Only one man thought of his wife. He took a piece of meat and wrapped it in a leaf so that the other men wouldn't see it. He told the men nothing about this. He then took the meat and brought it to his wife, telling her: 'No man brought his wife food, I am the only to do so. You can eat it.' He gave her the piece of meat."

**Function V/VI: The woman agrees to the relationship / Expansion of the relationship to other women**

"She ate only a little, taking the rest to two old women. The two old women were the most respected women in the village [Tok Pisin: *tupela i pes long ples*]. She had only eaten a little, the rest she took to the two women, telling them: 'My husband brought me a piece. I only ate little. The rest is for you.' That's what she told the two women and gave them the meat. The two ate it."

**Function VII: same as II**

"Sometime later, the men planned to go away again for some time. The women prepared many sago cakes. The men took them and left. Again they worked [on the men's house]."

**Function VIII: same as III**

"Again they hunted a pig, cooked it, and ate it. They left nothing."

**Function IX: same as IV**

"But this one man thought of his wife and again brought her a small piece of meat."

**Function X: same as V**

“The wife ate a little and...

**Function XI: same as VI**

...took the rest to give to the two old women. The two ate it and said:

**Function XII: The women become aware of the unequal relationship and discuss the matter**

‘Ah, that’s what the men are doing with us.’ The woman said: ‘Yes, no man brings anything home to his wife. They all come empty handed. My husband is the only one to think of me, so he brings me a little meat. I eat some of it, the rest I bring to you.’”

**Function XIII: The women consider ending the relationship with their husbands**

“‘I think we should consider leaving our men and the village’, the old women suggested.”

**Function XIV: The women agree to ending the relationship with their husbands**

“The village women gathered at the house of this one woman. They all agreed. They readied themselves.”

**Function XV: The women abandon their husbands**

“That same night, they set off, two in each canoe.”

**Function XVI: One woman retains contact with her husband**

“This woman, however, said to her husband: ‘This night, I’m actually going to leave you. I’ll bake sago cakes for you, many sago cakes, one for each day. When you’ve eaten all of them, it’s time to follow me.’ Those were her words. ‘I’ll be alone in a canoe. When you’ve eaten the sago cakes, and there’s only one left, get into your canoe and follow me. On the way, I’ll leave signs by snapping the blades of grass and the twigs of trees, so you can follow me.’ That’s what she said to her husband.”

**Function XVII: same as XV**

“The women set off and left. They followed a *baret* [stream].”

**Function XVIII: same as XVI**

“The woman snapped some reeds on her way, thus leaving behind signs.”

**Function XIX: same as XV**

“They continued on their journey. The woman followed in the last canoe. They came to a lake and went ashore, near a hill. They berthed their canoes, tethering them by ramming the paddles into the ground [on both sides of the canoe]. Then they proceeded through the forest.”

**Function XX: same as XVI**

“The woman snapped the branch of a tree.”

**Function XXI: same as XV**

“They continued until they reached a lake.”

**Function XXII: same as XVI**

“There she stuck a dry twig into the ground and placed a second twig across it.”

**Function XXIII: same as XV**

“The women continued on their journey.”

**Function XXIV: same as XVI**

“The woman kept on leaving behind signs. In the forest she snapped twigs.”

**Function XXV: Foundation of a village**

“Finally, the women reached a place which looked nice, high above the water. All the women found it a good place. So, they started building houses there. They felled trees and built houses. They remained in this place.”

**Function XXVI: The women perform the roles of men**

“When they had left their husbands and their village, they had taken all the good things from the men’s house: the *tumbuan*, the long bamboo flutes. They had taken all these things with them to their new village. There they performed a large *singsing*. They struck the hand-held drums and beat the *garamut* [slit-gong]. They did this in the same way as the men had done previously. They built a huge ceremonial house. So the women lived in this village in which there were no men, only women. The women performed many *singsing*; they were very proud [Tok Pisin: *amamas*].”

**Function XXVII: The man followed his wife's trail**

"In the meantime, this man had eaten all his wife's sago cakes. There was only one left. At night, he got into his canoe and followed the women's trail. He saw the signs his wife had left. He saw the snapped grass, in the forest he saw the snapped twigs."

**Function XXVIII: Arrival in the village of women**

"Finally, he reached the village of women. He hid at the back end of the village. When the sun set in the evening, he went to the spot where the women threw away their rubbish."

**Function XXIX: The woman establishes contact with her husband**

"His wife came to the spot to empty her basket of rubbish. Then she saw him. She discarded her rubbish. She turned around and asked him: 'Ah, how did you get here? – But it's good, just wait here! I don't know what the other women will say to this. If I took you with me now, they might kill you, or – I don't know what they would do with you', so she spoke to him."

**Function XXX: The woman seeks help from one of the man's sisters**

"She said to her husband's sister: 'Come, your brother's here.' The two women went together to see the man. Then they went back to the women and told them:

**Function XXXI: The women are informed about the presence of a man**

'There's a man here. He is from our village.'

**Function XXXII: Positive reaction of the women**

'Why have you been hiding him? Go and fetch him!'"

**Function XXXIII: All the women establish contact with the man**

"The two went to fetch the man. All the women approached him and had a good look at him. Then they performed a large *singsing*. They touched his head [Tok Pisin: *ol i kisim em long het*]). They performed a large *singsing*; they danced around the men's house [Tok Pisin: *ol i mekim save i go; putim em i stap*]). They kept the man with them. He had intercourse with all the women. This one man stayed with them. Many children were born, and now we have again many men, women, and children in the village."

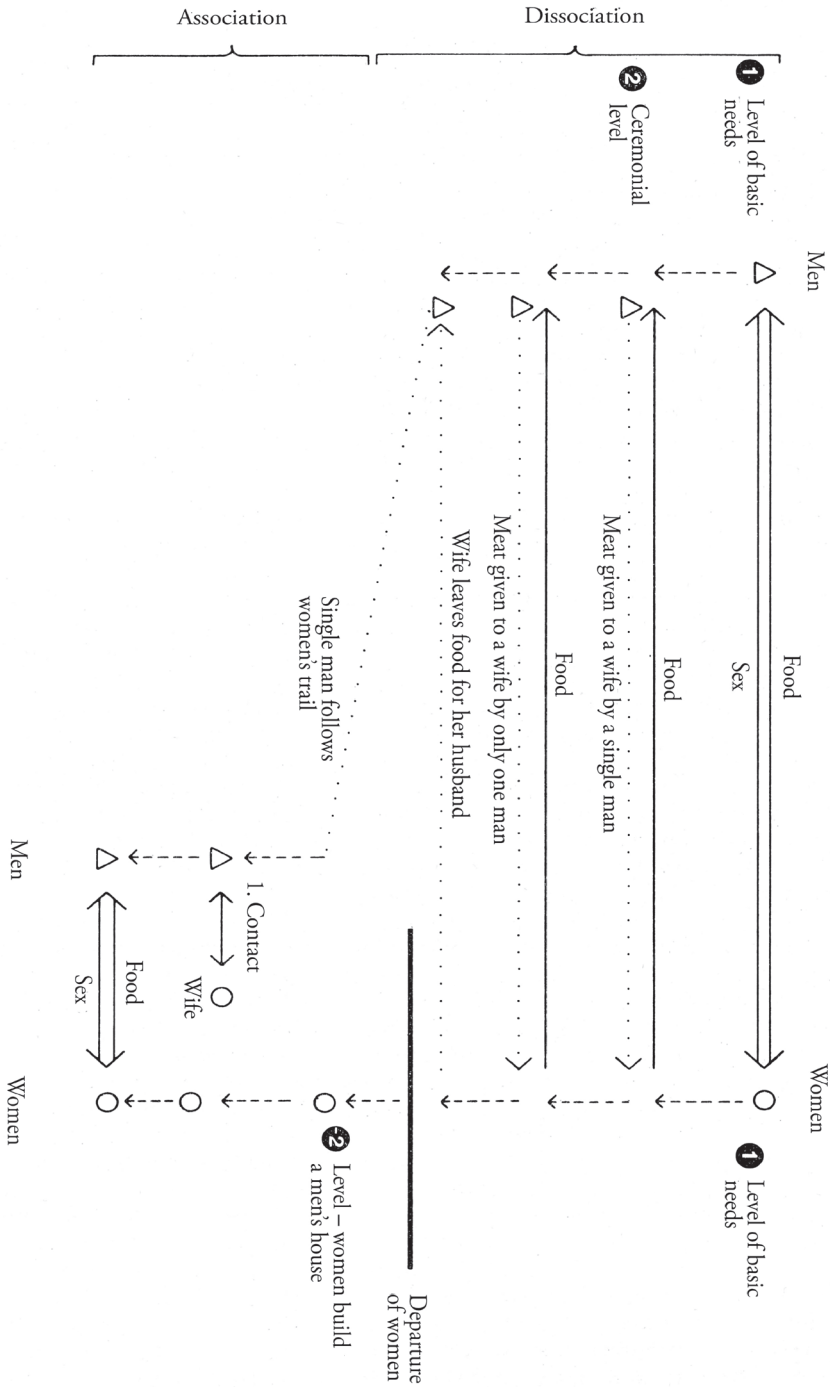
*Comments*

The table below follows the same setup as the one above. The only novelty (as far as the terms are concerned) refers to the inclusion of the additional level 2-1 which makes reference to the fact that the women have reversed the existing conditions by creating a ceremonial level of their own.

Here, too, the starting point is the food exchange relationship between men and women which is disrupted when the men start building a men's house (segregation by establishing a ceremonial level). Contrary to the first myth, the women are now ordered by their husbands to prepare large quantities of food (sago cakes). However, the exchange is a one-way affair: the men go to collect the food the women have prepared but do not reciprocate by offering them meat from the pigs they have hunted and roasted. Only one man brings meat home to his wife who, in turn, passes on some of it to two respected, old women (representing the village women in toto?). The two old women prompt the women to leave the village. The one woman (the one who had been given meat by her husband) reaffirms her relationship with her husband by preparing large quantities of sago and informing him that the women were about to leave the village. While, in the previous myth, the men escape to the cosmological level (by transforming into bats and flying off in all directions), here it is the women who leave the village by canoe. This one woman leaves behind signs in the landscape so that her husband can later follow her. In this way, she breaches the women's covenant, just as her husband flouts the rules the men had agreed upon (in the previous myth the rules had been breached by one single man, Kolimbange, in the present case by both a man and a woman). In so doing, the husband and wife prevent the irrevocable split between men and women. When the relationship between husband and wife threatens to wane – his food supply is almost depleted – he goes in search of her by following the signs she has left behind. He goes to the rear end of the village, the place where women normally discard their kitchen waste, a place usually avoided by men. To be able to disclose the man's presence and introduce him to the other women, the wife needs the help of the man's sister. It is only when all the women consent to his presence that the exchange of food/sex between the female and the male spheres (represented by the one man) can be resumed, and the balance in society based on reciprocal relationships is reinstated.

On the basis of a number of prominent features, one may assume that this variant deals with the same basic myth theme as do the five preceding versions. Evidence for this are some key functions they have in common; specifically, this refers to the functions I, III, IX (in the first five variants) and I, III, XV (in the last variant); X (in the first five variants) and XVI (in the last variant); XI (in the first five variants) and XXIX (in the last variant); and XVIII (in the first five variants) and XXXIII (in the last variant).

Compared with the other five versions, this last myth variant differs on one main point. While we have before an ongoing process of consistent dissociation, this last version describes the sustained relationships between an individual husband and his





wife as a special, exceptional case (in fact, their relationship never breaks off). The two act as a mediating *couple*. Still, the overall trend is dissociation, namely between men and women in general. But, at the same time, the two principal spheres (male and female) reveal a certain degree of permeability, and it is the durability of this one special relationship between an individual husband and his wife that gives rise to association.

As alluded to in the earlier part of this study, Iatmul men and women take their bearings from quite different value sets. One of the main differences seems to be that while women seek union in a more or less harmonious relationship with their husbands, men seem to grant the marital union comparatively little significance and clearly favour the communion of men. This “female mindset” becomes manifest in the last variant of the myth insofar as this one woman in the myth lends her personal relationship with her husband prime significance. On the basis of this I think it is justified to call this last version the women’s variant of this specific myth.

Against this background it also becomes plausible why the first five versions were described as “male constructs”. As mentioned above, Sabwandshan told us this last variant in reaction to the account she had offered previously. The first five variants bear testimony to the traditional, standardized mode of narrating myths, while the sixth version, although following the same plot, provides a distinctly more unencumbered and more gender-specific interpretation. Or, to rephrase it, it represents the thoughts of a woman on a theme otherwise clearly determined and phrased by men.

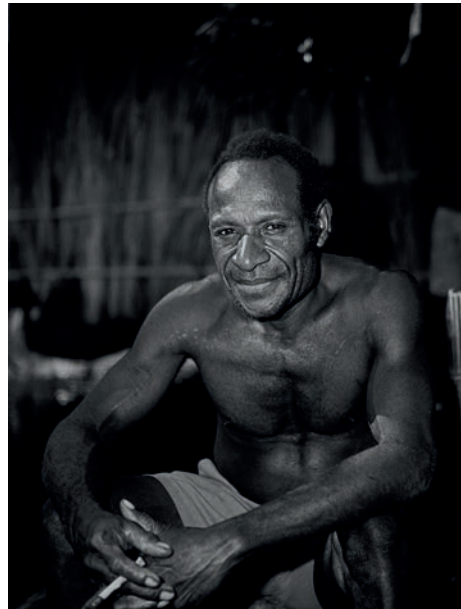
What Iatmul men would have to say about this last, women’s variant, I cannot say for sure but suppose they would put it down as a *giaman stori* (Tok Pisin), that is, as a false or untrue story, not least because the “female” version provides no names for the acting persona, otherwise one of the hallmarks of “true myths”. However, in the context of the last part of this study in which I look at relatively fixed forms of cultural expression – myths – and their variations, this kind of denial of the validity of a myth version must be seen as a male backlash to an individual rendition of the myth which met with wide approval among women.<sup>247</sup> From an anthropological viewpoint it would certainly also be wrong to discredit the “female” version as irrelevant or even false. Simply because, among the Iatmul, the overwhelming majority of myths are “invented” by men<sup>248</sup> and because men habitually represent their society and culture externally, it would be erroneous to describe “their myths” as the only true and valid versions.

<sup>247</sup> “Nous proposons, au contraire, de définir chaque mythe par l’ensemble de toutes ses versions. Autrement dit: le mythe reste mythe aussi longtemps qu’il est perçu comme tel” (Levi-Strauss 1958: 240). In our specific case – especially also in consideration of the explicit gender antagonism – it suffices if the myth is acknowledged as such by only one gender group.

<sup>248</sup> I am not saying that men invent myths with a rational plan in mind. Unfortunately, we still know very little about how myths are generated.

Women's "different way" of thinking, their striving for synthesis, or association, seems to me to be sufficient proof to show that, in earlier times, women did not pursue a fully developed ritual system of their own independent of the men (as often claimed in myths). In actual fact, they would have been out of their depth to follow such a path because Iatmul women feel and think differently and would certainly reject the idea, now as in the past, of regarding family life and the ritual sphere as two completely disjunct fields. In point of fact, I argue that myths that describe women as the primeval ritual specialists and portray men as beings in the role that women play today as nothing less than the product of male fears, or, to put it in less psychological terms, they represent justifications of the ruling conditions advanced by the segment of society which, outwardly, plays the dominant part.

The next myth, of which I recorded two versions, ties in neatly with the "female" myth variant recounted by Sabwandshan, but this time she told the story from a "male" perspective, namely of what happens when a man called Nobangowi/Moiemgowi betrays his own male community. In one version he retains relationships with his wife during a feast in the men's house, despite an imposed taboo; in the other, he incites the women to desert their husbands and move in with him, thus breaching the ethos of the self-contained association of men. For this reason, the others kill him, showing that the men are prepared to defend the "impermeability" of the male sphere under all circumstances (contrary to the Iatmul women for whom "permeability" is a normal condition).



*Fig. 70: Slabui (1973).*

The first myth version was told by Mingu (Kisamalidshane lineage of the Wuenquendshap clan) and translated in her presence by her husband Kubeli.

The second variant was told by Slabui (Yagum clan).

### **Function I: Initial situation**

*Mingu:*

"In the beginning, all human beings lived in Mebinbit. They lived like this, and we, their children, have this to tell: there once lived a man called Moiem-

gowi. He was married to two women. Initially he was married to two women.”

Slabui:

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**Function II: All the women move in with Moiengowi**

*Mingu:*

“Then all the women in the village deserted their husbands and moved in with Moiengowi. All the women left their husbands.”

Slabui:

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**Function III: The men are asked to perform women’s chores**

*Mingu:*

“The men were forced to bake sago and prepare food for themselves.”

*Slabui:*

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**Function IV: The men discuss the situation**

*Mingu:*

“They gathered to talk [about what to do]. They decided: ‘We will perform a *singsing* in the men’s house. We will stage a feast.’”

*Slabui:*

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**Function V: The men stage a feast in the men’s house**

*Mingu:*

“They built a fence around the men’s house. This men’s house was the Muintshembit men’s house.<sup>249</sup> When they had built the fence, they took their *kundu* drums and went inside to perform the *singsing*.”

<sup>249</sup> The *sagi* mentions Nangurumbit as the name of the men’s house.

*Slabui:*

“One day the men gathered in the men’s house. They wanted to stage a *singsing*. They performed a large *singsing*. All remained in the men’s house. Nobody was allowed to go home. Only at midday they went to their houses to fetch sago and water in a coconut shell [before returning to the men’s house]. The men remained in the men’s house the whole time, busy with their *singsing*. They had built a large fence around the men’s house. The *singsing* went on for a long time, for many days and nights. No man was allowed to go home to be with his wife and children. It was forbidden.”

#### **Function VI: Moiengowi/Nobangowi went back to his house**

*Mingu:*

“Moiengowi went to his house.”

*Slabui:*

“One man, however, hid himself and secretly went to see his wife and children.”

#### **Function VII: Punishment (death) of Moiengowi/Nobangowi**

*Mingu:*

“The men saw him. They made a small knot [Tok Pisin: *not*] and uttered a spell over it. Then they hid it under the floorboard. After they had hid it, Moiengowi came back outside. He stood on the house ladder. After that, he lived for only one day more; he died on the second day. He died.”

*Slabui:*

“When something like this happened, the men used to find out about it; all the men would fetch their knives, axes, and spears, and kill the man. That’s what always happened, which is why the men were afraid to go to their houses. They all stayed together, confined to the men’s house [Tok Pisin: *ol i save kalabus tasol long hausboi*] and focused on their *singsing*. – This man Nobangowi died, he died within the enclosure, [he was killed] because he had gone to see his wife. His wife and children never saw him again. They thought he was staying [in the men’s house].

#### **Function VIII: Moiengowi/Nobangowi is buried in the men’s house**

*Mingu:*

“They prepared a grave and buried him; he was buried in the men’s house.”

*Slabui:*

“They buried him within the enclosure. They buried him; they didn’t go to the village. They only performed the *singsing*.”

**Function IX: The wife (women) was (were) not told about the man’s death**

*Mingu:*

“The women knew nothing about this. Another man went in his place to fetch the sago from his house while the men remained confined [to the men’s house].”

*Slabui:*

“The men did not tell their wives [about Nobangowi’s death]. And no man told Nobangowi’s wife about his death; that was not on, such a thing was forbidden. The wife and Nobangowi’s children often asked the friend who came to fetch sago and water in his place what he was up to. The same man always went to fetch sago [in place of Nobangowi] and they always asked him. He told them: ‘He is sick, he cannot walk which is why I come to fetch his sago and water.’ He lied to them and took the sago, which he later ate himself. All women thought he was telling the truth. But, in actual fact, Nobangowi was dead.”

**Function X: The man’s skull is exhumed and adorned**

*Mingu:*

“After five days, the men exhumed his skull, washed it, and put it out into the sun to dry, before placing it on a *limbum* sheath.”

*Slabui:*

“After his corpse had rotted, the men exhumed the body and retrieved the skull from the grave. They washed it. They heated water and boiled it. They went on to produce a mix of earth [clay] and tree oil, and spread the paste across the man’s skull. They added a few small shells.”

**Function XI: The women get to hear that there is going to be *singsing***

*Mingu:*

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*Slabui:*

“They fixed a day for the *singsing*. As the day approached, the women and children got to hear about the upcoming event. They, too, readied themselves for the day. On the day, all the villagers gathered.”

**Function XII: Nobangowi carries the skull of Moiengowi / the *kas* carries the skull of Nobangowi**

*Mingu:*

“This man Nobangowi carried his brother’s skull. He carried his skull and...”

*Slabui:*

“The men took the dead man’s skull and placed it in a sago bag made from the shoot of a sago palm [Tok Pisin: *kru*]. Into this they placed the man’s skull. The man who had regularly gone to fetch the sago in his [Nobangowi’s] place, carried the bag. When midday had passed, the men began with their *singsing*. The man [*kas*<sup>250</sup>] was the first to step forth. A few men followed him. The *singsing* was performed by a long line of men.”

**Function XIII: The men perform a *singsing* and show the skull to the women**

*Mingu:*

“... left the men’s house. While climbing down, he sang the following song:  
 O Moiengowi, Moiengowi, *ngwal mina*, Moiem Nangurumbitna’ *bangugoli, bangugoli*  
 O Nobangowi, Nobangowi, *ngwal mina* Nangurumbitna *sagigoli, sagigoli*.  
 That is the *singsing* they performed.”

*Slabui:*

“Now they all stepped out [of the enclosure]. They sang; the man carrying the skull sang the following song:  
 O Moiengowi, Moiengowi, O Nobangowi, Nobangowi  
 O Moiengowi, *nyait nina, mai* Nangurumbit *bangugoli, bangugoli*.  
 Nobangowi *way mina*, Nangurumbit, *sagigoli, sagigoli, sagigoli*.  
 He sang this song and climbed down [from the upper floor of the men’s house].

<sup>250</sup> Kin term for a child’s father-in-law. Here, Nobangowi was the father of his child’s (most likely son’s) spouse

**Function XIV: The women recognize the man's skull***Mingu:*

"At that moment, the women knew what had happened."

*Slabui:*

"Now the wife of the deceased man realized what had happened. She looked: the men were holding the skull. She looked again: now she knew. She saw her husband's head. The men were holding it up high and stepped out [of the enclosure]. She saw him and felt it: 'That's the head of my husband', those were her words, and she wept. Now all the men and women began lamenting."

**Function XV: Return of the wives to their husbands (association) /  
End of the ceremony in the men's house***Mingu:*

"They returned to their husbands."

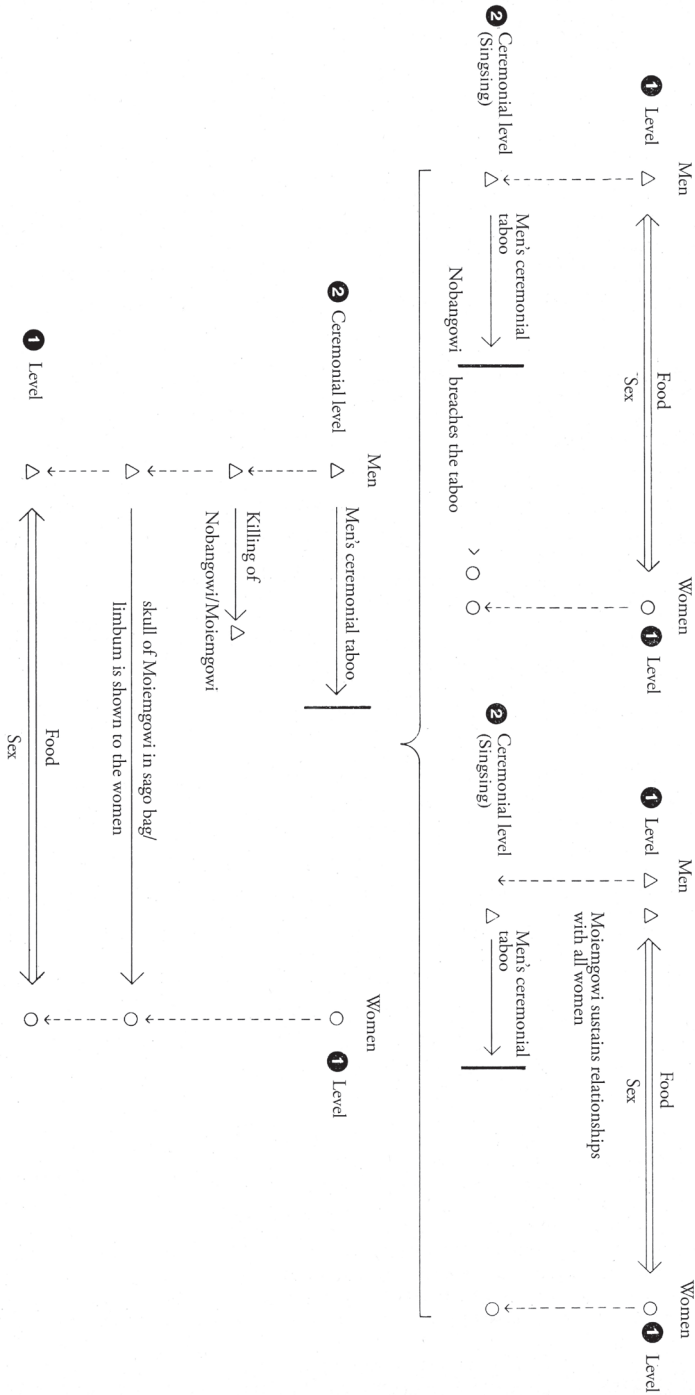
*Slabui:*

"They stopped the ceremony and tore down the enclosure."

*Comments*

In the variant as told by Slabui, the men have gathered in the men's house (ceremonial level) which entails the complete avoidance of women. Nobangowi jeopardizes the male community by secretly visiting his wife, thus breaching a pivotal ceremonial taboo. After detecting his misdoing, the men kill him within the ceremonial sphere. This time, the male community remains impervious: the news of the death of Nobangowi does not leak out. In place of Nobangowi, another man goes to fetch food from Nobangowi's wife. It is only when Nobangowi's skull has been prepared and adorned that the men step out from the ceremonial level and tell the women about Nobangowi's death.

If the ceremonial level is undermined by a man (or a woman), in other words, if someone breaches the rules that govern the ceremonial level, it is equivalent to the destruction of the ceremonial level as such (see Bateson, 1958: 135). In the same vein, if a man dies within the enclosure or in the men's house during a ceremony, it is reason enough for the feast to be stopped. In the myth just recounted, both eventualities occur alongside each other. The men then show the skull to the women; it is displayed in a small bag habitually used for carrying sage cakes.





In Mingu's version, Moiemgowi does not object to the women leaving their husbands and moving in with him. Evidently, his connivance amounts to a breach of male solidarity, which is reason enough to have him killed.

One could argue here that, in the two variants, the men's motive for killing Moiemgowi/Nobangowi is based on different prerequisites. However, what the two incidents have in common – and this is the decisive point – is that in both cases we are dealing with the deeds of renegades, in other words, with men who have violated the principles governing the community of men.

Here, too, we are faced with the process of dissociation, actually twofold dissociation: for one thing, between the men themselves, for the other, between men and women: the killing of Moiemgowi/Nobangowi (whose identity, or at least close affinity, finds clear expression in the lament performed by the mourners) takes place at the ceremonial level, that is, within the exclusively male sphere, and initially, the man's death is kept secret from the women. In the first version, association takes precedence again when the women return to their husbands; in the second version, dissociation comes to an end when the men conclude the ceremony and reunite with the women by showing them the killed man's skull and tearing down the ritual enclosure.<sup>251</sup> It is only by purging the "renegade" that association becomes possible. In both versions, Moiemgowi/Nobangowi is branded a negative mediator; in the story of Koliuan, recounted earlier by Sabwandshan, however, the man expelled from the men's community is credited with a positive role.

Immediately after recounting the myth above, Mingu told us a further story which I would like to present here. On the face of it, it is not a myth but rather a historical account,<sup>252</sup> which, over time and in passing down, became modified in a way which, from the perspective of an outside observer, comes close to a myth. Still, to Mingu the story of Moiemgowi was just as real as the (following) story of Malimbange.

I add the story of Malimbange here because I believe it is a good example to illustrate the difference between men's and women's mind frames (possibly also modes of action). Not least in view of the context it was told in, the story of Malimbange represents a woman's reflection on the myth of Moiemgowi rendered above. The story was told by Mingu in Iatmul and translated into Tok Pisin by her husband Kubeli in her presence.

<sup>251</sup> I am not sure how significant it is that the men show the skull to the women wrapped in a sago carrying bag / *limbum* (sago palm sheath container). It is certainly noteworthy that when the men go to fetch the food their wives have prepared, it is kept in a bag of this kind, or a *limbum* container. In comparison, the men present their wives with the opposite of food (a kind of anti-food), similar to the myth of Kolimbange where the women dish up for their husbands sago pudding mixed with the remains of the ominous woman from the men's house.

<sup>252</sup> Clues I received from Milan Stanek and Florence Weiss in Palimbe point in the same direction.

**Function I: Malinge is raided by the Nyaula**

“One day, the Nyaula came to Malinge on a headhunting raid and killed all the people [present in the village].”

**Function II: Malimbange who has a sick leg is taken captive**

“Only one man, Malimbange, who was suffering from a sick leg, survived. They [the Nyaula] took him with them.

**Function III: Most of the people are absent during the raid**

“His wife had gone fishing on the nearby lake of Kalagame. Most of the people were away spearing fish.”

**Function IV: Malimbange’s wife hears of her husband’s capture**

“When she came home, her husband was nowhere to be found. She said to herself: ‘The enemy has taken my husband.’”

**Function V: She follows him**

“Then she sets off. She puts some betel nuts in her string bag along with some betel pepper. She baked many sago cakes. She readied everything and carried it to her canoe. She drove to the territory of the Nyaula. When she arrived, she saw him.”

**Function VI: Malimbange is tortured by the Nyaula**

“They had tied him to a stone on the *waak* mound. They (the Nyaula) were dancing. They burnt his leg with fire. They performed a *singsing*.”

**Function VII: His wife had them loosen his tethers**

“The wife approached the place. She said: ‘He has a sick leg; you must treat his wounds. Keep him in the men’s house; let him go to the men’s house.’”

**Function VIII: The two go to the men' house where the wife gives Malimbange some food**

“She loosened the rattan tethers with which he had been tied up and took him to the men’s house where she gave him food. He ate. She picked up her string bag and gave him some betel; he chewed the betel and rolled himself a smoke from a tobacco leaf. Thus, they stayed there.”

**Function IX: She performs a *singsing***

“The wife got up. She took a piece of bamboo [Tok Pisin: *hap mambu*] and rammed it into the ground. She performed a *singsing*. She danced around the men’s house, singing. The *singsing* lasted until morning.”

**Function X: The Nyaula set her grass skirt alight**

“Then the men came and set her grass skirt alight. They set it alight, but she continued dancing and singing. The fire burned and burned.”

**Function XI: The Nyaula kill the woman**

“When the fire had gone out, they killed her with a spear. They speared the woman. They killed her.”

**Function XII: They also kill Malimbange**

“Then they entered the men’s house and speared her husband as well. Now they had killed both. The men beat the *garamut* [slit gong] and performed a large *singsing* in the village.”

*Comments*

Malimbange, who was suffering from an affliction to his leg, is spared from being killed in the village (for reasons untold) and taken captive by the Nyaula. This grants him special status comparable to that of Nobangowi/Moiemgowi – albeit with inverse signs. He is taken to their village and tied to a stone on the *waak* mound, the ceremonial mound in front of the men’s house. Thus, he suddenly finds himself in the ceremonial sphere of an enemy village. In the previous myths, it was Nobangowi who left the ceremonial level, or sphere.

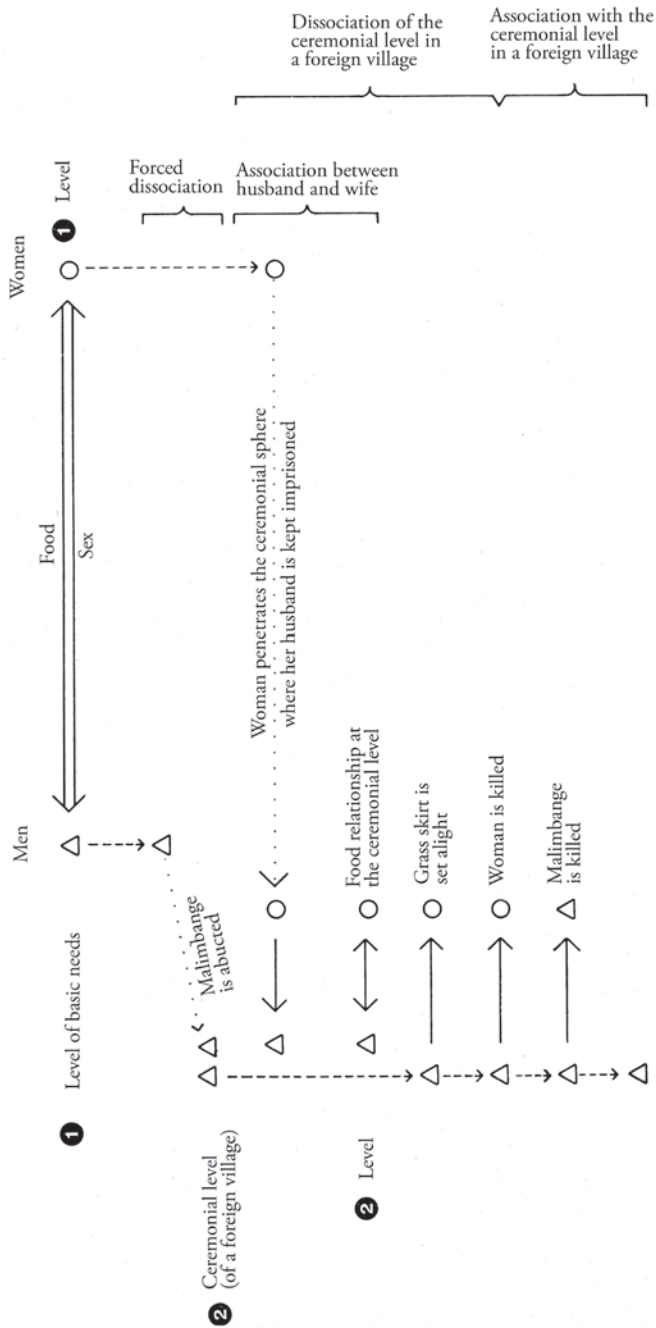
Malimbange's wife takes food to him in the enemy village, where she intrudes the ceremonial sphere. Her action has two sides to it: on the one hand, she creates association with her husband (the two form a couple), on the other, she creates dissociation in the enemy village by threatening the ceremonial sphere (that is, the male sphere) in her capacity as a woman. She succeeds in having the shackles removed from Malimbange, upon which the two, husband and wife, proceed to the men's house where they stay. Malimbange eats the food his wife has brought for him (that is, he approves of his wife's actions). In effect, the ceremonial level is "desecrated" in a dual sense, for one thing, by the wife intruding the men's house, for the other, by the exchange of food between husband and wife (in our diagram a characteristic feature of level 1). In other words, the ceremonial level is demoted by force to the level of everyday life. By picking up a spear (?) and dancing around the men's house, Malimbange's wife assumes a quasi-male role while, at the same time, retains her womanhood by caring for her husband. The Nyaula men react to the woman's in-between status by setting alight her grass skirt – a typically female piece of clothing – thus "returning" her to her habitual status as a woman. It is only then that she is killed (speared).<sup>253</sup> Malimbange suffers the same fate shortly afterwards. By killing the woman, the ceremonial level, which had been threatened by the intrusion of Malimbange's wife, is restored. Through the death of the two intruders, the profanation of the men's house is countermanded, and the Nyaula finally bring their raid on Malinge to a successful close.

The story of Malimbange recounted by Mingu can again be seen as a female counterpart to the preceding myth in both its versions. What, in my view, lends this story its quality as an expression of the female Iatmul mindset – very much like the second myth that Sabwandshan told – is the way the relationship between Malimbange and his wife is described, namely as very close and strong, certainly stronger than the divisive forces they encounter (Malimbange approves of his wife bringing food into the ceremonial sphere of the Nyaula men's house).<sup>254</sup> I described the second myth told by Sabwandshan as a female variant because it is marked by the permeability of the spheres of men and women. Something similar applies to this story. Even though Malimbange and his wife act intentionally and behind the back of their respective gender groups, their mutual action corresponds with the relationship pattern described in Sabwandshan's myth.

While in the myths treated so far, the relationship between men and women was described with regard to society at large (first, the conflict between men and women in general; secondly, the myth of Moiemgowi/Nobangowi/Malimbange which, although describing the actions of individual persons, has ramifications for the com-

<sup>253</sup> It might be worth comparing the killing of the Malinge woman by the Nyaula with the step-by-step killing (stage 1: cutting hair; stage 2: actual killing) of the woman residing in the men's house by the other village women.

<sup>254</sup> Bateson (1958: 158-59) provides a description of a man being dragged into the water by a crocodile in which the man behaves quite differently, actually more "like a hero".



munity as a whole), the following myth deals with an individual case, namely the relationship between two wives and their husband, without following up on the effect their actions have on society as a whole.

The myth was told by Woliragwa (clan: Korbmu; moiety: Nyau) during a “story afternoon” to which she and her co-wife had invited us. The myth was recorded in the local idiom and later translated, sentence by sentence, into Tok Pisin by Koliuan, using a second tape recorder.

**Function I: Initial situation**

“Once, a man was married to two women.”

**Function II: He goes hunting and cooks the game he kills in the bush**

“He often went hunting in the forest in hope of killing a wild pig, a cassowary, a tree kangaroo, or an opossum. When he killed something, he cooked it in the bush.”

**Function III: He only brings back the offal to his wives**

“When he went home to his wives, he only brought back the offal, after eating all the meat for himself in the forest. This went on like this for a long time.”

**Function IV: The wives talk about their husband’s behaviour**

“The two wives asked themselves: ‘Where does he keep the meat of all the pigs, cassowaries, tree kangaroos, and opossums he kills? He only brings home the offal in a palm leaf packet which he then gives to us.’ That is how they spoke among themselves.”

**Function V: The women decide to take revenge**

“When one day the man went off to the forest, the women decided to do the following: ‘Let’s go and look for lumps of earth of different colour, then we’ll play a trick on him in the forest.’”

**Function VI: They disguise themselves and lay in wait for their husband in the forest**

“They looked for different types of earth and took them with them to the forest. There they mixed the earth with water and smeared their bodies with the pigments; first their faces in different colours, then the rest of their bodies. The first wife decorated the second wife, then the other way around. After painting their bodies, they hid and waited for their husband. They added a few leaves to their adornment and then lay in wait for the husband to arrive.”

**Function VII: They see their husband who had just killed a pig.**

“Then they saw him; he was carrying a *limbum* full of offal. He had killed yet another wild pig which he was dragging along behind him. The knife and spear were still in his hands. He approached them. The second wife was the first to see him and said to the first wife: ‘Here he comes!’”

**Function VIII: The (first) wife scares her husband**

“The first wife sprang from her hiding with a large knife and a spear in her hands. With both weapons she charged towards her husband.”

**Function IX: The husband gets a fright and runs off**

“When the man saw her, he got a fright. He let the offal drop to the ground, turned, and ran off in the direction from where he had come. He ran off.”

**Function X: same as VIII. The (second) wife scares her husband**

“Then the second wife also burst from her hiding.”

**Function XI: same as IX. The husband gets a fright and runs off**

“The man realized that he was being pursued by two [creatures], both armed with knife and spear. They followed him until he reached the spot where he had been at before.”

**Function XII: The women return to the village and do as nothing had happened**

“The two women went back to the village. The first wife said: ‘Come, let’s quickly go home and wash this paint off, lest he comes home and sees this paint sticking to our bodies.’ The women turned around and went back to the village where they got washed and removed the earth, paint, and leaves from their bodies. Now they looked as they had done before. Nothing of them adornment was left, and they looked as before.”

**Function XIII: The man returns home late**

“When darkness fell, the man returned home. After running away from the two [creatures] he had remained in the forest for quite a while, actually, until darkness fell. Only then did he go back to the village. The women had been waiting for him for quite some time, saying to themselves: ‘I think he’s going to spend the night in the forest.’ – He returned after dark and woke his two wives.

**Function XIV: The women ask their husband why he had stayed away for such a long time**

“They asked him: ‘Where have you been all this time?’ He replied: ‘I was out in the forest; I slept a little before coming home.’ That’s what he told his wives.”

**Function XV: The husband and his wives do as if nothing at all had happened**

“The two women got up. He went to his little men’s house where he made a fire. He remained there until the next morning. The women prepared some sago. They sat down and ate the sago in the warmth of the fire.”

**Function XVI: The husband finds out what his wives had done**

“The man thought to himself: ‘I think I’ll take a closer look at my wives.’ He inspected the first wife. He looked closely at her face and her eyebrows. He inspected her face, then her body, but found nothing. Then he inspected his second wife’s face. Here he discovered a spot of paint which she had failed to wash off. He said to himself: ‘Yes, it was my two wives who did this.’”



**Function XVII: The man goes to the garden with his first wife**

“The next day he asked them: ‘Who of you wants to come to the garden with me?’ The first wife replied: ‘I do.’ So the man went to the garden with his first wife. The second wife stayed in the village. The first wife cut bananas from the tree and picked papaya. She collected the fruit and laid them out on the ground before tying them into a bundle to take home.”

**Function XVIII: The man cuts off her head and covers the body with banana leaves**

“The man said he was going to the garden of his second wife, but in actual fact he hid himself and killed his first wife with a spear. Then he severed her head with his knife. She was dead. He cut off some banana leaves and used them to cover her body.”

**Function XIX: The man returns to the village**

“Then he returned to the village. It was dark by the time he reached home. His second wife asked him: ‘Where’s the other wife, what’s keeping her away?’”

**Function XX: He tells her that the first wife had gone to stay with her brother**

“The man replied: ‘The woman has gone to stay with her brother; she’s gone to stay in her parents’ village. I told her it was okay to go, that she could stay as long as she liked. After that, she should come back to me.’”

**Function XXI: He told his second wife to come with him to pick up the first wife**

“After four days he said to his second wife: ‘Bake some sago cakes early tomorrow morning. I think it would be better if the two of us went to fetch my first wife; she hasn’t returned yet.’ Those were his words to his second wife. Early next morning she baked many sago cakes and stowed them away in a large sago bag. They left together and went to the garden.”

**Function XXII: The second wife discovers the dead body of her co-wife in the garden**

“The second wife noticed the stench of the rotting corpse. Many flies had gathered in the garden, especially around the banana tree where the man

had killed his wife and hid her body. Now her corpse had started to rot. The second wife approached the banana tree upon which she discovered the body, which was covered in flies. It was covered by leaves, but the stench was terrible.”

**Function XXIII: The man orders her to eat the corpse**

“The man told her: ‘Remove the leaves, put down the bag with the sago cakes here, and eat the woman’s corpse! If you don’t, I’ll kill you with this knife.’ The woman replied: ‘But we don’t eat dead bodies [Tok Pisin: *mipela i no save kaikai dispela samting hia*)] why should I eat the body?’ But the man insisted, while she refused. He got ready to kill her; she was frightened.”

**Function XXIV: The wife eats the corpse**

“She took a sago cake and began eating the rotting corpse of her co-wife. She ate, and ate, and ate, until she had eaten the whole dead body, the whole rotting corpse. To be able to do this, she had eaten all the sago cakes in the bag. The man had carefully watched her, making sure that she ate the whole corpse.”

**Function XXV: The man then give her a stick to lean on**

“The man prepared a [walking] stick and gave it to her, with the words: ‘Take this stick to lean on and start walking slowly. We’re going back to the village.’”

**Function XXVI: The woman is unable to stand up**

“The woman tried to get to her feet, but failed. She was much too heavy [Tok Pisin: *tait tru*] because she had eaten so much. She was not able to walk.”

**Function XXVII: The man leaves his wife behind**

“The man said to her: ‘Do as you like; you can lie down here. Die if you like; do whatever you like.’ Those were the man’s words to his second wife. Upon that he left her.”

**Function XXVIII: The woman broke wind but was unable to defecate**

“The woman stayed behind, alone. She was lying on the ground; she twisted and turned, but was unable to rise to her feet. She could not stop breaking wind. Through this her body became a little lighter but she was still unable to defecate. She was still extremely fat. When her husband had left her lying on the ground, she had felt really thirsty. She had no water, could not defecate, and felt terrible. The only thing she could do was fart. She wanted to drink; she knew where the next waterhole was. She began crawling on the ground, twisting and turning, until she was got near the waterhole. She was farting all the time, and they were really loud farts.”

**Function XXIX: A water-spirit crocodile hears the noise and approaches the woman**

“Nearby lived a water-spirit crocodile. The crocodile often swam on the surface of the water, so it heard the noise the woman was making when she farted. It thought to itself: ‘What on earth is making this noise?’ It looked around and then discovered the woman lying on the ground. It emerged from the water and approached the woman.”

**Function XXX: The crocodile asks the woman about her ails**

“When he [the crocodile man] had reached her, he asked: ‘Hey, woman, what are you doing here, why have you been lying on the ground for days?’ The woman looked at the crocodile and replied: ‘Why have you come?’ – ‘I’ve come because I want to know why you’ve been lying on the ground all this time.’ The woman replied: ‘My husband did this to me. I’m feeling really bad. I wanted to drink a sip of water, so I crawled all the way here. I saw the water but was not strong enough to fetch any. That’s why I’m lying here. Look at my swollen belly. I can’t get to my feet, I can’t defecate nor urinate.’”

**Function XXXI: The crocodile promised her water**

“The crocodile said to her: ‘When night comes you must open your mouth wide. It’s going to rain. Then you’ll feel better.’ After saying this, the crocodile slipped back into the water. The woman thought to herself: ‘Who is this man who spoke to me, and what kind of water will this be?’ Then she fell asleep.

**Function XXXII: At night, the woman drinks rainwater, and the swelling recedes**

“At night it rained. She opened her mouth, letting the rain drip into her mouth and enter her body. She drank, and drank, and drank. Now she felt a little better. She said to herself: ‘I fell a little better now.’ She still farted a lot but felt distinctly better. Her body was slim again, but still she was unable to defecate.”

**Function XXXIII: The crocodile returns to ask her how she feels**

“The crocodile returned and asked her: ‘Woman, how do you feel now? Shall I bring you something to eat?’ The woman replied: ‘No, I still can’t eat; my body is still not really slim.’ The crocodile returned to her many times, asking her whether she wanted any food.”

**Function XXXIV: The woman regains her original figure**

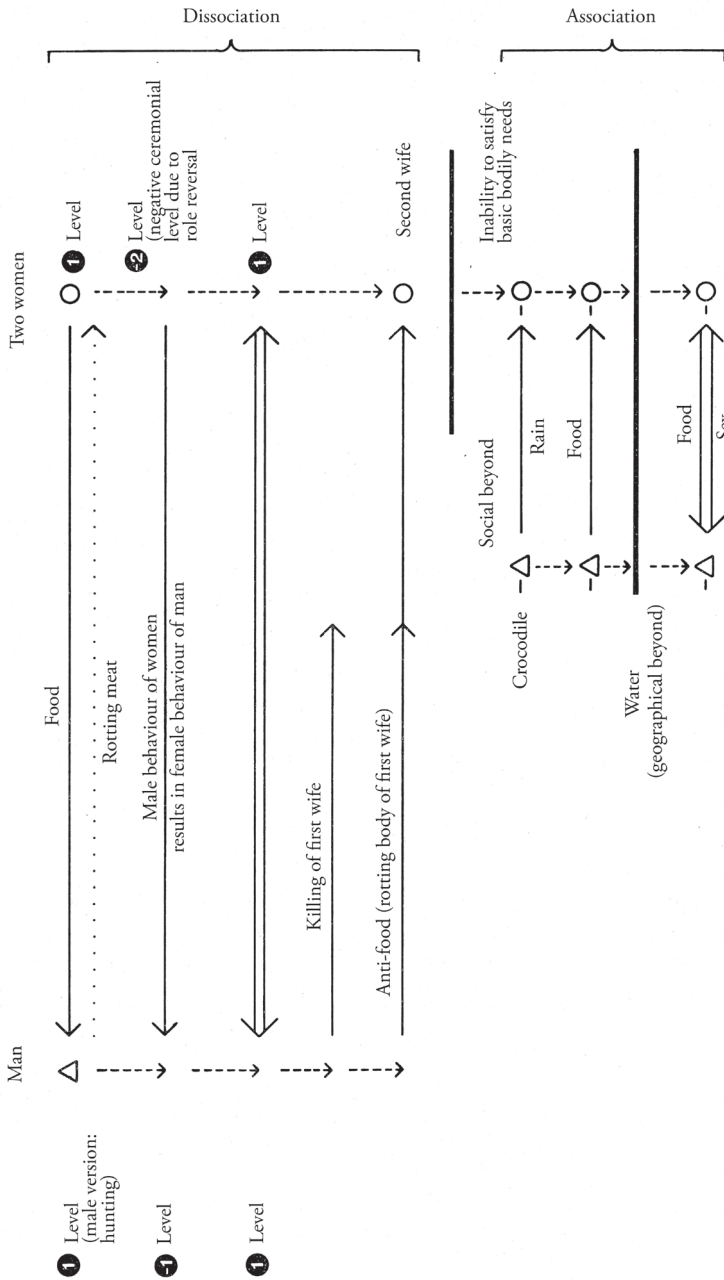
“One day, she found that her body was back to its normal shape. She sat up and tried to get to her feet. She said to herself: ‘Now I’m okay again.’ The crocodile came and asked her: ‘I see you’re sitting up. Is your body back to normal?’ The woman replied: ‘Yes, everything is back to normal again.’”

**Function XXXV: The crocodile builds a house for the woman**

“The crocodile said: ‘I’ll build you a small house.’ He took his knife and his axe, felled trees and cut leaves. He placed posts in the ground, laid the stems on top, and built a floor and a roof. Out came a small house. The woman went to sit inside the house. The crocodile brought her food. She ate and kept on eating. Then she tried to defecate and urinate, with success.”

**Function XXXVI: The crocodile takes her as his wife to his underwater village**

“The crocodile said to her: ‘I want to take you to my village.’ The woman replied: ‘We can’t live underwater, I don’t want to drown and die.’ The crocodile explained: ‘Don’t worry, the water is only on top, below there’s a village with people. I want to take you there.’ The woman said: ‘I’m scared’, upon which the crocodile replied: ‘There’s no need to be scared. The water is only at the top. I’m not lying. We’ll be there in no time. We’ll go and we’ll soon be in the village, it’s not far.’ The woman agreed: ‘Okay, let’s go.’ She asked: ‘Shall I sit on your back?’ ‘No, climb on to my head and hold tight’, the crocodile replied;



then he took her to his village. There he (the crocodile man) married her, and she gave birth to a son. Later, she gave birth to a girl. Now she was his real wife. He didn't take her back to her [old] village which lay above [the surface of the water]. She was the wife of the crocodile, and the crocodile looked after her."

### *Comments*

This story, which describes a conflict between a man and his wives, starts out from the same setting as the previous myths in which the confrontation was between gender-specific groups. As indicated in the diagram above, the relationship between the man and his two wives is defined by the exchange of food and sex. Conflict [and, therefore, dissociation] arises when the relationship is upset by an incident – in this case, the husband's habit of bringing home to his wives inferior meat in the form of offal, while he eats the prime pieces himself. The two women take revenge on their husband by creating for themselves a second, that is, (negative) ceremonial level. As we know from the previous myths, the establishment of a ceremonial level is the prerogative of men. In view of the fact that the women appropriate this "level" illegitimately, in contradiction to their traditional role as women and mere spectators of ceremonial life, I have designated this ceremonial level as 2-1. Although this new female level lacks the usual ceremonial elaboration – on the contrary, it is quite spontaneous and not rule-governed – it has the same impact on the opposite gender (here in the shape of the husband) as regular, male ceremonial practices have on women. Through enacting the ceremonial level, the women consign to their husband the role usually reserved for women, namely, the part of the overpowered and intimidated onlooker. Shortly after this reversal, the man and his wives again return to their traditional roles. The husband finds out what his wives have been up to and decides to kill his first wife. After carrying out his plan, he offers his second wife the choice of suffering the same fate as her co-wife or eating her decomposing body. Under duress, the second wife consumes the "anti-food", thus breaching the boundaries of human society. She can no longer stand or walk upright like a normal human being, instead she can only writhe and crawl on the ground. She is unable to satisfy basic human needs but her flatulence attracts the attention of a spirit crocodile that lives nearby. Like the woman, the crocodile represents a sphere beyond the reigning social order.<sup>255</sup> The crocodile man provisions the woman with water in the shape of rain (which falls to the ground from the sky and thus acts as an intermediary).<sup>256</sup> Drinking rainwater allows her to regain her normal female body but not her previous status as a "conventional" woman. After defying the boundaries of the social order, the woman together with the crocodile man now also transgresses the

<sup>255</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1971: 368) distinguishes animals according to what they eat. Owing to the fact that it is regarded largely as a scavenger, the crocodile is on the same level as the "scavenging" second wife.

<sup>256</sup> The sky is considered as male, the earth as female.

physical boundary: she leaves the realm of human existence – the world above the water – and settles down in the netherworld – the world under water – where she, now designated as O-1, reengages in a food-for-sex exchange relationship with her new consort, the crocodile man ( $\Delta$ -1).

### 14.1 Findings from the myth analysis

All the myth versions presented here pivot on the relationship between men and women as sexual or marital partners. Throughout – at least in the male myth variants – it is all about keeping the spheres of men and women apart but, at the same time, maintaining a balanced rapport between the two, however fragile. Lastly, each myth is determined by the disruption of relations early on in the story. Hence, a myth's sequence always features two principal phases, dissociation and association. Or, to put it differently: the key theme of the myths presented here is the emergence (or incidence) of conflict and how it can be resolved or, rather, eliminated.

So, in the end, what can we draw from the myths about the relationship between men and women?

Considering the postulated basic distinction between male and female whenever sexuality is involved, the terms “antagonism” or “gender segregation” spring to mind almost automatically, the former suggesting a dynamic relationship, while the latter appears more static in nature.<sup>257</sup> Admittedly, there do exist certain spheres that could be assigned the epithets male and female, respectively (in the sense of ideal types), but as we have seen over the course of this study, gender relationships are by no means static but highly dynamic and conflictive, so that “antagonism” is probably the more appropriate term – a tug of war, with both genders pulling at opposite ends of the rope. With regard to Iatmul culture, one needs to consider that there is a fundamental difference between the way men and women think (and feel): men explicitly and consistently strive to set themselves apart from women and create a gender boundary that is neither blurred nor permeable. This is borne out by a large majority of the myth versions presented above. Boundary crossing and mobility between the two spheres, in either direction, is not tolerated, under any circumstances (a reality that Kolimbange gets to feel: after failing to abide by the postulated rules – even if only once – he is unable to follow the men and, instead, literally plummets into the female sphere). Women, on the other hand, strive for “synthesis”. A rigid dichotomy with clear boundaries is contradictory to their basic attitude and interest. They feel that the world is an integrated, unitary whole, while the men prefer a divided entity.

According to these differing mindsets, or attitudes, between Iatmul men and women, one also has to consider that gender antagonism is consequently driven by contrasting intentionality. While men make every effort to keep the worlds of men and women separate, women – although themselves subject to the overall culture

<sup>257</sup> See Stagl (1971: 11-12) on the terms “dichotomy”, “dualism”, and “antagonism”.

and ideology of separate, unequally valued spheres – ultimately strive for unity. This, at least, is one of the conclusions I draw from the “female” myth versions. In this context, I believe it is also telling that the women narrators told me the “female” variant *after* rendering the “official” male version of the respective myth; Sabwandshan even made explicit reference to this interconnection.<sup>258</sup>

The findings indicate that Iatmul men and women are not only conceived as different beings but, on top of this, that gender relationships are determined by a fundamental contradiction in the sense that men seek dissociation from women while women strive for community, a fact, I believe, anthropologists have taken little notice of to date.<sup>259</sup> In terms of society as a whole, as a total system, one could say that women act centripetally, men centrifugally.

Accordingly, Iatmul men and women connect with their culture in fundamentally different ways. While women are capable of direct interaction with their male counterparts, men need a cultural prop. This prop comes in the form of the ceremonial sphere (possibly also of the cosmological realm) on which they depend to boost their self-confidence and -affirmation so as to stand their ground against the “unitary” women. In this sense, Firestone (1972: 156) probably has a point when she, albeit somewhat emphatically and based on conditions in Western society, writes: “The relation of women to culture has been indirect [...] the present psychical organization of the two sexes dictates that most women spend their emotional energy on men, whereas men ‘sublimate’ theirs into work. In this way women’s love becomes raw fuel for the cultural machine.”<sup>260</sup>

<sup>258</sup> For the sake of correctness, I should add that the two female myth versions were the only ones I could find and record. The fundamental difference between the male and female myth versions – which I believe to be of great significance – is something which I only realized whilst going through my field material at home. I believe it is telling that I never got to hear from a male storyteller anything like a “female” myth version, not even by implication. On the other hand, I have no convincing answer as to why not more women were in a position to recount “female” myths. Sabwandshan and Mingu were two women from whom I received a large number of myths, maybe even too many, making them hesitate and reflect on the fact whether it was right to tell an outsider – who, on top of that and according to Iatmul understanding practised a rather strange form of marriage with her husband – so much about their culture in the first place. As far as *stori go*, I had little contact with other women, maybe with the exception of possibly Wombre, but as she spoke no Tok Pisin, we were unable to engage in a deep discussion.

<sup>259</sup> Forge (1972: 536) writes: “It would, I think, be true to say that in New Guinea women are considered a part of nature [...]”. Iatmul men would very likely agree with this statement, Iatmul women certainly not because – in their mind – the men would need to be included too.

<sup>260</sup> Firestone applies the term “culture” in a slightly different way as to how it is commonly used in anthropology. What she calls “culture” we would probably refer to as the “ceremonial level” and “cosmological level” in the given context.



## **Concluding Summary (revised)**

In this book (a translation of my 1975 Ph.D. thesis, published in German in 1977), the attempt has been made to determine the various spheres of life of men and women and to show how these are organized, practised as well as ideologically legitimized. This was done by applying different methods, including quantitative and qualitative surveys, conversations, observations, collecting, and analysing life histories and myths. I tried to establish a close relationship with women in order to learn more about what it meant being a Iatmul woman. By means of detailed studies, various domains of the women's lives were explored separately with a view to integrating them into an overarching tableau of women's works and lives in the Iatmul village of Kararau in the early 1970s.

While women were the major food providers of the household, men's lives in the 1970s, after headhunting raids and initiations had come to a halt, ideologically concentrated on all-male secret knowledge. Many people were turning to Christianity (Western missionaries of different denominations were active) and the old rituals were fading. New cults, such as cargo cults, had emerged and were replacing the traditional male rituals and the emotional excitement they had offered to the participants. The most prominent cargo cult was the Mount Turun cult that swept through the entire middle Sepik area. But it was also gambling that attracted the men's attention, especially that of middle-aged men.

However, many domains of Iatmul culture continued in an almost unchanged way. The results of my detailed study can be summarized as follows: the concept of exchange, of giving, taking, and returning, is pronounced in Iatmul culture. Thus, men as well as women have their own exchange system, each of them following different standards. The outcome of the fish survey showed that providing fish for the household is primarily the women's responsibility. But many women catch more fish than necessary to meet their own needs. The surplus fish are passed on to other households. This exchange system serves also as a supply system, which regularly provides women who are prevented from fishing – for example, after the birth of a child or after a death – with fish. However, a woman may even receive fish from another woman even though she had been out fishing herself that day and was actually not in need of more fish. Thus, this giving and taking is not based simply on “necessity” but also serves as a means to establish and retain contact with particular women. A woman builds up her circle of relationships according to kinship and residential criteria as well as on the basis of individual preference (such as sympathy or even friendship). This exchange system expresses closeness, perhaps even intimacy; it is basically informal and strengthens relations among women in a personalized way. The number of fish one woman gives another woman and whether she gets the same amount back one day does not seem to be so important to her; no woman ever keeps records of the fish given or received.

The men's exchange system in which food is ceremonially exchanged is called *shambla*. It is a clearly defined, even rigid system in which there is no room for individual predilections. *Shambla* take place between the members of the two ritual moieties and in front of the men's house. This exchange is performed in an atmosphere of competition and is invested with a great deal of social prestige. Although women do not officially participate in such events, they act, at least to some degree, as food providers/preparers backstage. During a *shambla* every man has to return to his exchange partner food of different kinds to the exact amount of what he had received at an earlier date. Men keep record of what each of them received the year before and what they must now return.

The women's system of sago supplying – a further point in this study – is organized similarly to the distribution of fish. Its organization is also informal. There is, however, a major difference between the two systems of distribution. In contrast to the fish exchange, a woman does not directly pass on sago which she has procured from the market for herself. Instead, a woman going to the market takes over the job of bartering for another woman who has, for some reason or another, had to stay at home. The woman staying at home provides the woman going to the market with the amount of fish (or tobacco) for which she wants to get sago. The network of women cooperating is smaller. Obligations and expectations based on kinship relations and shared locality seem to be important criteria while there seems to be less space for personal preference. Thus, the system of sago supplying has the character

of a vital supply system on which women who are unable to go the market themselves are dependent. The labour input invested in obtaining sago – caching surplus fish, smoking it, paddling for several hours to the market place and back, as well as the actual barter work – is higher and, therefore, more elaborate than the work invested in fish. As my research concerning the supply of households with sago and fish, the staples, has shown, women have developed their own system of cooperation based on exchange which creates a kind of solidarity among them and secures the provision of their households with food.

The barter market – another subject of my investigations – is part of the women's domain. The barter market with Gaikorobi is of vital importance for Kararau people. The way in which women barter fish for sago is clearly different from the way men do business at market. The fact that women do the bartering seems to be a kind of guarantee that the two trading partners, the two villages, will not get into conflict. As an incident that occurred sometime in the past showed, disputes and fights occur when men become involved in market transactions. A myth provides similar evidence. According to one myth, the market was founded by the mythological ancestor, Moiem, with the goods bartered being sago and sexual intercourse. Moiem exchanged sago with the women after he had sexual intercourse with them. This barter relationship was destroyed when men interfered and killed Moiem, the creator of sago. After that, people had to learn how to produce sago – a process that involves a number of steps, all of them requiring hard work and involving men as well as women. In Kararau, the production of sago is relatively small; most of the sago is bartered from Gaikorobi.

The introduction of an economy based on money brought about a qualitative change in the markets. Recently, markets have evolved at the mission station of Kapaimari and in Wewak Town, in which men are involved. These markets lack the nearly sacred character – an atmosphere of almost holding one's breath and rigidly sticking to the rules as laid down by the ancestors – that is found at the barter market with Gaikorobi or the one with Aibom where women from Kararau exchange sago for Aibom pottery. At modern markets, commodities are not bartered but rather sold for money, though mostly without profit in the capitalist sense. At the core of this market experience is the notion of having participated in it and having earned some money, no matter how little.

Bridewealth paid in money rather than in the traditional shell "money" has caused a similar qualitative change in marriage ceremonies. Thus, the tendency today (mid-1970s) is that men tend to consider the payment of bridewealth more like a purchase than an official acknowledgement of a newly created social bond between lineages or clans. The introduction of money has also altered the relationship between women and men, as women formerly had greater power to dispose of the food they produced. As the sale of tobacco and fish in Wewak goes to show, today the money earned in market transactions flows primarily into the hands of men.

The women's limited power to dispose of the products grown by them must also be seen under another aspect. The women produce most of the food, but the means of production such as canoes, fishing spears, and gardening tools are made by men. Moreover, housebuilding, the clearing of overgrown plots of land, and the cutting of trees are men's work. The land on which, for example, tobacco is grown usually belongs to the husband. This applies also to the fishing grounds. But women make other means of production, such as fishing baskets and fishing nets. They also produce most of the household tools (baskets, string bags, pottery, etc.) and are responsible for collecting firewood and providing the equipment for preparing meals.

The difference in the orientation of men and women, therefore, becomes visible already in connection with securing the livelihood. Women, as wives, are responsible for the regular procurement of food for their families and the preparation of meals. Men, as husbands or fathers, only occasionally contribute to the family's menu; if they do, his contribution is considered a kind of extra and a welcome change to the daily food. The way food is obtained differs, depending on whether a man or woman is in charge. For women, spearing fish is a daily task and, therefore, a routine. For men, going fishing and, above all, spearing eels is akin to the experience of a hunt, particularly crocodile or pig hunts, which are quite emotional affairs. Although wild pigs have become rare, men become excited when someone reports having seen traces of a pig, after which they usually storm off to the forest with spears in hand. Yet, men are not allowed to eat the pig they have killed themselves but are obliged to offer it to other men, instead. Pork is considered a sumptuous fare for feasts, and it is the men who butcher the pig and prepare the meat. Such taboos and the subsequent exchange bind men together in a further way. Among women, there are no such prohibitions; they would actually make the food supply system inefficient.

The different orientation of men and women is markedly salient in the direct relationship between an adult man and a marriageable woman, actually the focal point of this study. Whereas women would like to have a husband who cares for his family and works hard in the garden, men only rarely comment on the qualities of the ideal woman. They say that a wife should regularly provide the family with food. But generally, men seem to consider their association with other men more important than the relationship with their wives.

A woman usually plays the active role in proposing sexual relations. Among the Iatmul, sexuality is considered to be a female potential and power, and men consider women's sexuality as a threat to their masculinity and, therefore, to their rituals. Men who are being chased by several women prefer to leave the village for a time rather than deal with the situation. Men consider a woman who has sex with several men to be a "bad" woman, whereas women in no way consider this kind of behaviour despicable. In their view, a bad woman is a mother who neglects her children.

Evidently men have greater difficulty in initiating intimate relationships with women. According to Iatmul cultural norms, it is appropriate for men to use violence when trying to create long-lasting relationships, as the institutionalized rape

of young girls by groups of men goes to show. But rape is also a means of confirming male dominance and exacting punishment, most clearly evidenced in the case of forced initiations in the course of which women, who had happened to reveal a men's secret, were gang-raped. Men's difficulties in establishing direct relationships with women are also demonstrated at another level. Whereas women (at least in Kararau) do not know any love charms, men tend to make use of them.

The life of a married woman centres first and foremost on her family, that is, on her husband and their children. Some women also emphasize the importance of their relationship with their (mostly elder) brothers. Affective bonds also seem to exist between a man and his sister. A man always speaks with respect, sometimes with discreet affection, of his mother; like "sister" or "daughter", "mother" constitutes a category in its own right. The relationship between father and daughter is rather colourless, with a few exceptions as one of the life histories shows.

A woman is bound to her affines (her husband's kin) by conventions and obligations since she lives in the house of her husband (patrilocality) and his brothers and families. For men, however, family life is more likely to be of secondary significance although some men are fond and caring fathers to their small children. A special tie, which sometimes seems to be more emotional than the one between father and son, is the one between a mother's brother (*wau*) and, above all, his sister's male offspring, *laua*, as already extensively described and analysed by Bateson.

In earlier times, the marriage rules – generating more or less continuous bonds between lineages or clans – restricted women's erotic activities much more than they do today (Mead already mentioned this with regard to the Tchambuli). Love, as Iatmul women understand it, is not considered a necessary requirement for marriage. On the contrary, affection for anyone other than one's intended partner is curbed if not completely stopped by the threat of *sanguma* sorcery. Nevertheless, elopements and extra-marital love affairs do happen. The way men and women solve conflicts also reflects the differences in their orientation. As the Iatmul say (and examples illustrate this), women rather tend to commit suicide if they face serious problems while men kill the person who has caused the problems.

The domains of man and woman are furthest apart in connection with menstruation and birth – another point examined in this study. After birth, a man keeps distance to his wife and her new-born baby. There is the belief that if a man comes into contact with a post-partum woman or touches a new-born baby, he will immediately become old and weak. During the post-partum period, which is governed by a series of taboos, a woman is neither allowed to light a fire in her stove nor prepare food for her husband. A man who has come into contact with such a woman or a new-born baby loses the ability to kill. A similar effect to the one of a post-partum woman and to a lesser extent to that of a menstruating woman is produced by a couple that has frequent sexual intercourse. What is more, the activated reproductive

powers which the couple embody are so strong that they would endanger the plants in the garden and cause the fish in the water to disappear.

On an abstract level, there are many indications that, in Iatmul culture, giving birth on the part of women and killing on the part of men are understood as opposed but complementary equivalents. According to some myths, the coconut originated from the head of a man who had been killed by men. The coconut also symbolizes a womb, or, more generally, a woman's fertility, as becomes evident in marriage ceremonies when the dowry is handed over. When the wife-to-be leaves the house of her father and ceremonially moves to the house of her future husband, she carries a sprouting coconut in her hands. It is told that if the shoot breaks off, the woman cannot become pregnant. Similar evidence is suggested in the *shipekundi* (magic spell), which is uttered over a coconut, in connection with conception and pregnancy. The connection between killing and procreation is borne out most strikingly by the following report when headhunting was still practised: if, in the night before the raid, the *waken* (spirit) of a man visited the enemy village and killed the *waken* of the people who, on the following day, were going to be physically killed, the wife of the prospective killer felt her body being penetrated by the penis of a specific ancestor at the moment the spiritual killing was carried out. Her husband would ask her the next morning just before he left for the headhunt: "how many?" She would then call the number of single penetrations she had felt. Consequently, her husband knew how many people he was going to kill.

Woman's sexuality plays a role in yet another domain of Iatmul culture. The Iatmul distinguish between sorcery (*grndap*) and witchcraft (*kugua*). Whereas sorcery can, in principal, be learned – it requires the knowledge of spells as well as the victim's secret names – witchcraft depends on the innate qualities of the person practising it. *Kugua* practitioners are said to steal the flesh from corpses, primarily from the head. The male or female *kugua* burns the flesh to ashes before casting a spell on someone over the remains. The properties of *kugua* are passed down within the family, often from mother to daughter. Men and women who practise witchcraft can never be traced because they go "another way". There are indications that men who practise *kugua* take on the form or essence of a woman, given that women are considered potentially dangerous and harmful, not least due to their sexuality. Men fear that women may practise witchcraft against them with the aid of menstrual blood. The ability of women to "bleed" every month is taken as an indication that a woman's blood has not solidified with a man's semen, thus she has not become pregnant. Instead of a growing child, menstruation is regarded as a half or dead child. In a sense, menstrual blood is equated with the flesh of corpses. Both substances can be used for *kugua*. It is for this reason that a man preferably takes on the form or essence of a woman when intending to perform *kugua*.

The way in which women are represented in myths and male rituals was a further area of investigation. In this context, men's ambivalent attitudes towards women become apparent: in myths, primeval female spirits and ancestresses are among the

most important actors, as represented in the naked female figure with spread legs perched on the gable of the front of a men's house. There are other myths, too, that reveal men's ambivalence toward women. There is a myth which tells that the women formerly held all ritual power in the way men do today. However, men overthrew them since they did not know how to handle the power, and the men were tired of doing nothing else but looking after the children. As far as ceremonial life is concerned, women and everything that is associated with femininity are, on the one hand, banned from men's rituals. On the other, as already Mead and Bateson pointed out, men depend very much on women's appreciation of what they do. As women in Kararau told me, they know what goes on in the men's house and the temporary ceremonial enclosures in front of a men's house, yet they prefer to leave the men in the dark about their knowledge. In fact, they admire the men for knowing how to perform so many mysterious things. It would never occur to a woman to laugh at the men's ritual life.

The knowledge of myths held by men and women was another subject treated in my study. The Iatmul have two names for mythical narratives: *wundumbu nyanget* are stories that also women and children know while *kip* refers to men's secret myths. After having recorded numerous mythical stories told by men and women – though men claimed that women did not know any myths, a fact women actually agreed with – I realized that, on the basis of content alone, no clear distinction can be made between *wundumbu nyanget* and *kip*. It seems that *wundumbu nyanget* refer to originally secret myths (*kip*) which, through indiscretion at some point time, became publicly known and hence reclassified as “common” stories. Two of my informants grasped the rapport between the two categories when they said that *wundumbu nyanget* was a name used to disguise another one – meaning *kip*. The shift from *kip* to *wundumbu nyanget* is not clear to most women and possibly not even to most men. However, there seems to exist a major difference between the two categories. *Kip* are always clan-owned; therefore, the clan-specific names of the actors are of utmost importance – and secret. In *wundumbu nyanget*, names have no priority, and men sometimes get upset when they realize that women occasionally call names of which the men say that they are simply “wrong”. With regard to Melanesia, in general, and the Iatmul, in particular, it is probably the first time that women, too, have been found to know and tell myths.

By applying a different approach to understanding women's works and lives and being able to compare them to men's lives, I collected life histories, or rather self-portrayals of Iatmul men and women. It became evident that men's and women's descriptions differed in significant points. Whereas the women for the most part narrated personal experiences, the men tended to describe themselves in relation to larger social contexts, mainly the history of their lineage, clan, or village. Thus, they talked about conflicts and consequent migrations, headhunting raids, punitive expeditions carried out by the Australian administration, and incidents during World War II.

Another approach to the main topic of my research was applied collecting and analysing myths in order to understand how the Iatmul reflect on the relationship between women and men in a more abstract way, and how they narrate these stories. The plots of the myths evidence that men attempt to distinguish themselves consistently from women. Any crossover or mixing of the male and female spheres, that is, the “economic” or “everyday level” (mainly the female sphere) and “ceremonial level” (male sphere), respectively, results in the punishment and/or killing of the culprit and the restoration the fundamental order of separate spheres. The female versions reveal that women preferably try to overcome this segregation and aim at a synthesis.

In summary one could draw the following conclusion: women are the main food providers and thus hold a strong economic position. However, they live in a shared culture dominated by the male ideology of a divided world. Men try to keep the spheres of women and men apart, and they achieve this through the means of ritual and violence. Women judge this separation differently. Basically, they strive for harmony and unity. This discrepancy in the relationship between men and women is one of fundamental characteristics that has shaped Iatmul life.



## *Afterword*



# Cultural Change in the Sepik

by Christiane Falck<sup>1</sup>

When I started my research with a Iatmul community in 2012, I was in the advantageous position of being able to compare my findings with those of other anthropologists who had worked with Sepik societies before me. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin's research was especially valuable in this regard because she explicitly focused on the role of Iatmul women – a topic that I became increasingly interested in during my fieldwork. In the Sepik, outside influences have entered a dynamic relationship with cultural elements that affect gender relations to such an extent that the roles Iatmul women have become central to processes of change, certainly in the village I have been working with.

My fieldwork site, Timbunmeli village, is situated at the southern end of Lake Chambri. People in Timbunmeli belong to a group of villages whose inhabitants identify as Nyaura – a term referring back to the Nyaura clan that founded the first village in their territory, Nyaurangei, from which the current Nyaura villages descended. In the anthropological and linguistic literature, the Nyaura are also called West Iatmul. The term Iatmul is widely used in the literature, but it is not a self-designated name. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1932: 249n2) took the name from a clan in one of the villages he was working with to group together villages that shared a similar culture and language. Although people in Timbunmeli do not use this term at all, they recognize that they are related to Central and East Iatmul villages by culture, language, and descent – all of them trace their origin back to a mythical place in the Sepik Plains, from where their ancestors ascended from a hole in the ground.

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The relationship between anthropology and the Iatmul is a long one. Many things have changed since, in 1912/13, the ethnographer Adolf Roesicke (1914; Schindlbeck 2015) visited their territory as a member of a Sepik expedition. By the end of the 19th century, the Sepik region had become part of what the German imperial government claimed as Kaiser Wilhelms-Land, German New Guinea, and thus Roesicke's encounters with Nyaura villages, among which he spent prolonged time, took place in a colonial context. Roesicke was followed by Gregory Bateson (1958) who, during the 1920s and 1930s, was the first to conduct long-term fieldwork among the people that he decided to call Iatmul. Margaret Mead, who had worked with the Chambri before, joined Bateson in 1938 to do research among the East Iatmul. Since the end of the First World War, and thus during Bateson's and Mead's fieldwork, the area was governed by Australia after being appointed trustee of the territory by the League of Nations. During the Second World War, Australia fought against the Japanese along the Sepik River, not only exposing locals to modern warfare but also involving Papua New Guineans in the conflict (see Gewertz 1983).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Rhoda Metraux made fieldtrips to Iatmul villages, and Meinhard Schuster worked with the Aibom, a society on Lake Chambri influenced (like the Chambri people) by Iatmul culture. During the 1970s, Deborah Gewertz began working with the Chambri (later joined by Frederick Errington), Simon Harrison with the Manambu, both direct neighbours of the West Iatmul, and a group of Swiss doctoral students (Milan Stanek, Jürg Schmid, Jürg Wassmann, Florence Weiss) conducted research in different Iatmul societies, among them also Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin among the East Iatmul. During the 1980s, Eric Silverman commenced work with the East Iatmul, followed by Andrew Moutu among the Central Iatmul in the 2000s.

Shortly after Hauser-Schäublin finished her fieldwork, Papua New Guinea became an independent state in 1975 and was no longer governed by colonial powers. However, post-colonial structures still impact on people's lives today. Inequality is not only characterized by boundaries between black and white people, Papua New Guineans and foreigners, but also by class structures and rural-urban disparities (Gewertz and Errington 1999).

For many Sepik villagers, opportunities to receive education, generate income, or access basic services such as healthcare and a clean water supply are still out of reach. In Timbunmeli, too, access to medical care is difficult and involves costly transport by motor-canoes and busses to regional centres or towns. There is also no electricity and no safe water supply (going by Western standards). Nevertheless, Timbunmeli villagers feel that they are better off than other Papua New Guineans in more remote areas of the country – via the Sepik River they have access to Pagwi, a former colonial administrative centre and now a transport hub that connects people on the river with the Maprik highway. Timbunmeli's households are able to generate an income from marketing the fish that women catch in the lake. Their market activities support the provision of *sevis* (Tok Pisin for service) for community mem-

bers in form of village-based, motor-canoe transport businesses and village stores. Families can save money to support their children's school education and that of their extended family's children. The possibility to earn money also allows villagers to buy amenities such as generators, solar panels, and batteries to power TV screens, boom boxes, lamps, and mobile phones. Furthermore, there are mountain streams on Timbunmeli island that provide what is considered healthier drinking water than the water other villages have to rely on. Therefore, people in Timbunmeli are thankful for the place they inhabit, sometimes calling it "paradise". In fact, some villagers say that their community has been blessed by God who has given them everything they needed to make a living.

Today, Christianity is an important part of my interlocutors' lifeworld who not only understand themselves as Nyaura, but also as Christians. Sepik people have been exposed to Christianity since the end of the 19th century. A first Catholic mission station had been built downstream at Marienberg by 1913, and Chambri Lake received its own mission station in 1957 (Gewertz 1983). Catholic missionaries started not only to proselytize among Sepik villagers, but also trained some of them to become catechists and spread the word of God themselves. In addition, the Catholic Church operated church-run schools and sometimes hospitals at mission stations and thus offered "services" to villagers that the government failed to deliver. Until today, church-run health centres have a better reputation in Timbunmeli, and villagers appreciate the regular visits of a Catholic priest who delivers mass about once a month, or every second month to his Chambri Lake parish. However, although a substantial number of anthropologists had worked with Iatmul societies before I began my research in 2012, no one had investigated the way Iatmul societies appropriated Christianity and how the new religion impacts on their lifeworld.

The latest change that has reached Timbunmeli village is mobile phone technology. In 2010, the village received access to the network of a mobile phone operator called Digicel. The new technology provides villagers connection with kin and friends living in other parts of the country. But the new technology also serves as a means to connect with the spirit realm (see Falck 2016, 2018b, also Telban and Vávrová 2014). And so, while a lot has changed on the Sepik River since the beginning of the 20th century, I suggest that continuity can be found in the way the Nyaura relate to the world. In Timbunmeli, villagers have appropriated Christianity, especially charismatic Catholicism, in line with their own ontology and cosmology. Spirits of God, and in fact God himself, are currently re-interpreted as being local spirits dressed in new names (Falck 2016, 2018a). This line of continuity, characterized by an existential intentionality to connect with the spiritual realm, however, has, in relation with other processes of change, entered into a new dynamic with gender relations and become a driving force of change.

Cosmology, as Telban remarked for the Ambonwari, a neighbouring Sepik society, "pertains to all domains of people's lives including their social organization, kin relationships, subsistence practices, and so on" (Telban 2013: 82). Thus, what,

from an etic perspective, could be differentiated into separate political, economic, religious, and social domains, still forms a connected entity in the lifeworld of the people of Timbunmeli. Bateson (1935: 178-179) already pointed to the constructed nature of these categories and remarked that they “are not *real* subdivisions which are present in the cultures which we study, but are merely *abstractions* which we make for our own convenience when we set out to describe cultures in words” (Bateson 1935: 179, emphasis in original). Therefore, Bateson (*ibid.*) suggested that in “processes of culture contact and change [...] we must expect that for the offering, acceptance or refusal of every [cultural] trait there are simultaneous causes of an economic, structural, sexual and religious nature.” Hence, changes in some areas of Timbunmeli’s lifeworld have triggered changes in others.

In the following, I take up topics that Hauser-Schäublin touched upon in her introduction – Bateson’s model of schismogenesis, gender relations, and relationships with spirits. Overall, I intend to indicate lines of continuity and change that can be identified when comparing Bateson’s (1920s-1930s), Hauser-Schäublin’s (1970s), and my own research (2012-ongoing) which followed each other at intervals of roughly 40 years. For this purpose, I also draw on the work of other anthropologists who have worked with other Sepik societies (Gewertz among the Chambri, Telban among the Ambonwari, Tuzin among the Ilahita Arapesh). The Sepik can be understood as a large cultural area in which different societies have influenced each other’s cultural repertoire (Mead 1978, Gewertz 1983).

First, I will outline Bateson’s model as a theoretical framework for understanding processes of change and relate it to my own findings in Timbunmeli village where new political structures, the market economy, and Christianity have entered into a new dynamic relationship with gender relations. Thereby I hope to show that Bateson’s theory might still bear some value for understanding cultural dynamics on the Sepik today. Secondly, I will discuss economic change, which is related to environmental change, in more detail. Although economic change is not altering gender roles, it nevertheless influences gender relations. Thirdly, I will show that trajectories of religious change, accelerated by the influence of a Catholic charismatic movement, are currently challenging relations between women and men and impacting on gender roles. In my conclusion, I offer some final reflections on the dialectic relationship between outside influences and local dynamics in Timbunmeli village.

### **Schismogenesis and cultural change in Iatmul societies**

Bateson (1935) suggested that inquiries into cultural change should not only include the study of cultural contact between communities with different cultures (e.g. European/Western/Christian and Iatmul), but also study contact situations within a single community between “differentiated groups of individuals, e.g., between the sexes, between old and young, between aristocracy and plebs, between clans, etc., groups which live together in approximate equilibrium” (Bateson 1935: 179).

He was interested in endogenous dynamics which, next to exogenous forces, shape processes of change. Still, in *Naven* (1958), he focused on internal dynamics and only very briefly mentioned the fact that outside influences were also affecting the people's lifeworld. Thus, in what follows, I intend to take into consideration what Bateson's model theoretically accounts for but what he failed to discuss. I will analyse how external influences interact with internal dynamics in processes of change in Timbunmeli community. Before I start, however, I would like to add a few remarks in order to contextualize Bateson's work.

Bateson's theoretical approach, which is structural-functional, has to be understood against the background of his time. Bateson focused on structures and their functions and suggested that societies developed mechanisms to maintain a state of social cohesion approaching an "approximate equilibrium". While the metaphor of "equilibrium" is outdated today, Bateson's idea of a status quo is more nuanced than his adoption of the concept from the natural sciences of his time might initially suggest. For him, an equilibrium could only be approximated as it was made up of dynamic elements and relationships (1935: 181) and thus should not be understood as static but as a "dynamic equilibrium, in which changes are continually taking place" (Bateson 1958: 175).

In *Naven*, Bateson studied relationships between "differentiated groups of individuals", such as men and women, kin, or patrilineal clans. While he states that "age" and "kinship", besides what today would be called "gender", influences people's actions, he paid little attention to individual agency. His focus was on broader cultural dynamics and mechanisms. Also, Bateson spoke of "sex" and not yet of "gender", a concept that, similar to the focus on the dialectics of structure and agency, was introduced to anthropological theory only decades later. However, Bateson understood "sex roles" or the "male and female ethos" to be culturally specific and context dependent, and thus (like Mead 2016 [1935]) predated understandings of the socio-cultural construction of what it means to be male or female which later became central to feminist anthropology and gender studies (see also Lipset 2008). I suggest that, when read in the context of his time, Bateson's attempt to theorize cultural dynamics that try to grasp complex structures of gender and kin relations is worth reconsidering.

Bateson (1935: 181) assigned the possibilities of group differentiation to two categories. The first category is made up of "cases in which the relationship is chiefly *symmetrical*, e.g., in the differentiation of moieties, clans, villages and the nations of Europe". The second category refers to "cases in which the relationship is *complementary*, e.g., in the differentiation of social strata, classes, castes, age grades, and, in some cases, the cultural differentiation between the sexes" (ibid.). In complementary relationships, a group/individual B always behaves submissively towards an assertive group/individual A, thus encouraging further assertion. In symmetrical relationships, group/individual A boasts and group/individual B replies with boasting. Both types "contain dynamic elements, such that when certain restraining factors

are removed the differentiation or split between the group increases progressively towards either breakdown or a new equilibrium” (ibid.). He called the process of creating a division or schism “schismogenesis”, differentiating between symmetrical schismogenesis and complementary schismogenesis to define interpersonal relations between groups and individuals.

During his fieldwork on the Sepik River in the 1920s and 1930s, Bateson (1958) noted that Iatmul societies are largely characterized by symmetrical schismogenesis as found in the relationships between moieties, clans, and men. He understood the continual emphasis of self-assertion in Iatmul societies as leading to a “weakness of their internal cohesion” and to the constant danger of “fissions” (ibid.: 97). The competitive and assertive behaviour expressed was part of the ethos of men, who dominated public affairs. Wondering how Iatmul societies were kept together despite their social life being to a large part characterized by aggressive, competitive male behaviour, Bateson identified mechanisms that neutralized tensions and created social cohesion.

One of those mechanisms involved headhunting raids against other villages. It united a village in loyalty or opposition to an outside element (Bateson 1958: 138-141, 194). Within the village, Bateson considered a complementary relationship between men and women as crucial for upholding social cohesion. While the lives of men centred around the ceremonial house, women’s lives centred around the family house. Bateson observed that men behaved dominantly and competitively in the public domain, while women were submissive and cooperative. Regarding relationships between women and men, Bateson noted: “Symmetrical schismogenesis is not evident between the sexes” (ibid.: 178). According to Bateson Iatmul men were “occupied with the spectacular, dramatic, and violent activities which have their centre in the ceremonial house”, while women were “occupied with the useful and necessary routines of food-getting, cooking, and rearing children – activities which centre around the dwelling house and gardens” (ibid.: 123.). Hence, they inhabited separate domains, something that Hauser-Schäublin’s fieldwork (1977 and this volume) confirmed. While male activities centred around politics and religion, women were in charge of the household and of providing food for the family. In Timbunmeli this still largely holds true today, however, as will be outlined below, male and female domains have started to overlap, with women encroaching into what traditionally was considered men’s business. Nevertheless, usually women leave it to the men to talk about important village affairs in the public domain and appear rather shy about voicing their opinion. There is a line of continuity to be found in what is considered appropriate male and female behaviour in different contexts.

Although Bateson identified regularities in interactions between differentiated groups of individuals, such as men and women, he also recognized variables (see also Gewertz 1981: 97). The behaviour expressed by women could “occasionally adopt something approaching the male ethos” (Bateson 1958: 148). With that he noted that the expression of male or female ethos (or gender) was context dependent and



not related to biological sex. Bateson stated that within the household a woman “may have considerable power and authority” because she was the one who raised pigs and caught fish – and it was “upon these activities that her husband chiefly depends for the wealth which helps him to make a splash in the ceremonial house” (ibid.: 147). Nevertheless, although men depended on the work-force of their wives and tended to consult their wives before striking a deal, “the more habitual emphasis of the women’s ethos” was “upon quiet co-operative attitudes” (ibid.: 148). Thus, from Bateson’s perspective that sought to derive general patterns, assertive male behaviour found its neutralizing counterpart in female submissiveness and admiration for male performances (ibid.: 128, 177; see also Hauser-Schäublin 1977 and this volume). However, complementary relationships, too, can drift towards schism, Bateson noted and identified a ritual that had the ability to relieve possible tensions: the *naven* rite.

*Naven* is the East Iatmul name for a ritual that celebrates first-time achievements of a Iatmul child. During the ritual, men dressed and behaved like women and women dressed and behaved like men in public. Thus, for the time of the rite, men assumed the female “submissive” ethos and women assumed the male “assertive” ethos, releasing and resolving possible tensions that might have arisen from the usually “assertive-submissive” relationship between men and women. However, the ritual, so Bateson, could also be understood as creating social cohesion between clan groups. Subject of the *naven* rite was the sister’s son (*laua*) of the man performing the ritual. Since the nephew, qua his mother’s marriage into a different patrilineal clan, was part of a different descent line than his mother’s brother who performed the rite, social cohesion was created between two otherwise rivalling patrilineal clans. With that the *naven* rite functioned as a mechanism that “turns groups into integrated wholes” (Houseman and Severi 1998: 11; Bateson 1958: 171-217; see also Lipset 2008: 221).

My interlocutors stated that a *sorak* (the West Iatmul term for *naven*) could also be understood as a public reminder of who had contributed to the celebrated child’s success. It is a call for compensating one’s maternal relatives who have worked hard to nurture the child.

Among the Nyaura, there are two versions of *sorak* celebrations. The first is performed by the maternal uncle (*wau*) for his sister’s son (*laua*). In it, the *wau* dresses either in women’s clothes and slides his buttocks down his nephew’s leg or else he dresses in his clan totems and gives an animal offering to his sister’s child. For the second version, a group of maternal relatives (*wau nimba*) dress in the totems of their clan to celebrate the child’s and, by extension, their own achievements. At the end of the rite, the *laua* is expected to compensate his maternal relative(s) and thus the ritual can not only be read as strengthening the relationship between different patri-clans but also between a child and his mother’s line.

At the same time, the public reminder of the importance of maternal relatives can be understood as a celebration of motherhood. The maternal relatives, especially

the individual mother's brother, stand for the mother of the child being celebrated. A child's success is attributed to the hard work of its mother, who has not only provided food but also cleaned its "arse" and dirtied her skin with its urine and faeces. During a child's upbringing, the maternal uncle also fulfils roles associated with motherhood. He not only provides the child with food, during initiation he also dirties his skin with the blood of his sister's son (see esp. Silverman 2001).

A child is expected to act respectfully towards a mother's brother – should he fail to do so, he will be rebuked and probably asked to pay compensation in form of an animal offering. A gesture that has been described as a central part of the *naven* rite may also be used as a mechanism for reprimanding behaviour that deviates from the appropriate conduct towards kin. It may be part of a public display of indignation. When a *wau* rubs his naked buttocks (potentially dirty with faeces) against a sister's son's leg, a gesture referred to as *gark*, it is a highly shameful experience that publicly humiliates his *laua*. In a kind of a role reversal, *gark* dirties the skin of the child with maternal faeces and thus reminds it of the hard work performed by its mother (and by extension its maternal uncle who is identified with her) during upbringing. In this case, *gark* functions as a public humiliation that puts the child back into its place before social discord between it and its maternal relative(s) can escalate.

Next to kinship relations that influence how men behave towards each other, Bateson identified other mechanisms for creating social cohesion within the male domain. Iatmul societies are organized in patrilineal moieties and clans competing for influence on village politics and hierarchy. Their competition, so Bateson, was relativized by alternating precedence in leading initiation rituals in yearly sequences. Furthermore, during initiation rituals initiators and novices behaved complementary to each other, which can also be described as expressing a complementary relationship between age-groups whose interactions are organized on the principle of primacy of seniority (Bateson 1958: 128-133-135). The "orientation of the men's attention towards the secrets of initiation" was another instrument that Bateson saw as controlling the symmetrical schismogenesis between initiatory moieties (ibid.: 196).

Bateson further noted that men performed parts of their rituals in public for women to see. There, their self-assertiveness was admired by women. In fact, Bateson went as far as wondering, "whether the whole system of behaviour which surrounds the flutes, *wagan* [ancestral spirits], and other secrets of initiation would be maintained if it were not for the fact that the women hear[d] and admire[d] the music of the flutes and the rhythms of the *wagan*" (Bateson 1958: 177, emphasis in original). Hauser-Schäublin (this volume, p. 206), too, has documented men's interest in women's opinion of their performances. Men even sent out spies to find out how women judged their enactments. Also, similar to Bateson, Hauser-Schäublin (this volume, p. 347) found that women in Kararau admired men "for knowing how to perform so many mysterious things". Thus, one might wonder whether Bateson's line of thought has some merit, especially since Tuzin (1997) has described how the disclosure of former male secrets to women and the unmasking of male secrecy as a

shameful deception, brought an end to the cult of the *tambaran* among the Iahita Arapesh.

In Timbunmeli, traditional mechanisms for the creation of social cohesion as described by Bateson have either disappeared or are currently being challenged by recent developments. Head-hunting has long been abandoned after it was forbidden by the colonial authorities, and no ceremonial houses exist in Timbunmeli today. The last male initiation took place in the 1980s, and men no longer dress as women in *sorak* rituals. Whereas, in former times, a *sorak* could be performed by an individual mother's brother (*wau*) for his nephew (*laua*), this is no longer the case in Timbunmeli. Today men feel ashamed to dress in female attire and perform the *gark* gesture.

While the collective of maternal relatives still celebrates their *laua*'s and, with that, their own achievements by decorating their bodies with clan totems and hitting their sister's child, the ritual that a single mother's brother performs for his *laua* has changed. Today the *wau* may honour the achievements of his sister's son by slaughtering a pig for him – a gesture which calls for compensation in money equivalent to or surpassing the monetary prize of the pig. In doing so and in order to perform the ritual, the men are dependent on financial contributions by female kin, because, in Timbunmeli, it is predominantly women who, qua their marketing activities, have the necessary monetary means.

With the vanishing of ceremonial houses and male initiations from the village context, men in Timbunmeli have not only lost the traditional sphere to express their male ethos, moreover, introduced domains originally appreciated as modern spheres for the expression of male assertiveness are increasingly being invaded by women. Customarily, men were in charge of the political and religious domains, but under the influence of Christianity, colonialism, as well as the legal system and structures of governance that came with political independence, traditional mechanisms that structured male authority within the male domain as well as in relation to the female domain are increasingly being challenged. Traditionally, Iatmul societies were structured by clan affiliation, age groups, and gender relations, and while clan affiliation remains strong in Timbunmeli today, age and gender relations are increasingly under pressure through outside influences.

Political organization in Timbunmeli has changed considerably. Under Australian rule, the colonial administration assigned village officers (Tok Pisin: *lululai*) who had to report to patrol officers (Tok Pisin: *kiap*). Today's government requests communities to elect members for a Ward Development Committee (WDC) which is responsible for village affairs. Different wards are organized in Local Level Governments (LLGs), where the ward members discuss politics. These mechanisms cut through the egalitarian clan structure of Iatmul societies. However, descent group affiliation still influences all aspects of life. Thus, it not only affects village politics but also impacts on election campaigns at local and district levels. People complain that if there is money for village development projects, it often disappears in the

pockets of kinsmen related to those in power. People would like to see more development in their village, but find it hard to overcome their differences which, interestingly, run along lines that already Bateson (1958) described as creating division in *latmul* societies: rivalling moieties, called *nyoui* and *nyame* in Timbunmeli.

Furthermore, the political structure designated by modern government does not only not discriminate between younger and older men, it also seeks to integrate women in political decision-making processes. A woman representative has to be elected to the village government, and in fact, during elections that took place in 2013, Timbunmeli community even elected a young woman as secretary of the village government. Most other offices were held by younger men who had beaten their older competitors.

The Catholic Church, too, includes young people and women in its activities and church offices may also be held by young, uninitiated men. This was also the case during my fieldwork – while the local pastoral workers were older men, the leader of the Catholic Steering Team was a young, uninitiated man, who, qua his office, had a higher status than the older pastoral workers. This leads to friction between male leaders who are competing for influence on religious life and politics in Timbunmeli (see Falck 2016). However, I will not go into this matter any further here, instead I will focus on changing gender relations in the village.

Relying on Bateson's terminology, I suggest that the complementary schismogenesis between men and women in Timbunmeli has begun to transform into something approaching symmetrical relations. This was set in motion by the dynamic encounter with outside influences, with market economy and Christianity being the two main drivers. In the next section, I go on to describe the process of economic change related to the influence of money, and the demands it creates which put pressure on gender relations.

## The fish work

When I began my PhD research in Timbunmeli village in December 2012, one of the first things I noticed was how much a woman's everyday life was consumed by what villagers call the "fish work" (Tok Pisin: *wok bilong pis*). I had read Hauser-Schäublin's PhD thesis in German about women in Kararau in preparation for my fieldwork, in fact, I even had it with me in the field. The differences to what she described struck me immediately.

In 1972/73, Hauser-Schäublin (this volume, pp. 45–66) had found that women in Kararau travelled to their fishing grounds every second or third day. In Timbunmeli, women paddled out to the lake every morning before sunrise to check the nets laid out between bamboo sticks thrust into the muddy grounds of Lake Chamabri. They came back with large amounts of fish around midday or early afternoon and were occupied with gutting and smoke-drying the fish once they had reached the shore. While women formerly only fished for a few hours in the morning (Gew-

ertz 1983: 53 for Chambri women) or stopped in-between to collect firewood in the forest (Bateson 1958: 143; Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 47) for Iatmul women), in Timbunmeli women spent most of their day on “fish work”. What they predominantly seemed to catch was, I learned, a recently introduced fish species, called *rabbamaus* (*prochilodus margravii*) in Tok Pisin. This obvious change inspired me to take a closer look at the fishing activities of Nyaura women. I decided to do a fish survey similar to the one undertaken by Hauser-Schäublin in the 1970s. During January 2013, I, assisted by teenagers from the village, counted the fish that each of the 24 Timbunmeli women who were part of my fish-study caught each day. Hauser-Schäublin had found that, on average, a woman in Kararau caught around nine fish per day in the 1970s, using locally produced fish traps and fishing rods (with nylon string and hook bought from the mission store). I found that Timbunmeli women could catch more than 320 fish per day. This impressive increase can be put down two developments: the introduction of new fish species and industrially produced fishing nets.

When fishing nets were introduced to the Chambri Lake area (approx. during the 1970s-1980s, as estimated by my interlocutors) it offered the lake societies a technology with which they could catch more fish in less time. Whereas women formerly produced fish baskets (*nami*, *kwiala*) and loop round nets (*njura*), or used hooks (*sungut*) and spears (*minja*) to catch fish, they could now span nets and catch their fish more easily.

Also, over the last decades, new fish species have been introduced to the Sepik River by fishery projects aiming at increasing the fish yield and thus the source of protein for the riverine population. Since the 1990s, the *rabbamaus*, *paku* (*piaractus brachypomus*), and *javakap* (*puntius gonionotus*) have been released into the waters. Fish foreign to Sepik ecology quickly proliferated and ousted local fish species such as the *nilpis* (Iatmul: *kami*, catfish) and *bigmaus* (Iatmul: *kaura*, *oxyeleotris heterodon*) in Tok Pisin. The new species not only outnumbered local fish but also ended the diversity of other water-life.<sup>2</sup> My interlocutors observed that they feed on the roots of water plants and thus prohibit the growth of waterlilies and water-grass. With the vanishing of areas of grass swarms of birds have also disappeared. Nowadays you hear people complaining that they hardly ever catch their ancestral fish anymore and are forced to eat fish of inferior quality, such as the bone-filled *rabbamaus*. Still, *rabbamaus* – cut down the middle and smoke-dried over the fire – is today the basis of Timbunmeli’s households’ income.

The introduction of new fish and fishing nets, together with the establishment of supra-regional markets, allowed women to generate an income from “fish work”. Today women no longer focus on catching fish for local consumption alone but catch

<sup>2</sup> Note that before the *rabbamaus* was introduced, another introduced fish species, the “tilapia” (Tok Pisin: *makau*) was already outnumbering local fish species; it is still caught today. However, my interlocutors do not perceive the *makau* as having affected the ecosystem in a way comparable to later introduced fish species.

fish for the distribution at markets, in order to earn money. Women now catch such a surplus amount of fish which means that they can afford the costs (around 90 *Kina*) of travel to markets in towns to sell their dry smoked product. Timbunmeli women, and sometimes their husbands, sons, or daughters, travel mainly to Maprik, a town situated on the Sepik highway between Pagwi and Wewak, to sell their fish on the local market. There their products compete with those of other Sepik river villages for buyers from the Wosera, Maprik, and Yangoru areas.

During the 1970s, Sepik river women (or their husbands) had only recently started to sell their smoke-dried fish products at town markets. Back then people travelled to markets infrequently, that is, only every few months (see Hauser-Schäublin this volume, pp. 64, 343) or once a year (Gewertz 1983: 159-160). My interlocutors, too, remember that it was only in the 1980s that women from Timbunmeli began travelling to town markets every now and then. In former times, the surplus amount of fish was primarily used for exchange with sago at local barter markets. Starting in the 1990s, however, the regular marketing of fish in towns became the prime objective for people in Timbunmeli – a new time had started, the time of money (Tok Pisin: *taim bilong mani*). Today, money is needed to purchase necessities such as sago, soap, transportation, medicine, and school fees. It is also required for desired items such as store food, mobile phones, radios, or nail polish.

Whereas, formerly, men also used to occasionally hunt for fish with spears (also Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 47), this is no longer the case in Timbunmeli. The “fish work” has become exclusively women’s work. Nowadays, it is almost exclusive-



Fig. 70: Agatha smoke-dries her mother-in-law's fish. (Photo Christiane Falck 2014)

ly the women who earn money while most men have to depend on their wives and female relatives for pocket money. The fact that, in Timbunmeli, women are the main source of income is proudly stated by women but can lead to conflicts at the micro level between husband and wife and wives, respectively, and, at the macro level, within the community between men and women, especially if women are reluctant to spend their hard-earned money on community projects. Fights between couples may occur when women refuse to give their husbands money, or when husbands sell their wives' fish on the market and keep the money for themselves (or spend it before returning to the village).

Men in Timbunmeli have few opportunities to earn money themselves. Formerly, men could produce carvings and sell them to tourists that sometimes visited the lake on a tourist ship, but today this is no longer the case. A way to earn some money for men is to produce canoes and paddles for sale (also Moutu 2013: 65) but usually a husband produces the canoe(s) for his spouse(s). Also, men go out to hunt crocodiles and sell their skin, but large crocodiles are hard to find in the area today; people say they have been hunted down (see also Gewertz 1983: 167). Some men catch smaller crocodiles or collect crocodile eggs and raise the reptiles in cages close to their houses, until they have reached the size desired by skin buyers. In an attempt to get a foot into the cacao market, many families also planted cacao but were then disillusioned by the falling prices and the high costs of transport and processing the beans.

Timbunmeli's women further earn an income by selling store goods from town or betel nut and betel pepper, lime, peanuts, or fried flower balls at the Saturday village market. Furthermore, there are two stores in the village (one owned by a woman, the other by a couple), but whoever can afford to buy a stock of goods tends to sell it again for profit in the village.

Smoke-dried fish is the main source of income in Timbunmeli. It is perceived as being both a blessing and a burden. Women's workload is heavy and time consuming. When my Nyaura aunt Erika heard other women complaining about the heavy workload connected with fishing, she would answer that Timbunmeli community was fortunate to have access to fish and that they should thank God for this blessing: "It [the fish] is God's blessing for us – what other blessings do they [other community members] want to see?" She was convinced that if families managed their household money properly, they would not only be able to help their children in acquiring higher education, but also support local business ventures. She was a case in point. Erika who, like most other women in her age group, had received no formal education, was the most industrious woman in the village. She owned nineteen nets with which she caught fish from the lake to sell on markets. She managed the money she earned wisely and thus was not only able to pay the school fees for a number of children, but also to operate a motor-canoe business and run the village's biggest trade store.

The considerable increase in women's fish work over the last decades was described by my interlocutors as a result of the wish and need to earn money given the increasing importance of money in people's lifeworld. "The *rabbamaus* has already twisted (Tok Pisin: *faulim*) our heads" is an expression often heard in the community when people complain that their prime objective is to catch and sell as many fish as possible for the sake of earning as much money as possible. Yet, although Timbunmeli women now concentrate on catching as much fish as possible, men do not. In Iatmul culture, daily fishing – especially with nets, baskets, and hooks – and nurturing the family have always been women's responsibilities and have remained so in Timbunmeli. Gender roles in this domain have not changed although the value attributed to women's work has changed under the influence of the market economy.

While many understand the marketing of fish products as Timbunmeli's path to improving living standards and others try to draw money from politicians for development projects, there are also villagers who have turned to the Christian faith in the hope of bringing change to the village. Next to the "fish work", many villagers perform what they call the "work of God" (Tok Pisin: *wok bilong God*). Interestingly enough, women outnumber men in publicly performing God's work and so it is women who currently dominate both domains of existential importance: religious and economic life.

### The work of God

I have argued elsewhere (Falck 2016, 2018a) that the conversion to Christianity in Timbunmeli has to be understood in relation to changing power relations in the Sepik that began back in colonial times. Before contact with white people such as traders, missionaries, colonizers, and soldiers initiated processes of change, Iatmul societies were considered – by themselves and by neighbouring societies – more powerful than other Sepik societies. Their warfare, rituals, spirits, magical knowledge, and their dominant position in trade relations due to the advantageous location of their villages on the main Sepik river, made them superior (Gewertz 1983, Gewertz and Errington 1991; Harrison 1990; Mead 1978, Metraux 1975, 1978). However, this superiority turned into inferiority when confronted with Western power, trade relations, religion, and the ensuing processes of change that set in. Not only did the Iatmul's relationship with other societies change, so did their view of themselves and their cultural assets, thus motivating them to change. The perceived superiority of white people was (and still is) understood as being linked with the ability to connect with powerful spirit beings – the source of all existence in the Nyaura cosmos. Hence, villagers turned to the Christian God and embraced Catholicism.

During the process of missionization, people in Timbunmeli learned that their own spirits were evil spirits that tried to entice them to commit sins. Attracted by the idea of being able to have a say in village affairs, escape the strict rules of their



ancestors' *wagen kult*, and lead the community on to the path of change, the younger generation showed no interest in learning from their elders and turned their backs on the old spirits and practices. Most men versed in traditional lore had died by the end of the 1990s, without passing their knowledge on to today's generation of male leaders.

During the 1990s, a charismatic Catholic movement reached Lake Chambri, changing Timbunmeli's lifeworld considerably. While the Catholic mission had already included young people, children, and women in the work of the mission before the arrival of the charismatic movement, male leadership had never really been questioned within the paternalistic structure of the Catholic Church. Men were appointed to church offices, held church services, and directed all kinds of Christian activities. Christianity had become a new important playing field for men where they could act out their self-assertiveness and male way of being-in-the-world which traditionally had been associated with the realm of powerful spirits. In Timbunmeli, church offices are held by men and family prayer groups also have male leaders who, as the heads of Catholic families, also hold claim to leadership in family prayer groups. In fact, however, women outnumber men in the active pursuit of the work of God, that is, in prayer groups of which spirit possessions are an important part. With the loss of their exclusive access to powerful spirit beings, men's roles are being contested.

While men today still seek and feel entitled to steer religious affairs, they have little control about what goes on in charismatic prayer groups where spirits of God use (Tok Pisin: *usim*) female bodies to preach, heal, and prophesy. In former times, only initiated men were used by ancestral clan spirits (*wagen*) to heal and advise villagers. They were the official caretakers of powerful spirits and their interactions with the spirit world was shrouded in an aura of secrecy.

In former times, the ritual moieties were in charge of organizing and executing initiation ceremonies in which Iatmul men were introduced to the secrets of the male domain. Central meeting point for the management of village affairs and the location for male rituals was the men's house (*geggo*) to which only initiated men had access. Through initiation men gained access to secret knowledge on how to control and activate powerful spirits. Those spirits were considered the source of everything that exists in the Nyaura cosmos, and good relations with them were necessary for strength, wealth, and power of individual persons and the community at large. In fact, it was men who, via their rituals, were in charge of holding the cosmos together (Telban 1998; Wassmann 1982). Still, although this made men look like the key pullers of strings, gender roles were in fact complementary. As has been remarked before (Bateson 1958, Hauser-Schäublin 1977, Telban 1998), male and female domains were crucial for social and cosmological cohesion – they complemented one another. The maintenance of the village and by extension the cosmos at large depended on the “totality and cooperativeness” of male and female ways of being and habitual practices (Telban 1998: 40). If the order was disturbed, severe consequences for the village, including its destruction, could be the result (*ibid.*: 169-170).

However, this does not mean that women had no contact with spirits at all. They could encounter spirits in the bush or water (*miunjumbu* and *wanjemook*), and spirits of the dead (*undumbu*) could appear to them in dreams. Spirits of the dead could also make their presence felt by rocking the canoe a woman was travelling in (see Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 191, see also Vávrová 2018 for the practice canoe rocking by water and bush spirits among the Ambonwari). While these are still ways for women to encounter spirits today, spirit possession is a new channel through which female bodies connect with the spiritual sphere.

During the Catholic charismatic movement, women, too, were baptized and touched by the Holy Spirit. Charismatic prayer leaders assigned patron saints to villagers who bestowed gifts of God on them, such as the ability to speak in tongues, to heal, and to prophesy.

After disputes concerning the question of leadership within the charismatic movement at Lake Chambri arose, the Catholic Church withdrew its support, my interlocutors told me. The movement was stopped. However, in Timbunmeli charismatic prayer groups started to form, during which now also spirits of dead villagers, reinterpreted as spirits of God, began possessing the bodies of women. In view of this, it is difficult for men to criticize women's involvement and central position in the mission work – after all, they cannot criticize God for pursuing His work and talking to the village through female bodies (see Falck 2016, 2018c).

During a visit to Timbunmeli in March 2017, I had a long conversation with one of the pastoral workers in Timbunmeli, Ivan, a man who has spent his entire adult life in the service of the church. I asked him about his assessment of the current situation in the village – the fact that women were being used by God to perform His work. Ivan and I started to talk about mythical times during which, according to a Nyaura myth, it was women, not men, who were in charge of village affairs. In those days, women were the custodians of powerful spirits.

Also, Hauser-Schäublin recorded myths in which women were presented as founders of clans, as keepers of secret knowledge, and controlled important ritual regalia (Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 174; 225-233; also e.g. Tuzin 1980: 34-35; Wassmann 1991: 180).



Fig. 71: A spirit of the dead embodied in Helen receives a phone call during a prayer meeting. (Photo Christiane Falck 2018)

However, Iatmul women did not know the secret names and details that made the knowledge of the mythological repertoire so powerful (Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 233-236; also Silverman 2001: 43), or, “as a matter of form and courtesy between the sexes”, they did not volunteer to let others know that they knew “all about the tamberan secrets” (Mead 1934: 246).



Fig. 72: Vito consults a spirit of the dead possessing Sandra's body. (Photo Christiane Falck 2018)

Moreover, Hauser-Schäublin discovered that it was a female being who was equated with the mythical place in the Sepik plains from all humans had evolved (Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 231). In the same vein, my interlocutors told me that the Nyaura creation myth concealed the fact that the first beings were born of a woman – the hole in the ground from where they emerged in Mävimbit was a vagina, the darkness surrounding them prior to the event was that of the inside of a mother's womb (Falck 2016; see also Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 174; Silverman 2001: 31, Wassmann 1982: 240, 1991: 182). Motherhood and female creative powers, as discussed by Silverman (2001), are important motives in Iatmul culture as expressed here. Furthermore, both women and men in Timbunmeli know that it was women, not men, who were the original caretakers of powerful spirits. However, both, women and men, usually do not talk about this openly in the presence of the opposite gender.

Ivan, too, told me about the times when women looked after the *wagen* in the ceremonial house and men after the children in the family house. It was women who caught *wagen* spirits with nets while fishing. Through violence, men appropriated

the *wagen* and acquired the knowledge that later would inform the practices in the men's house. When I asked Ivan what he thought about the fact that, as in ancestral times, now women were again in charge of spiritual affairs, he said:

Mary delivered Jesus. And that is why the women receive everything. [...]. The women got the Holy Spirit first, the women looked after the *kastom* first. And I, the man, I just came in and by force chased her away. And I, wrongfully, became the caretaker [of spirits]. It was not mine [to take]. Ok, and that's why we see that the women are receiving the big, big *presens* [Tok Pisin; gifts from God]. This spirit is using the women. [...]. Before in our *kastom*, the women were its guardian and that is why everything goes to the women now and they are the owner. [...]. Ya, it is something that they own. They want it back now. And you see, the spirits, too, they use the women. It wants to use the women. And we see that the women are owning it now. And you can see that the spirits use the women now, too. It strongly wants to use the women. And so we see that the women are owning it now. I, the man, I only watch over them. I can say: take care only. [...]. The good things came from the side of the women and so the women lead. I, the man, I have no part in it, I only support and steer them. Now, everywhere the women work now. And what can we men say? It is not something that belonged to us. It belonged to the women and they already pulled it back. I was not its rightful owner.

Myths of a primal theft in which men stole flutes or bullroarers – both items of spiritual power – from women are common in the East Sepik (e.g. Hauser-Schäublin this volume, p. 225-231, Silverman 2001: 34-35, Tuzin 1997: 159). According to Silverman, the fear that women might regain their former powerful position is prevalent among the East Iatmul in Tambunum (Silverman 2001: 36). In view of current events in Timbunmeli (see also Gregor and Tuzin 2001; Tuzin 1997), one could say that a male nightmare has come true: the male cult has lost its significance and women have acquired a direct access to the most powerful spirits.

When women are possessed by spirits of God, men change their behaviour towards female bodies. Traditionally, men sit elevated on wooden stools while women sit on the ground, thus expressing respect for male authority. However, when spirits enter female bodies, the women sit on the stools while men sit on the floor, thus publicly accepting and endorsing the former's dominant authority with nothing less than respect, docility, and submissiveness. Today, female bodies possessed by spirits of God – often but not always male spirits – do exactly what male bodies used by *wagen* spirits did in former times: they heal and provide answers to questions that affect people's lives (see Falck 2016). Spirits, now intimately associated with the Almighty, have found their way back to their original custodians. There was nothing men could do about it.

Today in Timbunmeli, Iatmul women no longer watch and admire men's ritual practices. Instead, men follow women's public performances in their pursuit of the work of God, while trying to retain control over organization of religious activities.

This can lead to conflicts between male leaders and women pursuing the work of God. Ivan himself struggled with the increasing female influence in religious affairs.

During my fieldwork in 2013, Ivan had gotten into conflict with a group of women, who, without consulting male leaders, had taken things into their hands and, in charismatic prayer sessions, performed cleansing rituals on village ground where sorcery items had been hidden for the purpose of impairing the operation of the village school and harming its teachers as well as other villagers (see Falck 2016). During a church service, Ivan complained publicly about the unauthorized prayer meetings and called the spirits that were guiding women “home-made spirits”. His critique led to bitter resentment among women and, in fact, also among men who had experienced women’s spiritual activities as being highly effective. God was working through female bodies in their community – women were performing the “work of God”. The conflict ended with Ivan publicly apologizing to the women for what he had said.

## Conclusion

Hauser-Schäublin was one of the first anthropologists to focus on the lifeworld of women. Her work provided me with the opportunity to apply a comparative perspective when I started to study the lives of Iatmul women, some forty years after *Women of Kararau* was written. Her analysis confirmed what Bateson had discovered some forty years earlier on, namely that women and men occupied different spheres structured by different values. However, she also found that the spheres of men and women were interlinked. While Bateson focused on cultural dynamics within the Iatmul from a generalizing perspective, Hauser-Schäublin’s doctoral thesis offers detailed information about an until then neglected part of the people’s lifeworld – the female domain – and provides insights into the lives and scope of actions of Iatmul women during the 1970s.

While women and men in Timbunmeli today still largely occupy different gendered domains in their everyday lives, my fieldwork has shown that their lives have changed considerably, with new tensions arising from the interaction of internal dynamics and external elements that are used by male and female individuals to carve out a space for the purpose of increasing their influence on the way their community is changing (see Falck 2016).

Bateson wondered what held a society constantly on the verge of fission together. He found an answer in mechanisms that have disappeared or that are increasingly challenged in Timbunmeli today. Changed structures of governmentality and changes in people’s economy and religious life affect life in the village today. The different spheres from which men and women once acquired their self-worth (see also Errington and Gewertz 1987) are in the process of change. Women are increasingly integrated into former male domains and today question men’s traditional entitlement to leadership.

Yet, interestingly, although the gendered structure of the political and religious domains has started to change, gender roles in the economic domain and the general organization of life have not. Women are still the caretakers of the family home and the nurturers of their families. Men are still in charge of providing their family with a house and their spouse(s) with canoes and paddles. Men also still need their wives to make a “splash” (Bateson 1958). However, with the increasing importance of money, the value attributed to female work has changed. Economic life – not only subsistence economy – depends on women’s ability to catch and sell fish.

Not only economic change has increased men’s dependency on women, religious change, too, is leading to a dependency of men on women’s spiritual work. God and his spirits have revealed themselves as local spirits that originally belonged to women. Men are forced to rely on female mediums to which they to turn if they require help, counselling, and healing. Today men find it increasingly difficult to control spiritual life, with spirits choosing to work through women’s bodies and not through their own. In the religious domain, the reversal is most visibly conveyed in the behaviour expressed during spirit possessions – with female bodies expressing self-assertive behaviour and male bodies complementing it with docility and cooperativeness.

However, both women and men have an existential intentionality to connect with the spiritual sphere and to uphold good relations with it. The dependency on the spiritual sphere is an unchallenged ontological fact in Timbunmeli which infuses all aspects of life and existence. Good relations with the spiritual are important for the power, strength and well-being of the individual as well as the community at large. If relationships with the spiritual are disturbed, sickness, death, and the destruction of the world as people know it are the expected consequences.

Today, this dependency on the spiritual sphere necessitates good relationships with “God” and his spirits. Like the performance of *wagen* rituals in former times, the pursuit of God’s work also demands unity and cooperativeness (see Falck 2016). So, while the question of control over the spiritual realm has become a source of dispute and competition between young and old, male and female, the dependency on it is something that Timbunmeli villagers share.

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## **Appendix: Kinship Terminology Chart**



The book offers a glimpse back in time to a Middle Sepik society, the Iatmul, first investigated by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the late 1920s while the feminist anthropologist Margaret Mead worked on sex roles among the neighbouring Tchambuli (Chambri) people. The author lived in the Iatmul village of Kararau in 1972/3 where she studied women's lives, works, and knowledge in detail. She revisited the Sepik in 2015 and 2017. The book, the translation of a 1977 publication in German, is complemented by two chapters dealing with the life of the Iatmul in the 2010s. It presents rich quantitative and qualitative data on subsistence economy, marriage, and women's knowledge concerning myths and rituals. Besides, life histories and in-depth interviews convey deep insights into women's experiences and feelings, especially regarding their varied relationships with men in the early 1970s. Since then, Iatmul culture has changed in many respects, especially as far as the economy, religion, knowledge, and the relationship between men and women are concerned. In her afterword, the anthropologist Christiane Falck highlights some of the major topics raised in the book from a 2018 perspective, based on her own fieldwork which she commenced in 2012. Thus, the book provides the reader with detailed information about gendered lives in this riverine village of the 1970s and an understanding of the cultural processes and dynamics that have taken place since.

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin has been Professor of Anthropology at the Georg-August-University Göttingen since 1992 (emerita since 2016). She has carried out fieldwork among the Iatmul and Abelam in Papua New Guinea (between 1972 and 1985, revisits in 2015 and 2017). Among the Iatmul, she studied women's lives, works, and knowledge. Among the Abelam she explored the elaborately constructed, towering ceremonial houses, which constituted the focal point of social, political, and ritual life. Later, her interests shifted to Bali and Sumatra, Indonesia (since 1988), and to Cambodia (since 2008). Many of her recent publications focus on the ritual and political organization of space, on the one hand, and on material culture, cultural heritage, and cultural politics, on the other.



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