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“Fish, Water, and Mosquitoes”: The Western Invention of Iatmul Culture

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Introduction

Since they first encountered European visitors in 1886, the people who live along the Middle Sepik River and have come to be known as the Iatmul have induced generations of travellers, administrators, and anthropologists to admire, describe and – to lesser extent and with greater difficulty – explain the size of their villages, the beauty of their houses, the splendour of their art and ritual, and the complexity of their economic and political life. These descriptive and analytical attempts have fallen short, however, because they deploy westernized categories such as river/hinterland that diverge from local conceptions, they erroneously presume ethnolinguistic continuity in extrapolating from one village to many, and – most problematic of all – they use ethnolinguistic categories such as “Iatmul” and “Sawos” as though these were agents that determine history.

In 1984, commenting on Gewertz’s (1983) model of the area’s past, Hauser-Schäublin (1990) was the first to point out anthropology’s role in constructing the Iatmul and Sawos as ethnolinguistic units and to question the utility of these constructs in historiographic approaches to the Middle Sepik. By then, studies had already appeared in the German literature – and others would soon follow – that further undermined the prevailing picture of Middle Sepik historical processes. Using Hauser-Schäublin’s

insight as a starting point, this paper seeks to contribute to a reconsideration of Western ethnographic data and analytical categories in the light of Middle Sepik views of their pasts. It attempts to deconstruct “Iatmul” as a single agency and argues that it is, instead, merely an epiphenomenon of underlying processes generated out of artful adaptations to an environment characterized by periodic flooding, a natural abundance of fish, scarcity of all other exploitable natural resources, and homicidal threat.

First Encounters with the River-Dwellers of the Middle Sepik

On August 18th, 1886, Otto Schellong recorded in his diary what he had just been told by the first Europeans to visit what had until then been a *terra incognita* to the Western world: the Middle Sepik River in what was then the German colony of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and is today the northern part of the independent state of Papua New Guinea. “Here, large villages were found, of supposedly 1000 inhabitants and more – something hitherto completely unheard of here. [...] The houses were described as spacious and grand, with deeply swaying roofs” (Schellong 1934:87, translated from the German by the author). Nearly 50 years later, Gregory Bateson, who had just returned from fieldwork in the area, wrote in similar vein about “the splendid design of the dancing ground and ceremonial houses”, “[...] towering sixty foot gables” (Bateson 1932:258). Yet another fifty years had passed when Eric Silverman, who conducted fieldwork in Tambunum village, likewise observed that the river-dwellers “have come to dominate the middle Sepik,” having amongst them “the most prolific Sepik artists” (Silverman 1988:5).

The people, who so deeply impressed these authors and many more, have come to be known as the “Iatmul”. At contact, they lived in about 20 villages spread along the banks and oxbow lakes of the meandering river from Tambunum in the East to Japandai in the West. In the historiography of the area, five settlements were considered the centres of outward migration. Each had more than 400 inhabitants, but their offshoots were often smaller. Each village was organized in wards, each usually inhabited by cosmologically related sub-clans, and dominated by a men’s house. Being inundated for many months in the year, the area is rich in riverine resources but does not allow much gardening or arboriculture. Therefore, the main staple, the starch of the sago palm, was traded in fish-for-sago markets with bush-dwelling neighbours to the north, who also supplied them with shell valuables that were used in every social transaction; with betelnut, a stimulant in daily life but also a prerequisite of every headhunt; and with magical paint, pottery, netbags, carvings and vegetables (Bateson 1932:passim; Hauser-Schäublin 1977:39,42; Kocher Schmid 2005:123; Silverman 1993:50f.). Intensive trade relationships were also sustained with the inhabitants of the Chambri and Aibom hills to the south, who supplied the river-dwellers with pottery, stone axe heads, and mosquito-proof sleeping bags (Gewertz 1983; Hauser-Schäublin 1977; Schindl-

beck 1980; Schuster and Schuster 1972). Only the easternmost river-dwellers seemed to have been more independent of frequent sago and shell wealth supplies from the north (Haberland 1966:83; Mead 1976:370; Silverman 1993:50–51; 2001:100).

The Birth of an Ethnolinguistic Group: Gregory Bateson Introduces “the Iatmul”

By the end of the First World War, about 1000 foreigners had travelled up and down the Sepik River (Claas 2007:47–57; n.d.), yet of these only members of the Kaiserin Augusta-Fluß-Expedition 1912/13 had expanded their investigations into the bush on either side of the middle river (Behrmann 1924:l.2,l.3). Unfortunately, Roesicke, the expedition’s ethnographer, died before he could publish any major work, his notes were destroyed in the 2nd World War (Damm 1953:92), and his diary will not be made available to researchers until it is published (Markus Schindlbeck, personal communication 1998).

Because they seemed to share many traits – for example, the layout and size of the villages, the language, economy, and art style of their inhabitants – the West considered these villages as parts of a single entity, a perception reinforced by a mistaken assumption that the main river was the principal travel route, with the bush at the sides merely a hinterland. Even before Bateson’s arrival in 1929, the area was being recognized as a “style area” (Reche 1911), but it was his seminal research that gave the inhabitants the name by which they are now known among Papua New Guineans and Westerners alike, the “Iatmul”.

Bateson, as it happens, was far from happy with the term he had chosen and his misgivings were well placed. He had visited less than half of the villages he was uniting under that term, leaving out the western group completely (Bateson 1932:245). His fieldsite Mindimbit had suffered badly under “pacification” and labour recruitment, and its ritual and political life had largely broken down, making it difficult to contextualize accounts of cosmology and the past (Bateson 1932:274–274; 1958:135,168–169). Furthermore, he had visited only one of the many neighbouring villages from which he was differentiating “the Iatmul”; he had witnessed hardly any of their interactions with the river-dwellers (Bateson 1932:450); and he knew almost nothing of their relations with them. In naming the “Iatmul,” in other words, Bateson drew a boundary line that defined the extent of Western knowledge rather more than it did any actual “tribe”.

Revisionism and Missed Chances

Bateson’s misgivings about the term “Iatmul” were soon forgotten, and subsequent research did nothing to revise matters. In 1933, Reo Fortune and Margaret Mead arrived

to conduct four months of fieldwork among the neighbouring Chambri. Mead, though, used the fruits of her Chambri work principally to sustain the argument about “Sex and Temperament” (1935). Fortune never published his results. Whatever the merits of their fieldwork, they missed a valuable opportunity to revise Bateson’s “Iatmul” construction in the light of a neighbouring group’s perspective. Later visitors – anthropologists and collectors – only reinforced the notion, presenting the cultures and art forms off the river as distorted and crude copies of “Iatmul” prototypes (e.g. Bühler 1960:8; Haberland 1965:43). This assumption of a prolific centre radiating culture into its hinterlands also carried overtones of temporality crucial to constructing “Iatmulness,” for the radiating area had to be older than its “hinterland” receptors.

Gewertz, the Basel Expeditions, and the Unfortunate Coincidence of Language and Time

It was not until the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, that a major fieldwork wave was conducted in the Middle Sepik region. In the course of two expeditions from Basel, ethnographers were based in the river villages of Palimbei, Kandingei, Yentchan, and Kararau; in Aibom, a neighbouring village to the south; in Gaikorobi, a major settlement in the bush north of the river; and among the Kwoma in the Waskuk Hills to the northwest. At about the same time, several English speaking researchers also began work in the area – among the Kwoma, the Chambri, and the Avatip, a riverine people to the West. The first major publication of the Basel group appeared in 1963 (Schuster), followed by Kaufmann (1972), Hauser-Schäublin (1977), Schindlbeck (1980), Wassmann (1982, 1988), Stanek (1982, 1983), Schmid and Kocher Schmid (1992). In 1977, the first publications of the English-speaking ethnographers began to appear – Gewertz (1977) on the Chambri, followed by Harrison (1978) on the Manambu, and Bowden (1982) on the Kwoma. As most of this work was Ph.D.- related, its focus was geographically very narrow. Providing data on five river settlements and three bush settlements, though, the potential for a comparative evaluation of the area within a historiographic framework was in the offing. Unfortunately, the attempt at synthesis came too early: when Gewertz produced her “Sepik River Societies” in 1983, only four of the numerous publications that would provide detailed investigation of the region’s past had appeared, all of them in German. Of these, Gewertz referenced only Schindlbeck (1980), and she failed to make use of his important data on past market arrangements. Given the difficulty, not to mention the expense, of getting three dissertations and an article – roughly 1200 pages of German text – translated into English, however, she can hardly be blamed for the omission.

Well aware that she was generalizing from a small body of data to a region that contained more than 50 settlements, Gewertz cautioned that “the deductions I base upon these data must be taken as approximate” (1983:15). These deductions pictured

the “Iatmul” as an expanding centre, forcing small hinterland groups of hunters and gatherers to form sedentary communities, with whom barter markets could be established to provide sago in return for fish. In Gewertz’s view, the sago producers were the submissive partners, bush women having to put more labour into providing their sago than did river women into procuring their fish. This hegemony the “Iatmul” were able to impose on their neighbours, supposedly, because with their larger villages they enjoyed a superior fighting force, which allowed them to deprive the bush-dwellers to the north and south of access to the desirable resources of the river. In addition, according to Gewertz, the sago suppliers furnished a convenient supply of heads for Iatmul warriors. As a result of this dominance, “Iatmul” culture had spread outwards, leaving minor mirror images of itself along its periphery (Gewertz 1983). Gewertz’s book, although criticised in many details, was well received and is still frequently cited in studies on cultures of New Guinea.

Gewertz’s framework defined the development and migrations of the Middle Sepik area by two major conditions: a) the existence of ethnolinguistic groups à la Bateson, with river-dwellers acting as a monolithic block to keep their neighbours as marginal vassals (see also Bowden 1991; Schindlbeck 1985); and b) the classification of all bush-dwellers and their relationships to the river-dwellers as essentially the same. With her book, Bateson’s “Iatmul” became even more entrenched as an ethnic group dominating the Middle Sepik – at least in the English speaking literature.

Connecting Loose Ends: Hauser-Schäublin’s “Fish, Water, and Mosquitoes”

In 1984, the Wenner Gren sponsored a conference in Basel on the Sepik (Lutkehaus et al. 1990) at which more than fifty papers were presented on different aspects of life in the two Sepik Provinces. Because the papers were all presented in English, they considerably advanced English-speakers’ access to results of the Basel field-research. In her own paper at this conference, Hauser-Schäublin (1990:478) provided one of the first critical comments on Gewertz’s book, which had only just appeared: Although Bateson’s study was brilliant, she observed, it was she believed “Western-centric” to regard the “Iatmul” as “the group that dominated the Middle Sepik.” Referring to the results of her own research on the area’s architecture, she pointed out the fallacy of taking the more elaborate for the older: “It is true that Iatmul gaigo [ceremonial houses] were higher and larger, but this is no indication that they were the prototype for Sawos ceremonial houses” (Hauser-Schäublin 1990:478). And she went on to indicate a different and quite provocative starting point for research of Middle Sepik pasts:

The abundance these people dispose of consists of fish, water, and mosquitoes. (Hauser-Schäublin 1990:478)

What she meant was this: if, initially, the Middle Sepik environment offered nothing but fish, water, and mosquitoes, then why did people settle there, and what had brought about their distinctive way of life?

A Middle Sepik View of Middle Sepik Pasts

Hauser-Schäublin's statement gained even more standing in 1988 when the archaeologist Pamela Swadling and her colleagues published evidence that 6000 years ago, part of the Sepik Basin had been a large inland sea that over the next 5000 years had gradually infilled the basin (Swadling et al. 1988). Clearly, "Iatmul culture" was a stage in the adaptation to an environment that had undergone considerable change. This view has long been advocated by Middle Sepik narrators themselves:

The Sepik was just water and then ground started to form here, you know how the Sepik puts down its mud banks. The water becomes shallow and then it shows in low water and grass grows on it. Islands formed in the Sepik. We had worries about land. (Alingai from Kanganaman, Bragge n.d.:139)¹

This watery prehistory provides a baseline to an intriguing hypothesis of how Middle Sepik markets emerged. Let us assume that sago had originally grown close by the shores of the inland sea. As the waters of the sea began their retreat towards the modern coastline, the distance between sago groves and fishing waters gradually would have increased. Because the newly exposed sea bed in the Middle Sepik would have been flooded for several months each year (as it still is today), and because sago palms cannot tolerate extended inundation (Rhoads 1982), the groves of sago on which Middle Sepik people depended would not have followed the retreating shoreline. Once the fishing grounds moved beyond the typical range for logistical foraging, therefore, people would have to build overnight camps. In order to secure their access to the river against competitors, however, these camps would have to become larger and more permanent. Finally, as the distance between these river camps and the home village increased further, it would eventually make sense for people to institute markets at the erstwhile river camps, now grown into villages, exchanged their fish catches for the sago produced 'back home':

The ancestor said they would split the line, half to remain and make sago and the others to go out to the Sepik to fish, the idea being to exchange sago for fish, so both lines could have both items. (Abandimi from Malingei, Bragge n.d.:148)

Each village on the river was a unique and constantly changing combination of sub-clans, each bringing with it a particular patrimony of cosmological and magical knowledge and a distinctive set of enemies and trading partners according to the particular contacts it had forged in the course of its migrations (Claas 2007:117–221; Silverman 1993:174; see also Harrison 1984:402). As a result, groups that had been forced to live

together in villages for defensive purposes, nonetheless had divergent political interests (Behrmann 1924:53; Bragge n.d.:passim; Hauser-Schäublin 1990:473; Silverman 1993:1; Stanek 1983:50–52; see also Roscoe 1996): although they had joined to defend their settlement, they each had their own enemies to fight and their own allies within and outside the village with whom to trade and to unite forces. This tense field of cross-cutting interests could become as great a threat to the existence of a village as an enemy attack (Bateson 1958:96–97; see also Harrison 1993; Silverman 1993:81).

Countless ceremonies were created that united groups and united individuals across groups, thereby strengthening bonds within the village, but still fissions were unavoidable (Bateson 1958:108; Bragge n.d.). Members of descent groups, clan groups and men’s-house groups were engaged in a constant struggle to gain more power by marrying well, increasing their numbers, attracting more followers, and gaining access to more ritual and cosmological knowledge (Stanek 1983; Wassmann 1982; see also Harrison 1990). Following Roscoe’s (1995) analysis, I argue that this struggle, created by the necessity of preventing fission and of convincing oneself as well as the enemy of one’s invincibility, created the splendour of art and ritual that Westerners conceptualized as the most impressive marker of “Iatmul culture” (see also Bateson 1932:262). Each village’s fight against fission was unique, however, because it was descent groups and men’s-house groups – not villages or ethnic groups – that migrated and made war. For the same reason, each village’s contacts with its neighbours constituted a set of relationships without parallel in other villages.

By creating “Iatmul” and “Sawos” as the entities that possess agency, however, Gewertz obscured this particularity. To begin with, “Iatmul” river villages did not enjoy a military advantage over their “Sawos” sago partners on account of superior size. To be sure, as Gewertz points out, the average Iatmul village was larger than the average Sawos village, if one is looking at the Sawos language area *as a whole*. When the focus is limited to just those Sawos villages that actually exchanged or warred with the Iatmul, however, this numerical difference disappears (Claas 2007:68).

When Gewertz refers to a pattern of “Iatmul” aggression against their “Sawos” sago partners, what she fails to recognize is the specificity of these attacks. To be sure, river people attacked their bush neighbours, but never were their targets their own particular sago partners and often there were campaigns that enemies on the river mounted against *one another* via their sago partners. Contrary to Gewertz, individual river and bush exchange partners rather enjoyed relationships based on common ancestry and concomitant amity (Claas 2007:355–61).

It follows also that there was no “Iatmul” hegemony that set exchange rates in the sago-for-fish markets to the disadvantage of the “Sawos.” Rather, these exchange rates were generally considered fair (Bowden 1991; Schindlbeck 1980:167–169). Moreover, if river women ever behaved towards their sago partners at these markets in a dominant manner, as Gewertz witnessed, then this must have been the exception, for

many observers also commented on their characteristic lack of antagonism (Behrmann 1924:51; Bowden 1991:227; Bateson 1958:144; Hauser-Schäublin 1977:42).

To the extent that Middle Sepik people recognize entities that map onto anthropology's conceptions of "The Iatmul" or "The Sawos," it is a distinction between "river dwellers" and "bush people." For the people of the Middle Sepik, though, these latter are neither static nor are they ethnic categories of the kind envisioned in traditional Sepik anthropology. The "Sawos" and "Iatmul", in actuality, are a people who share a common ancestry and history, who have continually moved back and forth between river and bush (Bragge n.d.), and who are united in relationships that symbiotically exploit the resources of their environment (Claas 2007; Kocher Schmid 2005; Schindlbeck 1985) and are viewed as qualitatively distinct to all other relationships with their neighbours.

River Villages as Gateway Communities

The only natural resource worth exploiting on the Middle Sepik River was indeed fish. But by positioning their villages as they did, the people on the river created a cultural resource: the dependencies of their neighbours. Precisely because their neighbours differed from one another, river villages were able to position themselves as gateways of interregional trade. In response to environmental variation they controlled the movement of commodities while reducing the costs of their transportation (Hirth 1978:35–37), transportation that was costly not only because distances were long but because, in an area of enduring warfare, traffic was also dangerous. The social groups in river villages connected their trade friends into a largely peaceful trade circle, defending it against rivals within the village and enemies beyond. Although the component groups of river villages had shared a greater proportion of their past with neighbours in the bush than they had with one another and although they never acted as a "tribe," they were nevertheless expressing a feeling of unity when they claimed that their origins lay in the bush area north of the river (Wassmann 1982:19) but that their particular way of life originated outside it (Claas 2007:373–384; Kocher Schmid 2005; Silverman 1993:50–51; 2001:17,23).

This ancestor bone dagger I am showing you has been carried by my ancestors since we were at Laming inside the Gaikorobi [northern bush] area. Two families went outside when it was still the dark times. (Councillor Guanduan from Kanganaman, Bragge n.d.:141)

But things always change. The term, "Iatmul", may once have been misplaced, but more recently, the fast traffic of outboard motors that now connects river villages, the administrative borders encircling them, the national and international art dealers who once again are defining style areas have begun to unite what was once divided by the lethal defence of fishing and trading rights. In Tambunum, according to Silverman, "Iatmul"

has finally become a term of cultural identity grounded in “a sense of tradition and heritage, a different and previously unencountered type of self-awareness” (Silverman 1993:60). Notwithstanding the contours of the past, it is a sentiment that has likely now gained a far wider currency in the Middle Sepik.

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Notes

- 1 Statements from Middle Sepik narrators in the text exemplify many similar statements in Bragge (n.d.).

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