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Mining narratives and multiple geographies in Papua New Guinea: Ok Tedi, the emerald cave and Lost Tribes

by

Dan JORGENSEN*

ABSTRACT

Mining in Papua New Guinea has been accompanied by an efflorescence of origin tales that often serve as justifications for local claims to land rights or benefits arising from specific projects. While many of these narratives or myths have a clear instrumental function, there are many other elements of these tales that cannot be accounted for in these terms. In this article the author describes a recent origin story that emerged around the Ok Tedi mine, and places it in the context of traditional mythology, a changing system of regional relations, and circulating evangelical discourses. He argues that the story is best interpreted as an attempt to articulate a local position in relation to multiple geographies in which mining and Christianity are linked across scales ranging from the regional to the global.

KEYWORDS: mining, myth, narrative, Christianity, Papua New Guinea

RÉSUMÉ

L'exploitation minière en Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée a vu émerger de nombreuses histoires des origines, servant souvent à justifier des revendications locales quant au droit foncier et aux bénéfices relatifs à des projets précis. Bien qu'une large part de ces récits et mythes ait une fonction clairement instrumentale, cette dernière interprétation ne peut rendre compte de tous les éléments constitutifs de ces histoires. Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit une histoire des origines récente, qui a émergé dans le contexte de la mine Ok Tedi. Il replace cette histoire dans le contexte de la mythologie traditionnelle, d'un système de relations sociales régionales en évolution, et des discours évangéliques qui circulent dans la zone. Il défend l'idée que ce récit doit être interprété comme une tentative d'articuler une posture locale avec les géographies multiples qui relient exploitation minière et christianisme, selon des échelles qui varient du régional au global.

MOTS-CLÉS : mine, mythe, récit, christianisme, Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée

«Claims based on ritual knowledge are frequently heard at the District and Supreme courts in Papua New Guinea, yielding decisions as bewildering to the claimants as the substance of the claims must appear to the presiding judges. The perceived success of some of these claims has played a part in the widespread revival of interest in the continuing communication and enactment of this knowledge [...] Beyond

their more limited function of providing further evidence in support of rights to ownership, the mythology and cosmology of a community are also creatively reconfigured to account for disparities in power and for changing circumstances.» (Ballard and Banks, 2003: 301)

The expansion of Papua New Guinea's mining sector has had a remarkable effect on the

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production of indigenous narratives, which have proliferated as the minerals economy has grown. Often these narratives take the form of origin stories brought forward to establish land claims and secure benefits that may arise from such projects. Thus, to take one example, Jacka reports that Ipili living in the vicinity of the Porgera mine have pressed their claims by invoking Kupiane, a spirit snake, as the source of gold, while neighboring Huli make similar but opposing claims by arguing that the snake's head is located on their territory (2005: 647-648; Ballard, 1994). Elsewhere, tales about ancestors and their doings frame the positions of rival contenders over the Frieda mining project (Jorgensen, 1997). Many other examples of narratives linking mineral wealth to a landscape created by ancestors or populated by spirits can be found, and taken together they have filled out a significant part of the scholarly literature on myth in PNG (e.g., Biersack, 1999; Brutti, 2007; Wardlow, 2001; Weiner, 1994).

Much of this can be explained in terms of securing rights or explaining the origins of mineral wealth, but as Ballard and Banks suggest, there is always something more to these tales than that. One striking example is provided by Crook (2007a) in his discussion of the efforts of West Ningerum people to secure recognition of their claims to the Ok Tedi mine. Local activists shaped their story for an intended audience of government officials and the mining company by framing their argument in the language of compensation for damage, but consciously concealed other aspects of their tales that spoke of spirits and tunnels in a subterranean landscape. Their reasoning was that these portions of the account would not gain credence with the authorities, rendering them superfluous to their practical goal.

In this article I discuss an origin narrative also concerning itself with the Ok Tedi mine¹. Though brief, the story is complex, especially in its spatial referents, and much of my account is devoted to interpreting it in the light of traditional mythology, shifting regional relations, and the recent history of the area. Many aspects of the story make sense in such terms, but far more remains unexplained – in particular, why it seems important to claim descent from Israel's Lost Tribes. The remainder of the article shifts focus to understand the connection between

mining and «Christian Zionism» in the tale, and the significance of the different geographies they evoke. Here I argue that much as traditional sacred landscapes linked local and regional scales, so contemporary Christian geographies link these to a sacred landscape that is global. Put differently, the argument is that the tale is less about mines or mining *per se* than about claims to membership in a world transcending local horizons – a world in which local people were always already natives of a distant land². Finally, I conclude by offering some examples to illustrate the ways in which the story's imaginary geographies assume tangible form in contemporary events.

The regional context: mine, people, and landscape³

Ok Tedi was PNG's first post-independence mining project and remains the country's largest mine today. Situated in the northwest corner of Western Province, the mine has radiated influences throughout the North Fly District and adjacent parts of Telefomin District⁴ for over thirty years. The mine itself is located on the site of Mount Fubilan at the headwaters of the Ok Tedi River, and is serviced by the township of Tabubil, which grew from an airstrip and base camp to a town with a population now estimated to be about 20,000 (National Statistical Office, 2009). Tabubil is now the largest town in western PNG, and is surrounded by villages whose populations have grown with influxes of migrants seeking employment or informal economic opportunities. The population of Tabubil and environs consists, therefore, of a mix of local landowners, mine workers, employees in retail sales, banking, and transportation, and a fluctuating number of market gardeners and gold-panners. A purpose-built highway connects Tabubil to the river port of Kiunga, but there are no outside road connections for either town, and the only links to the rest of the country are by air.

People from many parts of PNG live in Tabubil, but most originate from the surrounding hinterland, where Min peoples predominate (Jorgensen, 2006 and Gilbert, 2012 for details). Min trace their origins from a

1. I have discussed the strategic use of myth in claiming mining rights in detail elsewhere (Jorgensen, 1997, 2007); for an account from the perspective of evolving cosmological views, see Jorgensen (1998).

2. Although I do not have the space to develop it here, this point owes something to Sahlins' recent work on alterity and autochthony (2012), in which the alien origins of local people assume a critical role in both internal and external relations.

3. In the following discussion I omit reference to the downstream landscape, which has been the subject of its own literature (see Kirsch, 2006). My concern here is with the mountainous zone that is the home to the Min peoples.

4. In neighboring West Sepik Province.

FIGURE 1. – Map of Papua New Guinea

common ancestress known as Afek, and inhabit the mountains of the Fly and Sepik headwaters straddling the boundary between Western and West Sepik Provinces. Afek came from east of the Strickland River and journeyed through this country, establishing the various groups along her route or at her village of Telefolip, where she ended her travels. Taken together, the Min form a distinctive regional grouping of peoples conscious of shared origins and affinities, despite enmities that may have prevailed in precolonial times (Jorgensen, 1996).

The Min landscape is extremely rugged, with relatively narrow valleys situated among steep slopes and high mountain ridges. Much of the terrain is marked by extensive karst development: caves and sinkholes abound, and a number of streams or rivers emerge from or disappear into underground channels. In some places – particularly along the foot of the Hindenburg Wall on the south side of the main ranges – the sound of subterranean streams is audible despite the absence of visible watercourses on the surface. In such a setting it is perhaps not surprising that traditional Min cosmologies take it as axiomatic that caves serve as portals to a subterranean world.

Most people can name and locate several caves, and men still enter them to hunt bats or flying foxes. These caves have stories associated with them, both old and new. In one, a man ventured deep into a cave in search of flying foxes and emerged into the sunlight in the gardens of

people he had never seen before; unbeknownst to him, they were the flying fox people, who killed him and sent him home to die. Stories about Ataanim, the Sun, tell how he travelled underground from west to east at night to begin a new day on the far side of the Strickland Gorge. More recent tales explain the disappearance of a tourist who met two women along the mountain track from Oksapmin to Telefolmin. They invited him back to their underground homes, where he married them and stayed in their golden city until he took a taxi to the town of Wewak on the coast. In a foundational myth, Afek traveled along a subterranean track connecting two key villages on either side of the main range: Telefolip, and Bultem, the central village of the Wopkaimin⁵. Not only do caves afford an entrance to an underground world, then, but they also are gateways connecting distant places.

This view of the world received apparent confirmation in 1975, when a British expedition entered the area and mapped a number of local caves, including one extensive system whose entrance was via a sinkhole roughly 500 metres across. This system consisted of high galleries and long, broad passages stretching for over 3 kilometres (Brook *et al.*, 1977). Cave art was found along their walls (p. 33), and the team found two pits that had been dug into the floor next to the remains of hearths (Gillieson, 1980). Local guides told the team that one of the pits was the hearth Afek used while resting on her

5. *Abiip miton*, «main village», «birthplace».

underground journey from Telefolip to Bultem (Brook *et al.*, 1977 : 40).

A story about two caves and the mine

Today the village of Bultem is located on the road connecting Tabubil and the Ok Tedi mine, and is about 15 minutes from town by bus. In February 2013 I was living in Bultem, where I was carrying out fieldwork on the use of mobile phones. One day Samuel, a village acquaintance who lived and worked in town, phoned to say he would like to visit with the pastor of his church⁶. Samuel arrived with Michael, his pastor, and a third man I had not previously met. Conversation turned to a current dispute in Bultem over some caves on village territory. A team of scientists had, with the assistance of Ok Tedi Mining Ltd. (OTML), sought permission to enter these caves. They were biologists wanting to study cave animals, especially a variety of bearded flying fox that roosted there. When the village councilor and his assistants were first approached, they readily granted permission, but this led to an almost immediate eruption of complaints from some of the older men of the village. The team's work was put on hold while attempts were made to resolve the dispute⁷.

The majority of villagers appeared to have no objections to the researchers' plans, but some of the older men complained that they had been bypassed in the decision and should have been asked. Closer to home, Samuel's uncle also complained that the scientists might steal things from those caves – in particular, gold. These worries focused on a particular cave (*Bultem*⁸), after which the village was named. Samuel and Michael explained that this cave figured in their ancestors' stories about an underground road connecting it with a similar cave below the village of Telefolip. At this point my third visitor, Tanbelok, spoke up, saying that he was actually the person who should have been asked, since he was the «principal landowner» of the cave and should have been offered payment because of this. Tanbelok continued, along with Michael, to explain the basis of this claim by way of a story about the true origins of the Min people and their connection to the landscape.

According to the stories of Afek's journeys, she built spirit houses (*yolam*) that became the focus for their respective ethnic groups' initiation and ritual systems. Thus Telefolip was the main ritual site for the Telefolmin, Demiduvip for the Urapmin, Bultem for the Wopkaimin, and so on (Jorgensen, 1996; see also Michel, 1988). An important feature of these stories was that these sites were connected to one another by an underground track that led from Telefolip to Mount Fubilan – the site of the Ok Tedi mine.

This much is generally known and accepted, though its interpretation had given rise to tensions between the Wopkaimin and other Min people in the past. The Wopkaimin of Bultem and their immediate neighbors, including some Kamfaiwolmin, had been officially recognized as the Mount Fubilan landowners when the mine was constructed, and have since that time received various benefits – company-built housing, hydro power, and royalty payments – that are unavailable to Afek's other descendants (Gilbert, 2012: 79-80). This was an especially sore point for Telefolmin, whose spirit house at Telefolip was generally acknowledged as having ritual pre-eminence over other centers, partly on the strength of being Afek's last abode. As a corollary, Telefolmin were seen as custodians of her ritual and cultural legacy (for details, see Barth, 1971, Jorgensen, 1990a, 1990b).

Tanbelok acknowledged that the tale of Afek and her journeys was the common story, but he went on to say that it was wrong in some crucial details. He pointed out – as most senior men already knew – that Afek's spirit houses were situated near caves that served as sacred sites (*amemtem*). In fact, he said, these caves were the reason she built spirit houses at these locations. What was missing from the commonly accepted story, however, was an acknowledgement of Afek's true identity. Together, Michael and Tanbelok then explained what had been hidden for so long. Afek, they said, was in fact a white woman – a missionary who had come to PNG in the remote past, along with a male missionary. This man was a German, and they each had a book that they were bringing to the Min people. She had killed him, however, and hid his existence and that of his book⁹. His book was the «positive» book – the Bible – while hers was the «negative» book, and had all kinds of

6. I use pseudonyms throughout.

7. After I left Bultem I heard that the team was given permission to enter the caves in company with a representative from the village, but am unaware of further details.

8. I italicize the name to emphasize the reference to the cave, rather than the village named after it. In local logic, the relation is something like that of a prototype (cave) and derivative (village); *-tem/* is a suffix indicating «cave».

9. I was later told his name was Martin Luther. In view of the strong connections between this narrative and others circulating in Western Province (see below), it is tempting to speculate that the killing of the missionary bringing the Bible is an oblique reference to Rev. James Chalmers, who was killed on Goaribari Island in 1901 (Busse, 2005: 445, 460-463). Afek kills men (including close relatives) in numerous myths, so such a claim is not inconsistent with traditional narratives (see, e.g., Jorgensen, 1990b, 2001).

FIGURE 2. – Ok Tedi Mine (© Ok Tedi Mine CMCA Review)

things about witchcraft and sorcery in it. In this way the ancestors were deceived.

According to both Michael and Tanbelok, the Min were also deceived about their origins and the status of Telefolip, which is not the true point of origin for the Min. Instead, the Faiwol village of Imigabip is the original Min settlement, founded by ancestors travelling from ancient Israel¹⁰. One proof of this, Tanbelok insisted, is that the Faiwol language is the same as that of the Old Testament Jews. What is more, beneath Imigabip is a cave with a large pool or lake formed by a subterranean river. This cave houses Moses' *kontrak bokis* (Tokpisin, «contract box») – the Ark of the Covenant brought by their ancestors on their journeys from Jerusalem. This box was authenticated with a photograph that also adorns Michael's church, a copy of which he showed me¹¹.

Michael also showed me a photograph of a large green stone that glowed – a jewel or crystal said to be in the same cave. He said he was convinced it was an emerald, and likely very valuable¹². According to him, this emerald had «spiritual powers». In the old days, Faiwol men would

bring the bodies of enemies slain in battle for cannibal feasts by the side of the subterranean pool, and at these feasts they would give the blood of their enemies to this stone so that their taro gardens would prosper. This stone is what revealed the existence of minerals at Fubilan, and it is also the source of the gold and copper at the Ok Tedi mine. Today the blood of the victims of industrial or automobile accidents there feeds the stone, and it is these deaths that keep the mine productive.

Sacred geography and subterranean sources of wealth

The underground track leading from Telefolip to Bultem, and on to Fubilan, is sometimes referred to as Bagelilep – the Ghost Road. Traditional myth explains that Afek and her younger brother lived at Telefolip, and at one point she killed him in retaliation for spying on her. She then charged him with the task of

10. Imigabip was the central Faiwol ritual site (Jones, 1980).

11. The box itself has an important history, having been taken by white people from Africa – where it had been moved after the fall of Jerusalem. This, according to Michael, was the reason for the Twin Towers attack in 2001 – the Africans wanted to avenge the loss of the box. This plan was fulfilled in the recent re-election of Barack Obama, a black man who governs America. It was not clear to me how this meshed with the story of the box's travels to Imigabip.

12. The photograph of the Ark was a computer print of an image widely available on the internet, depicting a box surmounted by two golden figures of winged angels or cherubim. The image of the «emerald» appeared to have a similar source as the photograph of the Ark, but I have not been able to locate it on the internet. Both of these images were from pages in a book being produced by Michael, which I was unable to examine.

FIGURE 3. – Telefip Spirit House (1979, picture Dan Jorgensen)

preparing a place for the dead, which they would reach along the track he cleared – Bagelilep. The place he made for the dead is called Bagelam (Ghost Place). One of the tasks he was to accomplish there was to create the large stone adzes – *fubi* – that Telefipmin needed to clear their gardens. Bagelam was thus understood as the source of *fubi*, and that is the reason that the mountain above it is named Fubilan.

Afek visited her brother in Bagelam, and he later returned to visit her in Telefip. But when he came, his body was decomposing and full of maggots. Embarrassed, he turned into a bird and flew off to the west (i.e., towards Bagelam). When he left, however, the maggots remained: they were *bonang* – the small white *tambu* shells (*Nassarius* sp.) used in traditional bridewealth and mortuary exchanges (cf. Robbins, 1999: 85-89).

Ideas connecting wealth and the dead are widespread in Melanesia, but among Telefipmin and other Min these ideas were mapped onto an underworld geography linking their spirit houses. This preoccupation with subterranean spaces goes a long way towards understanding the Min interest in mining itself, and in a way not entirely reducible to the monetary dimension of resource extraction. This becomes more apparent when we consider the materiality of traditional wealth and its significance.

Everything in traditional Min material culture was perishable – with the exception of bone, stone, and shell. Each of these are linked in the narratives about the origin of death, the land of the dead, and wealth, and each of them has a particular cultural valence of life-giving that evokes their permanence: the ability to withstand processes of decay and degeneration

(Jorgensen, 1985: 218)¹³. To refer back to the origins of death and the creation of the land of the dead, Afek's younger brother in the end left three gifts for Afek's descendants: the stone adzes to clear gardens, the shells given at funerals and recycled at marriage, and his own bones, which became key relics for the taro fertility cult based at her spirit house in Telefip.

Although there was a great deal of variation in traditional Min ritual systems, their spirit houses were repositories of cult relics, and while ancestral skulls and other bones were the most prominent of these, stones figured as relics as well. Thus the first *fubi* adze made by Afek's brother was housed at Telefip, at the entrance to the underground track to the land of the dead. Among Wopkaimin and Faiwol-speakers, round stones were often displayed alongside painted skulls in spirit house ritual (Barth, 1987), while among the Bimin-Kuskusmin quartz crystals were placed underneath the houses in which male initiations were conducted (Poole, 1982). Stones, and especially those of unusual shape or composition, were a focus of ritual attention and endowed with power.

This background, and long experience of working on geological survey teams, may explain why many Min are avid amateur geologists adept at noting anomalies in stone or patterns of vegetation. Such variations reveal differences in underlying formations – signs that often indicate subsurface mineral deposits. Most significantly, stone quarry sites are often associated with mineral deposits. In addition to *fubi* adzes at Fubilan, a second kind of adze – *bangalii* – originates from quarries adjoining the Nena deposit at the Frieda River prospect. According to Telefip accounts, *bangalii* originated from bones placed under the mountain by an ancestor who travelled underground from Telefip.

Although claims to the area are complex and have been established on quite different grounds, many Telefipmin take this tale as a key part of their case for a share of mining benefits at Frieda. To this should be added a more expansive assertion that a third kind of adze – *mook* – that entered the Min area from east of the Strickland also originated from Telefip ancestors, who placed bones at what is now the site of the Porgera Mine in Enga Province (Jorgensen, 1997). According to elders at Telefip, these three stone adze types corresponding to the Ok Tedi, Frieda, and Porgera mines are connected as the head and legs of a human figure whose heart is at the site of the Telefip spirit house. This heart takes the form of a perforated stone club head – *tingii* – said to be the prototype and source of PNG's one Kina coin (also a perforated disc)¹⁴.

13. Compare Golub's discussion of what he terms the Ipili «predilections for the permanent» in the context of their experience with the Porgera Mine in Enga Province (2006: 282ff).

14. It's worth mentioning that the Telefip word for money or «coin» is *tumoon*, «stone».

FIGURE 4. – Map of the Min region

Telefolip, Ok Tedi and shifting regional relations

The ancestors’ subterranean travels connecting caves and spirit houses mapped out a network of ethnic relations ordered by ritual status, often tied to particular powers or competences. For example, Imigabip’s dependence on Telefolip took a particularly vivid form in Faiwol mythology, with Afek’s sexual fluids flowing beneath the main ranges from the Telefolip spirit house to the Imig River, which nourishes all the taro in the surrounding landscape (Jones, 1980: 181; Crook, 2007b: 50)¹⁵. Jones characterizes the overall shape of this regional system from a Faiwol perspective:

«The cult anchors Imigabip in a perpetual relationship with the cult house in Telefolip, where the

primary relics mentioned in myths reside. Imigabip as well as certain other villages, such as Bultem in Wopkai territory, is a semi-autonomous satellite, so to speak, of Telefolip, where many tribal groups may meet for important rituals and initiations such as the rebuilding of the Telefolip cult house [...] According to the Faiwol, Min peoples are all linked by their association with Telefolip: they have the ‘same’ cult beliefs and initiations.» (Jones, 1980: 180-181)

This regional system not only mapped ritual relations, but also corresponded to a network of trading links along which wealth items moved between the Fly and Sepik headwaters (Barth, 1971, 1987; Craig and Hyndman, 1990). The two key upland nodes were Urapmin and Telefolip, situated at the only points where it is possible to cross this stretch of the Upper Sepik. Urapmin, in turn, was connected by a mountain pass to Bultem, and was thus strategically

15. Telefol versions speak of the flow of white fluid from an underground vine (*iman sok*, «taro vine») that nurtures taro like a mother’s milk nurtures children.

FIGURE 5. – Telefop from the air (note spirit house at upper end; 1975, picture Dan Jorgensen)

positioned in terms of the flow of valuables along this track. Telefop was linked to Urapmin by tracks following the course of the Sepik, but it was also connected to Imigabip by a route over the main ranges along which shells flowed north.

When the Ok Tedi project began, people were unsurprised that gold and copper were found beneath Fubilan, situated as it was atop the subterranean source of traditional wealth, and the minerals were seen as substitutes for wealth originating in the land of the dead. If anything, then, announcements about mining tended to confirm traditional views. As events unfolded, however, shifts were making themselves felt across the region – beginning with the disruption and eventual collapse of the overland trade in shells.

Telefolip's centrality in this landscape played an important role in Telefol claims over the Ok Tedi mine as the project took shape. But, as already mentioned, Wopkaimin became the recognized landowners, with Telefol claims rebuffed. Although they were granted hiring preference, Telefolmin and their neighbors felt themselves marginalized as a result. In fact, one of the broader consequences of the Ok Tedi project was to reshape regional relations for many groups in terms of their spatial and practical relation to the mine.

Imigabip's position was also disadvantageous in the post-Ok Tedi era. Whereas Telefol efforts secured the Telefomin District Development Agreement, which provided a national-grade high school for local students, Faiwol educational opportunities were limited. While Telefolmin received no royalties, they had easier access to good employment opportunities at Tabubil; Faiwolmin, by contrast, remained on the fringes and had fewer and poorer prospects in the new mining economy (Polier, 1996). In this light, Michael and Tanbelok's story can be viewed as

FIGURE 6. – Imigabip Village looking north toward the Hindenburg Wall (1975, picture Dan Jorgensen)

another installment in the ongoing attempts to claim a share of the mine's revenue stream (e.g., Crook, 2007a; Gilbert, 2012; Jackson, 1982). But there is something wrong with this picture if the only point is to cash in on mining royalties: the story's only immediate claim was on what biologists might pay to enter Bultem cave (a claim which in any event was not fulfilled).

Tanbelok's story draws upon traditional myths and older ideas about the underworld and stones associated with life, death and wealth. Viewed through this lens, the main point is to reconfigure Imigabip's place vis-à-vis Telefop and Fubilan in the Min regional system. This makes sense as a bid for centrality by denying Imigabip's dependence on Telefop for taro fertility (*cf.* Jones, 1980: 180-181) while asserting Ok Tedi's dependence on Imigabip for its continued operation.

The region and beyond: Operation Joshua

Understanding Tanbelok and Michael's story to this point has turned upon locating its narrative in the context of traditional origin myth, regional ritual and trade relations, and the advent of the Ok Tedi mine. There remains, however, a substantial part of their tale that cannot be accounted for in this way. Moreover, it is *this* portion of the story that held the greatest interest for its narrators. As our conversation developed, they explained why they came to me. Although they were interested in meeting me as someone who knew about Min culture, what they really wanted was to establish the authenticity of the crystal or stone – could I confirm that this was really an emerald? This was why Michael had brought along photographs of the Ark and of the emerald. It was, he explained, their hope to turn the cave into a cultural center¹⁶. The plan would

16. I wasn't able to confirm the stone's status, though I did point out that quartz crystals were widely known for the area. I suggested that – given the proximity of Tabubil – the best course would be to get the opinion of a professional geologist, of which many (including local Papua New Guineans) were readily available. He and Tanbelok said, however, that they wouldn't trust company employees with this information.

FIGURE 7. – Bultem Village (2013, picture Dan Jorgensen)

be to blast the cave open and build a museum that tourists would pay to see, and they hoped to get support for this project from the local MP, PNG's Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture¹⁷. From this perspective, the key parts of the tale are about the Ark and the emerald – and the Faiwol status as descendants of Israel's Lost Tribes.

In order to understand this part of their story we must look beyond Min mythology to a Christian movement that emerged at Telefop roughly a decade earlier: Operation Joshua. I first became aware of Operation Joshua when a Telefop woman whom I had never met phoned me in Canada from Tabubil to say that there were «diamonds and gold» beneath the Telefop spirit house, and that an «operation» was underway to gain access to them.

«OJ», as it became known, was part of a nationally orchestrated campaign aimed at spiritual transformation in anticipation of parliamentary elections. As such, it was linked to events and developments elsewhere in the country and to an evangelical concept of «spiritual warfare» that was circulating globally. The connection between this effort and the gold and diamonds was that the latter were blessings already available to the people of Telefop – providing they could put «satanic»

(i.e., traditional) practices and influences behind them (see Jorgensen, 2005 for details).

There were confessions, prayer sessions, and the destruction of traditional relics, but OJ's attempts to find the gold and diamonds failed. But people *did* dig up a painted stone and discolored soil that gave off an unusual odor. Many thought this was natural gas, but it was soon concluded that the smell came from a far more dangerous «uranium gas» used in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. It was decided to send soil samples to Israel for analysis in the hope that the gas would prove useful in Israel's struggles. In addition, one of OJ's leaders also claimed that blood samples were sent to Israel for DNA testing, where it was confirmed that he was a descendant of the Tribe of Benjamin (pp. 454-456).

Tribes lost and found

Israelite descent was central to OJ's story, and this is part of a theme – generally known as «Christian Zionism» – that is a favorite among Pentecostals and other evangelical groups. As part of the legacy of colonial evangelism,

17. Busse reports a similar desire to attract tourists to the site the grave of Sido, a regional culture hero further to the south in Western Province (2005: 444).

Christian Zionism held that the Lost Tribes were scattered across the globe and their remnants could be found among colonial peoples; the end times could not begin until prophecy was fulfilled with the return of the dispersed tribes to their homeland in Israel (see Gifford, 2001: 74-77).

This forms part of a globally circulating discourse that has taken root in various former colonial territories, including the Solomon Islands and PNG. In this regard, OJ shared much with other movements in Melanesia, including the Remnant Church in the Solomon Islands (Burt, 1983; Stritecky, 2001). Since the 1950s, further Lost Tribe movements have sprung up in the Solomons, including some claiming that the Ark was in a cave on their territory (Timmer, 2008, 2012; see also Brown, 2005).

Much more directly linked to OJ is a similar movement among the Gogodala of Western Province (Dundon, 2011, 2014). Dundon discusses how Gogodala have taken the notion of Lost Tribes and run with it: Gogodala based in Port Moresby contacted Professor Tudor Parfitt of the School of Oriental and African Studies and invited him to conduct DNA testing to verify their claim that they were indeed a Lost Tribe (Dundon, 2011; Parfitt, 2008; cf. Parfitt, 2002). The Gogodala argument included myths in which the ancestors arrived by canoe with the Ark of the Covenant, brought from Jerusalem. This was said to reside below the surface of a local swamp (see also Parfitt, 2008: 279-311).

Parfitt travelled to PNG in 2003 to take DNA samples and examine Gogodala claims, and was welcomed with Israeli flags and kippa-wearing throngs. He took DNA samples, and although he declared the tests «inconclusive» and no Ark was found, many Gogodala believed their claims had been confirmed. In this they were encouraged by an Australian evangelical group whose end-time preparation turned on facilitating the repatriation of the Lost Tribes to the Holy Land (Dundon, 2011: 37-38).

Dundon's account leaves little doubt that OJ's focus on DNA and Israel drew upon Parfitt's 2003 visit: the OJ leader's assertion of descent from the Tribe of Benjamin echoes identical Gogodala claims. Tanbelok and Michael's tale makes a similar claim, and goes it one better by placing the Ark of the Covenant in Imigabip's cave.

This brings us to the puzzling question of the emerald. It fits with long-standing ideas linking subterranean stones to wealth or cult relics, yet seems too outsized to fit within that frame. The source, however, may turn out to be not very different from stories of the Lost Ark. In 2007 PNG newspapers reported a «New Faith» church on Bougainville whose pastor revealed that the Covenant Box (i.e., the Ark) was hidden in a cave in the local mountains. One distinctive element

of the New Faith was the special importance accorded to «the Jasper Stone» – a gem or gem-like stone imbued with special powers.

«To add it all up, the sect maintains its belief that Bougainville is one of the «Lost Tribes of Israel» is proven by the «Jasper Stone» which is mentioned in Revelation 22 of the Bible.» (Post-Courier, 2007)

Although a fair distance separates Bougainville from the mountains of Min country, news and rumors travel fast in Papua New Guinea. Here it is worth noticing that on Bougainville the Jasper Stone apparently directed people's attention to valuable stones that were being stockpiled for sale: it instructed people to search riverbeds to:

«collect stones of special colors, presumably close to gold...» (Pacific Islands Report, 2007)

The Imigabip emerald's ability to make gold visible at Ok Tedi seems too close a parallel to ignore: it and the Jasper Stone are obviously cousins.

Multiple geographies

Much of Tanbelok and Michael's tale is about reconfiguring Imigabip's place in a region that had previously been dominated by Telefop and is now dominated by Ok Tedi, and it does this by offering a new imaginary geography. But if we step back from the details of the tale and consider it as a whole, it becomes clear that it is also set in a second landscape full of biblical references, and this raises the question: why two geographies when one would do? Here I would offer three answers.

The first begins with the observation that the story brings together mining and Christianity – the two most profound historical influences shaping contemporary Min experience. This juxtaposition recurs in different forms in the Min region and beyond. So, for example, one premise of OJ at Telefop was that «spiritual» and «physical» development were linked, and this was the logic underlying the expectation that mineral wealth would be found beneath Telefop once traditional spirits and their relics were eliminated. And though gold and diamonds were not found, the discovery of «uranium gas» was seen as establishing Telefop's credentials as an important site in a global Christian narrative. At nearby Urapmin, Robbins describes how conversion to Christianity entailed severing the relation of spirits to the landscape, and it was hoped that one benefit of this would be to enable large-scale mining on their territory (1995; 2004a). This did not take place, but Robbins suggests that Urapmin membership in a global

Christian community nonetheless affords an alternative to failed development on the margins of the regional mining economy (1997).

The mutual implication of mining and Christianity in local perceptions is evident in a different way in Jacka's account of millenarianism near the large Porgera mine. Considering Ipili dissatisfaction with their experience of mining, he argues that they find Christian concepts of heaven especially satisfying as a way of structuring «their own sense of their engagement with globalization and modernity» (2005: 649). Jacka is quite explicit about Ipili disappointment, which is not simply reducible to disparities in wealth. Instead, he says, what frustrates people is «their inability to make social connections outside of the Porgera valley» (2005: 648) or to become enmeshed «within the global social network that they so desire» (2005: 649).

Jacka's remarks bring the spatial aspects of both mining and Christianity to the fore in a way that leads toward a second answer to our question. Several ethnographers have highlighted Christianity's strong conception of a world that transcends the local (e.g., Cortén and Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Robbins, 2004b, 2008; Jorgensen, 2005; Manderson *et al.*, 2008, Telban and Vavrova, 2010), and I would argue that this prospect of access to an expanded world explains much of its appeal. Returning to our question about Tanbelok and Michael's story, the juxtaposition of biblical references to more immediately local or regional locations serves to bridge differences of scale. Much as traditional sacred landscapes linked local and regional scales, so contemporary Christian geographies link these to a sacred landscape that is global.

A third answer to our question takes a different tack and looks instead to questions of provenance in the production of Tanbelok and Michael's tale, which obviously has diverse sources. Much of it is recognizably derived from local variants of Min culture, even when the current version departs from «standard» accounts in detail or implication. But those elements invoking Isrealite descent, the Ark of the Covenant, and so on, obviously originated outside traditional narratives. More to the point, they clearly were not invented on the spot, but were adopted with surprisingly little modification from Christian Zionist models that have been passing around Melanesia for some time. Nor is it necessary to invoke a free-floating cloud of associations, since there are specific examples of proximate links in the chain of transmission, beginning with the Gogodala experiment in DNA verification, followed by an appearance shortly thereafter of strongly similar elements in OJ's development at Telefolip.

This point is important because it directs our attention to an easily overlooked aspect of contemporary PNG life. As Dundon points out,

«Increasingly, through access to the internet, television and mobile phones, people in the so-called “remote” areas of PNG make claims to knowledge and “evidence” to substantiate links with global and Christian others...» (2011: 39)

Put differently, this suggests that the impulse to expand local horizons – and the local presence on them – is not only a theme of such narratives, but a means of producing them.

Comings and goings

Mining stories are never just about mining, and I have argued here that a key question for local people is to understand their place in a world that mining and Christianity have called into being – a world that transcends the local. From this point of view, addressing this question is the real business of Tanbelok and Michael's tale. In closing, I would like to leave the consideration of narratives to mention some practical ways in which the expanded worlds we have been discussing become a tangible reality for contemporary Papua New Guineans.

International travel is something a good many Papua New Guineans desire, and for those who have the means to travel, Israel and the Holy Land are favored destinations. Since the 1990s, a number of Min, including some Bultem villagers and the leader of OJ mentioned above, have made the journey to Israel independently or as members of church groups. As one of my village friends observed, if one doesn't have higher education or much money, church participation often opens the door to international travel.

The same week I was visited by Tanbelok and Michael, I received another visit – this time from old friends from Telefolmin. I had known Sarah and Kabinip for nearly forty years, and we had a happy reunion. They had flown down to Tabubil, and were staying with relatives in one of the other villages just outside of town. They were in a very happy and upbeat mood: they had just gotten word that the results of DNA tests from the previous year had come in, and it was confirmed that they were descendants of one of the Lost Tribes. In their new identity as «Black Jews» they were going to be helped to visit Israel, and were passing through town on their way to Port Moresby to finalize their travel arrangements. Though their families were deeply skeptical, they were delighted and pointed out that they could follow in the footsteps of their brothers and uncles, who had already visited Jerusalem in the 1990s.

I left Bultem and Tabubil shortly afterwards and returned to Canada in early March. Had I stayed, I might have had the opportunity to learn more

about the reaction in Western Province to Tudor Parfitt's third visit in ten years (EM TV, 2013). He was welcomed back to Gogodala country with a banner that said,

«Welcome to Gogodala Tribe DNA Declaration Program, Tuesday 12th March 2013.» (Florida International University, 2013)

Later that year Prime Minister Peter O'Neill led a parliamentary delegation to Israel, where a number of matters were discussed, including security and trade. One of PM O'Neill's crowning achievements, however, was the establishment of a PNG consulate in Jerusalem and an agreement exempting PNG citizens from visa requirements for travel to Israel (Islands Business, 2013; The National, 2013).

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