

The Papuan Queen Doesn't Shop Here Anymore

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Port Moresby on Halloween is just like Port Moresby on any other day. I first arrived in Papua New Guinea on October 31, 1967. Brian, my archaeologist husband, and I spent a few days in Port Moresby stocking up our patrol chest with the supplies that we would need for our first few months in a coastal village. Chinese merchants supplied us with lots of tinned goods, saltine crackers, rice, powdered milk and eggs, malaria pills, first aide supplies, flashlights and batteries, matches and a kerosene ring for cooking. We also bought a good supply of trade tobacco in hopes of trading for fresh foods in the village.

A DC-3 carried our supplies and our selves over the Owen Stanley Range to land on the grass airstrip known as Wanigela. We spent our first three days at the Waijuga Plantation while Brian arranged for a place to live in the coastal village of Rainu. He found a thatched storage hut belonging to the Anglican Mission. It did not take long to take possession. The patrol chest went into the smaller room with the kerosene ring on top of it. Mosquito nets were hung from the rafters to cover the two air mattresses that served as our beds. Unfortunately we discovered a hole in one of the mosquito nets and a slow leak in one of the mattresses. Since we were an egalitarian couple we switched places each night. One night you had the good mattress and the bad mosquito net and the next night you slowly sank into the cement floor as the mattress deflated but were not bothered by the mozzies.

Although our nights at the Waijuga Plantation had been relatively luxurious it was a relief to get out from under the censorious eyes of Mrs. Cridland. She and her husband had been in Papua since World War I and she made her opinion of anthropologists and archaeologists quite clear. I think that her two favourite statements were, "You can't trust the natives," and, "Let me tell you, Margaret Mead wasn't so high and mighty when she was in Samarai trying to get that husband of hers out of jail."

Our neighbours in Rainu and Oeresan were much friendlier. Our shed was at the back of Rainu near the lagoon and served as the border between the villages. The villages were on a broad shallow sandbar that was separated from the mainland by a marshy lagoon. Both villages had dozens of homes made of poles and beri leaf thatch. Each house was raised from the ground about five feet and had a large porch that was open at the front and covered by the house roof. Most household activities took place on the porch or at the fire pit by its side. Children, dogs and pigs roamed at will among the houses and everyone kept an eye on them.

Fresh supplies were not readily available. I suppose that, had I been more enterprising, I might have chased up some fresh fruit and vegetables. Neighbours did offer us taro, bananas, coconuts and once a chunk of wild pig. I quickly learned to decline the taro since it tasted like laundry starch. I boiled the pork for four hours before we dared consume it. A stalk of bananas ripened while hanging from a porch rafter and occasionally I could keep down a few sips of green coconut milk.

This was Brian's field trip and I was along in a "whither thou goest" role. Brian was busy digging pits, surface collecting, and studying the way that ceramic pots were made. This was research for his doctorate in archaeology. I was to keep house, prepare meals, interview women on subjects that interested Brian and be supportive. I failed miserably. My daily routine would begin by running into the bushes to urinate. Then I would collect rainwater from our drip sheet contraption, go into the "kitchen" and light the kerosene ring. Usually I could get the pot of water onto the heat before I had to run outside and throw up. The smell of the kerosene set off the nausea and the ripening stalk of bananas on the porch added another aroma. An appreciative audience of village pigs waited for my performance each morning. Pigs are quite intelligent and they quickly discovered that I was a reliable food source. Everywhere that I walked during that first field season I was followed by a herd of expectant pigs.

Each morning a parade of village matrons would stop by the hut and offer to show me the proper place to bathe in the river. I accepted the offer on my first morning but found that the bathing place was a muddy hole in the Sasap River. It was very close to the mouth of the river and so muddy that it was impossible to see if any crocodiles were in the vicinity. After my first visit to the bathing place I washed either in the ocean where I could see the critters or after dark during torrential rains.

Shopping in the Wanigela region was rather limited. Most supplies were brought in by ship or by boat. A steam ship company and the Anglican Church ran large ships along the coast of Papua New Guinea. These ships moved people and supplies. Since two rivers ran into the ocean near Wanigela, the coral reef had openings where the fresh water prevented

coral from growing. This enabled the ships to come near the beach. Smaller boats would move the supplies and people on to the shore and take copra or other passengers or packages out to the boats. The village copra co-op, Waijuga Plantation and the other private plantation all had tractors that pulled carts from the beach across the metalled road to the inland plantations and villages.

In addition to the large ships that only arrived occasionally were the trade boats. These were all built to the same pattern. They were 39 feet long since vessels below 40 feet in length did not require operating papers and licensing. The boats had both a motor and a mast with a mainsail. The sail could complement or replace the engine and the boom also served as a winch support for lowering and raising supplies into and out of the below deck hold. Forrester's Mr. Allnut would have been at home on the small coastal vessels that plied this coast. The boats served as occupation, home and refuge for the kind of men who would never feel at home in the suburbs of Sydney or Christchurch. The small boats took copra, cocoa, rubber and crocodile skins to Samarai and brought back stock for the small trade stores.

Shopping was limited to the trade stores. Each plantation, the copra cooperative, and two independent men had small shops where items such as tobacco, rice, gingham, kerosene, sugar, tinned meat, biscuits, clothing and metal pots could be purchased. Their wares could be obtained for copra, crocodile skins, or cash.

My shopping excursions were limited. We had little cash and had most supplies with us. I once bought some savoury biscuits from a trade store and I attempted to buy shoes after the village pigs devoured my left sandal. I was unsuccessful. All the stores looked alike. They were raised from the ground on posts with steps that allowed customers to attract the merchant's attention. Most were attached to regular homes. The shopkeeper would appear at the high window and hand down merchandise to the customers. All shopkeepers were men. Actually I never had an opportunity to visit the trade store attached to the copra plantation in the hills behind Serad. That plantation shared a trait with some Greek Orthodox monasteries; absolutely no women were allowed to set foot on the place. Brian visited the plantation occasionally and assured me that its trade store was identical to the others in the region. It, like almost all of the mercantile activities in Wanigela, was controlled by a man.

Women had a separate and smaller economic sphere. Shifting horticulture provided basic subsistence for each household. As one local matron explained to me, "Making a garden is just like making a baby. A husband and wife start it together and, after that, it is totally up to her." Men produced the export crops and ran the trade stores but women provided most

family food. Women also worried about finding cash for school fees and uniforms, church donations and special foods and gifts for celebrations.

Wanigela women have manufactured thin walled, porous clay pots for the past 200 years. The porosity allows water to evaporate and thus keeps the remainder cool or, if hot water is desired, the thin walls allow water to boil rapidly over a fire. These pots are valued in areas without a pottery industry and outrigger canoes visit to obtain them. Usually the pots are exchanged for tapa cloth made of beaten mulberry bark. The tapa is painted and made into traditional clothing. Women to the south of Wanigela are famous for their tapa. Both the women of the Massim and Wanigela paint the tapa in beautiful designs that depict animals, plants or other objects simultaneously in three dimensions. These women developed the art style before Braque or Picasso. The Anglican Mission buys the decorated tapa and stores it until tourists or art dealers arrive to purchase it.

By the time my first visit to Wanigela ended I had learned interesting facts about pottery designs and facial tattooing but my marriage was not doing well. I discovered that I was pregnant and, since this was a planned pregnancy, it should have been a happy event. Unfortunately, I suffered from morning sickness and I was married to an anthropologist who considered morning sickness to be a cultural rather than a physical phenomenon. He was disgusted by my illness and rather concerned with an auto-immune illness of his own. While I was vomiting, Brian was defoliating. All of his hair fell out and his fingernails were beginning to flake off. We both had malaria. We were living in extremely uncomfortable conditions and the marriage fell apart. The amusing aspect was that, due to the pigs' appetite, when I left my husband I was both pregnant and barefoot. (So much for folk wisdom!)

Four years later I returned to Wanigela under very different circumstances. I was divorced and doing research for my own doctorate. I was the mother of an active three-year-old boy. Ian, my son, and I moved into the former priest's house in the Serad mission compound. We took our meals in the large mission house with the nursing sister and a British volunteer schoolteacher. Sister Helen Roberts was the mission manager, an experienced nurse and an excellent linguist. She helped Carole Stedman and I with our efforts to learn Ubiri, the local language, and could always recommend a source of information for my research.

Ian had a wonderful time during this visit. He would have breakfast with us in the mission house and then disappear for the rest of the day. He rarely returned for lunch and, if no one had seen him by dinnertime, I would ring the mission bell (an interesting percussion instrument made of a huge abandoned Japanese artillery shell casing). Ian spent his days roaming with other children in the various villages. He frequently went to

the beach villages. On a few occasions he returned cleaned up and wearing a borrowed ara (a type of breech cloth). As Hilary Clinton commented, "It takes a village to raise a child" and Ian was quickly incorporated into the village childcare network. He was fed and bathed and entertained along with the other children as needed. The single need that the villages could not meet was his insatiable appetite for peanut butter. Villages in Papua New Guinea have very small stores of either peanut butter or of Marmite. Ian craved peanut butter and Carole desired Marmite. Some peanut butter could be obtained but, in Australia, Vegemite is the substitute for Marmite.

In attempting to keep Ian supplied with his dietary staple I visited all of the local trade stores on a regular basis. If a ship or trade boat brought in supplies I would immediately visit all of the stores to buy any peanut butter that might have been off-loaded. Most of my visits were in vain but Ian was good-natured about his meals. On one occasion a small bat fell from the thatch ceiling into his mashed potatoes. Ian's only comment was, "Do I have to eat my potatoes to get pudding?"

Much had changed during my four-year absence. The village council had prohibited free ranging pigs. That did not break my heart. Papua New Guinea was preparing for independence. The owner of the upland plantation had sold the estate to the United Church Mission. The mission brought in workers from the Trobriand Islands and the new manager had no objections to visits by women. In fact, Carole and I made frequent Saturday visits to bathe under a small waterfall. The manager arranged to keep workers out of the area on Saturdays and we could actually wear swimsuits without offending anyone!

Changes in myself were also vast. I was learning the language and working on my own research. I quickly discovered why so many women had shown me the correct bathing spot on the Sasap River. I also realized that men did not leap to their feet when I approached due to Anglican ideas of gender etiquette. Despite seventy years of Anglican influence many traditional beliefs and customs were still in evidence. Polygamy occurred despite Church disapproval and some aspects of the traditional worldview continued to influence behaviour. The concept of ufam was still entrenched. Ufam is thought to be an aura that surrounds each individual. The invisible particles of this substance are subject to gravity and each person is thought to constantly shed bits of it. Ufam has three polar components: male vs. female, kin vs. non-kin, and living vs. non-living. The ufam of non-kin is slightly dangerous. The ufam of the non-living is so perilous that pregnant women and relatives of the recently deceased must observe purification rituals. Finally, the ufam of women is dangerous to men.

The polarity of the male vs. female components creates an almost automatic set of behaviours in male/female interactions. Men always bathe upstream from women. If a woman passes above the genital region of a man it endangers him. No wonder the women wanted me to bathe near the mouth of the river and no wonder men leapt to their feet whenever I came trucking down a path scattering my dangerous ufa in all directions! Seated males always stood when a woman approached. Men can safely walk among seated (usually on the ground or floor) women but the reverse is fraught with peril. At social gatherings women sit near the entrance and men walk past them and later serve the refreshments. Being waited on by men is one of the advantages of being a gender pollutant.

Understanding the worldview solved many of the problems that I had encountered in the kinship system and greatly simplified my doctoral research. The basics of the economic system were that households produced their own food. Trade stores sold imported goods. All trade stores were owned and operated by males who could safely serve customers of both sexes. With the exceptions of clay pots and decorated tapa, males controlled cash and trade.

In 1991, I returned to an extremely different country. I had left many good friends in Wanigela and made a brief visit during the summer of 1991. I had a research grant to investigate the mission birth and death records and look for interesting demographic patterns. Sister Helen had retired to a new home in Wanigela and offered me a room. She was one of the few non-natives who managed to obtain citizenship in the new country.

Just by flying over the community to land at the same grass airstrip I could observe that much had changed. The population had doubled in size to about 2,000 and most of the population had moved from the coastal villages to the north side of the airstrip. The attractions of that locale included the convenience of the airstrip, the Anglican Church, the medical clinic, government elementary school, a bank, a post office, the tapa storage area and, on three days of the week, an open-air market.

Two events were responsible for the resettlement of the population. When the OPEC cartel was formed the price of gasoline soared. Large vessels that supplied coastal communities could no longer afford to operate. When the Saint George hit a reef, the Anglican Mission did not bother to salvage her. Other ships met similar fates or were simply turned into scrap metal. Large-scale shipping died on the Papuan coast after the formation of OPEC.

The small coastal trade boats might have survived the oil price hike. Profits would have been lower for the coastal traders but they could have managed. However, most of these rootless, romantic characters were forced out of Papua New Guinea when it gained independence in 1975.

The majority of non-natives could not qualify for citizenship. Non-citizens were not eligible to operate most businesses under new laws. Many plantations reverted to the government and boat owners found few native buyers for their small boats.

The loss of shipping did not totally isolate coastal communities. Outrigger canoes were still used to visit neighbouring communities and the local trade in pots and tapa cloth was not effected. Planes replaced boats and ships as the major form of transport to cities. The government replaced the weekly flights of lumbering DC-3's with more frequent flights of small planes. Thus the airstrip replaced the coast as the major communication hub.

The seven small trade stores of 1972 were no longer in business. They had been replaced by a single large trade store beside the airstrip. Most of its stock arrived by air and payment for goods was strictly a cash transaction. Stony's store carried some canned goods but its most popular items seemed to be batteries. These were required to power the seemingly ubiquitous tape players, flashlights and musical instruments. This store is owned and operated by a man. His prices are steep since transportation costs are high but the store has a monopoly on imported goods and seems profitable. The owner still operates from a high window and hands purchases down to his customers.

The village market is totally different. It has a few covered stalls but most merchants sell from woven mats on the ground. Customers include men, women and children but all of the merchants are women. The concept of ufam prevents men from selling in this market. Men cannot sit on the ground surrounded by their wares while women stroll through the market. Wares include betel nut, coconuts, bananas, fresh fish, tropical fruits, melons, peanuts, taro, sweet potatoes, and baked bread rolls. Men frequently supply the coconuts, betel nuts, and fish to their wives. All of the wares are produced locally and women transport them to market in the traditional bilum.

I found that the changed modes of transport have shifted the balance of economic activity toward women in another area as well. The exchange of pottery for blank tapa was always conducted by outrigger canoe and was never influenced by increases in fuel prices. The pottery has maintained its value since metal replacements are now more expensive. The tapa business has increased in importance as the artistic merit of Collingwood Bay tapa gains recognition. Tapa from this region has been featured internationally in Revlon cosmetic ads and was prominently displayed in a Frasier television episode. Private collectors charter planes in Port Moresby and fly to Wanigela to obtain tapa. Some European art galleries

buy tapa from the mission store. Tapa is flexible, lightweight, non-perishable and can be easily exported by mail.

The changing aspects of commerce seem to have altered gender relations in Wanigela. Some men have leased government lands to produce cash crops. Unfortunately they have no way to get vegetable and fruit products to a large-scale market. The only male producer who seems to be making a profit has little competition. He raises crocodiles and sends the live animals to Port Moresby aboard the small planes. The crocodiles have their jaws bound shut with rubber bands made from old inner tubes. Although I found it quite entertaining to watch as the reptiles were loaded on the planes, I was grateful that I never had occasion to fly with them.

Women's commercial enterprises seem to be quite successful in Wanigela. They run the market and they produce pottery and tapa cloth. Women seem to control most of the cash in the community. Their endeavours are succeeding to such an extent that some men are moving into traditionally feminine crafts. Men are beginning to decorate tapa. If economic factors truly provide the substrata for the rest of society, I suspect that the concept of ufam that survived one hundred plus years of Christianity may become extinct as men move into a merchant role in the market. Perhaps wealthy women will not seem as dangerous as poor ones, or men may find that wealth and power are even more dangerous than ufam.

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