

THE ABANDONMENT OF YABOB ISLAND 1942-1975 AND THE MEMORY OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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Abstract

Settlement patterns have been one of the key issues with regard to the inhabitation of small island environments. For the indigenous people of the coastal islands of the Madang Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG), socio-cultural changes in the post-contact era have made settlement an issue again, specifically, whether they choose to live on the mainland or to maintain their way of life on the islands. For the people of the coastal islands, most of who speak Austronesian languages, there is a renewed awareness of a 'Them/Us' dichotomy between themselves and coast dwellers, and this plays a role in the creation of the cultural landscape of their settlements.

The inhabitants of Yabob Island abandoned their homeland as a result of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War and resettlement did not commence until after PNG independence in 1975. This paper summarises the resettlement process in order to discuss the reenactment of a historical consciousness of a communal past or, more specifically, what might be termed "the memory of cultural continuity" which creates a particular time-space of a "subjunctive past" (Schechner, 1985) in this contemporary PNG community. The data used for this paper was collected during fieldwork between 1997 and 1998 on Yabob Island.

The Islands

Yabob Island is the homeland of the Yabob people, an Austronesian-speaking group now living south of Madang town, a port on the northern coast of New Guinea that serves as the administrative centre of Madang Province. After the construction of Madang town in the late 19th century, communities were divided into villages north and south of the town. The northern villages are locally known as *ilon* (bay) villages, since they are inside Madang Bay, protected by lagoons and mangroves, while the southern ones are called *murin* (rough sea) villages because the area is constantly washed by the waves of the Bismarck Sea. Currently, about a dozen islands, most of which are raised coral reefs, are inhabited. Yabob belongs to one of the two *murin* villages¹¹; which comprises the

mainland strip (known as *bikples* in Tok Pisin) and three islands, Urembu, Mareg and Yabob. Urembu is uninhabited, the farthest from the shore and the smallest; Mareg is only five minutes away from the mainland by canoe and is the most populated (although it is smaller in size than Yabob).

Yabob Island is the largest of the three islands but is still relatively small, with a coastline of less than one kilometre. There is a small beach where canoes are kept but the rest of the coastline is surrounded by a small cliff of between one and two meters in height. Travel from the mainland to Yabob Island takes about 15 minutes by canoe and there is no regular ferry service. Between May and August, there are many days of *rai*, a dangerous wind that capsizes canoes. In 1997, Yabob Island had barely ten households, with less than four persons per house. The Yabob Islanders formed the smallest community cluster of an (extended) village whose total population numbers c1,000. Between 1997 and 1998, no Yabob islanders had a regular job - all lived from a combination of subsistence agriculture and fishing, remittances, and part-time jobs. Most children over 10 years old were usually able to paddle a canoe to go to school. However, unlike on the mainland, basic infrastructure remained unsatisfactory: there was no electricity and lamps were used; rainwater was collected in tanks made from old refrigerators; and firewood had to be collected on the beach.

Before western colonisation, the Austronesian-speaking people in the Madang area lived on the islands only; using areas of the coastal strip for hunting grounds, taro gardens, lumbering, and to collect clay for pottery. As a part of a vast trade network spread from the Siassi Islands of Morobe Province to Karkar Island in the north, they traded clay pots produced by the women of Yabob and Bilbil villages. These clay pots were a currency used in exchange for various goods - most importantly obsidian. The Austronesian-speaking groups of coastal New Guinea were the seafarers. They proudly told stories about how they sailed the ocean for a long distances using large masted canoes; at this historical consciousness and collective memory has been the basis of their identity as the 'people of the coast'. This self-identification with the maritime geography reflects a differentiation from the non-Austronesian groups of the hinterlands, who are often thought to mark 'the line of the bush'. These non-Austronesian groups were subsistence hunters and farmers. Groups living close to the coast inevitably encountered the island people; some encounters were hostile and violent. The Yabob people are said to have wiped out an entire group called Sivo, who lived in today's mainland Yabob village settlement. Annoyed by repeated harassment of their women while they were collecting clay on the mainland, the Yabob, together with their non-Austronesian ally the Gum, raided the Sivo, killed the villagers, and buried them in a hole^[2].

The Germans arrived in the region in the 1890s to build their headquarters at Kaiser-Wilhelmsland, which was later renamed Madang and taken over by the Australians after WWI. Christianity was introduced, with the Ten Commandments - and colonial law - prohibiting murder. Even after inter-group conflict ceased, due to strong discouragement by the administrators, the Austronesians kept living on the islands. The introduction of

Christianity changed the pre-contact culture well before World War Two by prohibiting most of the native practices and belief systems. The collection of head tax and other integration into the colonial administration stimulated local cultural imagination, which expressed itself through outbreaks of ‘cargo cults’ (Inselmann, 1996; Lawrence, 1989). Despite these drastic changes, the Austronesians around the Madang area still remained on an islands landscape sprinkled with the traditionally thatched roofs and canoes.

The History of Abandonment

Madang fell under Japanese attack in 1942. Because of its location, Yabob Island was one of the first points of the Japanese landings and the Japanese 18th Army took control of the tiny island within an hour. The people, seeing the fully armed soldiers, surrendered; as an old man said to me: “Well, we gave them what they wanted. As it goes, we had no power”. Although there were four clans on Yabob at the time of invasion, the community had given up long distance navigation and the associated traditions played a declining role in the community (although Mareg Island, the legendary landing site of the ancestors of the Madib and Madib Raro clans, was still believed to be the home of demons). After the landings, the Japanese built a military hospital in the middle of a cliff on the mainland and; thereafter, Yabob village became an important strategic point. Some islanders remained on the island until American air raids intensified to the extent that most houses were completely demolished and the men were recruited to serve the Japanese, constructing roads and bridges. New settlements were built on the mainland and the evacuated villagers dug a well and built huts there and Yabob Island was abandoned altogether by the end of the Pacific War. When the Japanese left and the Australians recovered control over New Guinea; the villagers were kept on the mainland. The villagers recalled that the administrators made the decision for this permanent relocation from all the small islands off the Madang coast believing that there was overpopulation and ineffective sanitation on the islands. Until PNG independence the former island people lived exclusively on the mainland.

This decision to relocate the Yabob community had a greater impact than the simple change of dwelling patterns: the villagers also gave up commuting with canoes. Since all the settlements moved to the mainland, access to Madang town became exclusively land-based. In the local language, *wag* originally denoted a canoe but now has been extended to signify modern public transport, such as buses. As this linguistic adjustment shows, the Yabob people became accustomed to life on the mainland: roads to the compounds were paved, a school system was prepared, and some found employment in the hospitals, the radio station, government facilities, the police office, and private enterprises (including branches of banks and Air Niugini). Even the chief of Yabob’s oldest Kakon clan became a medical orderly.

The Resettlement and the Rebuilding of Landscape

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Resettlement became possible in 1975 after PNG independence, when the restriction of residence was lifted. However, most villagers chose to stay on the mainland, probably because the life on the island, which had been forsaken for more than three decades, was regarded as too inconvenient in terms of a contemporary way of life. Only the members of Kakon clan decided to build their home on the island by claiming customary land ownership (there were no competitors in this). When they landed, the beach had receded and the water in the well tasted salty, but nothing else seemed to have changed from the time when the people left, including the old Protestant graveyard. The men built their houses with help from their relatives on the mainland. They cut down trees, cleared the space, planted palms, and gradually rebuilt the landscape. As of 1997 there were about ten households and two men's houses for young boys, and although people moved on and off the island there were generally about 30 people living there at any one time.

Although to a visitor's eye the landscape of the island looks timeless, with the quiet beach, the green foliage, the traditionally thatched stilt houses, and so forth, the landscape is a reinvention that only began after independence. Even the use of canoes is a renewed practice given that people had to learn how to paddle and steer them at the time of the first settlement: Moreover, there have been some important changes to the structure of the village. First, although the graveyard was resurrected, there is no church on the island today (and churchgoers on the island canoe have to the mainland for services^[3]). Second, and more importantly, the islanders have reconstructed *haus boi* (*darem* in the Yabob language) - the men's houses that were burned down by the mission (along with their sacred objects and musical instruments) because they were the place to conduct rituals that were denounced as idol worship.

In rebuilding the *darems* of the two sub-clans of Kakon, the Yabob Islanders reactivated aspects of their former practices. Women's access to the *darems* is prohibited and young boys are encouraged to live together and to learn camaraderie and various life skills before they marry. The once obsolete *mulung* (initiation) ritual was also refashioned and resumed. Not very much is known about the *mulung* ritual in the pre-colonial era, but certainly it involved the performance of 'the voice of spirits' by various sound-producing instruments in order to awe the initiates, and circumcision rituals (Hannemann 1996[n.d.]). Today, no villagers seem to remember these aspects of the ritual, or at least they choose not to mention them.

The *mulung* ritual of Yabob takes place as follows. Every two years the initiation ritual is hosted on Yabob Island, with boys from both Yabob and the co-hosting Bilbil village. Participation frequently extends to any villagers' relatives who might live in distant places and neighbors who live in the mainland housing areas. Bilbil and Yabob take turns hosting *mulung* for each other. Although the ritual is held in the both villages, there are now no residents on Bilbil Island. The contemporary ritual manifests itself as educational camp in which the initiates learn traditional handicrafts, the art of group activity, ethics, traditional values, and the like. The initiates' appearance is strictly hidden from the rest of

the village: even for bathing and laundry on the beach, and times are carefully selected in order to avoid the eyes of women and visitors. The event's finale is a public performance of a traditional dance learned during the *mulung*. Despite its emphasis on things traditional, the summer-camp style event is a recent innovation. Some changes may also have happened after the *darems* on Yabob Island became the target of police raid in the 1980s. Under suspicion of hiding juvenile suspects and possession of illegal firearms; the clan leader, a man in his sixties at that time, was investigated to determine whether the *darem* system was an undercover gang society.

Despite all these changes and differences, islanders tend to inform visitors that: "nothing really changed because we kept our tradition intact". An old man from an *ilon* village who revisited Yabob Island for the first time since the Japanese campaign, remarked: "I see some of the old trees still standing there", for instance. In fact, many of *ilon* islands have their natural bush replaced by mangoes and coconut palms, and their gardens covered with turf. On Yabob Island the sacred names and location of the micro landscape such as certain bushy mounds, grassy dents, or rocks are kept by the male successor of the clan so that they do not lose knowledge of supernatural power; mythical sites regarding the tale of the origin of the clay pot are still remembered, too^[4].

Historicity of Yabob Island: Beyond the Displacement

Answering the question of why only the Kakon clan returned to their island, the clan leader answered: "because it is our land inherited from the ancestors". One can identify a number of reasons for the resettlement of Yabob Island: the population pressure on the mainland settlement as a result of scarcity of land; a move to claim the customary land tenure of the island; a deliberate choice of the more secure, quieter land in preference to the mainland; and so forth. However, these explanations do not account for the sense of tradition, or the sense of 'home'. Over the years since colonisation, the centre of clan solidarity shifted from being the men's secret society (due to the removal of the men's house which institutionalised a complex kinship structure), to extended families (that gained more mobility as peace was extended regionally). What is observed today as the existing kinship network is not an old institution at all. Networks of extended family living in distant towns and provinces have gained importance; child rearing and schooling have become shared work among households of siblings and in-laws. The new function of the men's house has been restricted to serving as a place for the male bonding of the youth whose social space in the school has become the centre of their activity.

Resettlement has not taken place on all the islands. For instance, Bilbil Island continues to be uninhabited (despite the increased population of the mainland Bilbil village), although the Bilbil community has also maintained a sense of tradition, as the resumption of *mulung* with Yabob indicates. Some of the traditional geographical names even appear in the lyrics of pop music and denote the identity of the local people. *Nen a*, composed by

Yabob performer Sandie Gabirel (and recorded on Kale Gadagads' 1992 album *Kales*), includes the last words of an old dying Bilbil man addressed to his daughter:

Nen ηame Panu Domon me hinan / Nen a e so uruti mon / Nηame hinan tibun.

(My daughter, I am a man of Panu Domon / My daughter, do not cry / I am a *tumbuna* for this.)

Panu Domon, literally 'the point' in the local tongue, is the name of a harbour on Bilbil Island, after which the dying man's clan was named. The protagonist, sick in his bed, is depicting his painless ending with the metaphor of the fair weather. The last phrase 'I am *tumbuna* for this (fair weather)' signifies the magic of his clan as the controller of the weather for long distance navigation. Since the canoe is a common metaphor for the dead, the old man's reference to *tumbuna* (the sorcerer) as the seafarer vividly describes his departure. The fact that a popular artist reproduced the old man's word to compose a song indicates that symbolism relating to the ancient way of life is still able to produce compelling images. Consequently, the resettlement on the abandoned islands inevitably produces cultural images regarding their roots, and the time of *tumbuna*, among the Austronesians. There is no doubt that the actual relocation is at least symbolically connected with this realm of cultural images, whether the actors would like it or not, or regardless of direct cause and motivation. Furthermore, there is an entangled articulation of roots among the Yabob Islanders; the garments, headdresses, and music for the *singsing* dance, for instance, are in fact a recent invention after the prohibition of indigenous dance and music by the mission in the 1920s. They were forgotten for a long time, and then finally resurrected and refashioned in the 1970s by recalling and re-editing the fragmented memories of the original. As the repertoire, choreography and the costume of the dance changed, so did the initial function of dance in the pre-contact era as the tool of inter-group communication. Dances today consist of modern cultural contents such as heritage and spectacle; the dancing at the end of *mulung* has become a subject of spectatorship, something to show to the audience. The signification of *singsing* as something 'traditional', with identification of ethnic groups itself, is a recent cultural invention which started only after colonisation.

The Yabob Islanders' reenactment of tradition is hardly an exact replica of its past. Their act of reconstruction of the past is an invention. In addition, choosing the periphery, and moving away from the urban centre to an isolated island, seems an "anti-modern" reaction to the post-Independent PNG. The resumption of canoeing and old practices related to *darem* and *mulung* are another indication of such anti-modernity rather than simple duplication of the pre-contact way of life. Interestingly, the homecoming of Kakon clan itself is a part of a reenactment of history, for the Kakons are the oldest clan and the first residents of Yabob Island. In this regard, the actions of Yabob Islanders in terms of what they often characterise as 'tradition', are not a resistance against modern and post-colonial institutions. Rather, this reenacting of a pre-colonial past based on cultural memory that has become a resource of historicity that produces a cultural grid to create a new centre of activity. The resettlement of Yabob Island is a reenactment of

cultural history and a remaking of a socio-cultural centre that used to be the nucleus of the *wag*-going people. Since Madang town has become the modern administrative and economic centre for the mainland neighborhood, the resettlement of Yabob Island is an invention of a new centre for another world of meaning.

Furthermore, what appears as anti-modern is actually a product of modernity; the contention that Yabob Island is an undeveloped and under-serviced periphery, inadequate in the age of motor vehicle *wags* is a modern construct. On the surface, life on Yabob Island with no electricity or tap water might appear a representation of anti-modernity; however, the resettlement project has a particular historicity and cultural memory. This cultural memory is a source for reconstructing the past and reviving village life on the island. In this, it is ideological, in creating a social space that represents the authenticity of 'things traditional'. When the landscape of the resettled island becomes a representation of cultural memory, and when the resurrection of *wag* as Kakon clan sea-going canoe evokes the cultural past of the people, then it becomes the source of imagination that visualises the idea of a pre-colonial neighborhood. This whole sequence, therefore, is a reworking of the pre-colonial in post-colonial time.

This type of entangled historicity might be characterised as a 'displacement', since something not continuously practised now bears the name of 'tradition' as if it existed without hiatus. However, the word 'displacement' suggests a judgement from an infallible camera eye, so it is more appropriate that this notion be replaced with another, that of a 'subjunctive past' that expresses a particular kind of continuity. The subjunctive past is a reenactment of an historical past in the present time. It is a "restored behavior", to use Richard Schechner's term from his discussion of the anthropology of theater¹⁵¹. While the Yabob Islanders' social space was not necessarily a theatrical one (in the sense of Schechner's original formation), Yabob Islanders invented their past by means of restoration in order to live in today's post-independent PNG; positioning them in a historical mode of the cultural narrative of 'the people of the coast'.

Conclusion: The Reality of Social Space in Papua New Guinean Modernity

Just as the canoes called *wag* are travelling back and forth in the quiet deep blue sea, what appears as traditional is not a substance but a *modus operandi* of reality; it is how historicity is incorporated in a contemporary way of life, or the 'subjunctive past' of historicity. Yabob Islanders re-enacted and re-inculcated their historical continuity by reinventing men's houses and dances and resurrecting mythological knowledge and canoes. Despite this historical discontinuity of the settlement on the island and its abandonment, the source of such an imagination of cultural continuity is reproduced with the memory of the seafarers, the memory of the micro landscape of the island, old practices, and the native image of the canoe. This reenactment of history could take place nowhere else but on the island.

Yabob villagers today identify the distinction between Austronesian and non-Austronesian groups in terms of the 'line of the beach' against the 'line of the bush', referring to the historical location of the homelands of the two groups. Such a distinction has become the source of their identity as *mangi Madang tru* (Tok Pisin for 'truly Madang people'); it is also used to describe their identity in contrast to newcomers from the Sepik or Highlands in the semi-urban squatter settlements. The reenactment of the subjunctive past is a making of distinction as well; the feeling of the seasonal wind on the sea and the very scenery of the islands are restored in order to create a distinct social space that has been achieved through the reinvention of historicity and a reenactment of the way of life on the island from the pre-colonial time. It is a subjunctive mode of the past, a particular revisiting of the past and, at the same time, the product of action and a reinvention.

Yabob Islanders today are likely to send their relatives to an Australian university, become pop artists, own grocery stores, join tuna fishing boats from Korea and drink heavily in Pusan, work for oil multinationals, become born-again evangelists, and have ceased to speak their indigenous tongue for the creolised Tok Pisin. In other words, their sense of the here-and-now is quickly merging into the capitalist mode of production, the market economy, and the system of the nation-state of PNG with its post-modern cultural grid. Yet still they resist by forming their locality intact through reinvention, which might be partially due to the fact that they still rely on a subsistence way of living because of their limited command of English. Urbanisation, institutionalisation, post-colonisation, post-industrialisation, globalisation, etc., have formed the social environment of the people who restored their native sense of centre and periphery; they reinvented historicity through cultural inventions by means of reactivating their cultural memory. In this sense, what appears as a traditional way of life is a production of modernity that always objectifies the historical past, but in 'restoring' their past in a subjunctive manner, Yabob Islanders are creating a new centre, in order to ensure their cultural survival today.

Endnotes

[1] The other is Bilbil village.

[2] A communication facility stands on the burial site today.

[3] Missionaries conducted their service in the small church or *haus lotu* in the Pacific style. The Protestants built one on Yabob, while the Catholics built theirs on Mareg Island.

[4] These are the places where Hon Pain, the daughter of the celestial place, washed her young boy's body, and the site where she made her final clay pots, the invention that she brought to the Yabob women. These events occurred before going back to her place with her son because her mother-in-law divulged her true origin to him as she scolded him, breaking the initial condition of her marriage not to tell anybody about her true identity.

[5] Schechner writes: “Restored behavior is symbolic and flexible: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances. These difficult terms express a single principle: The self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles. Symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into theater of social, religious, aesthetic, medical, and educational process. Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is “twice-behaved behavior” (Schechner 1985:36).

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