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Ritual of Superiority: Tolai *Tubuan* Performance at the National Mask Festival in Papua New Guinea

by

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ABSTRACT

The National Mask Festival in Papua New Guinea is an annual event organized by the national government to preserve and promote the cultures associated with masked figures representing ancestral spirits that are found in many parts of the country. For the last 15 years, it has been held in Rabaul/Kokopo, home of the Tolai people, who are known as one of the nation's most influential and affluent indigenous groups and well-known for their masked figures referred to generically as tubuan. This paper analyzes the Tolai performance of tubuan dances and rituals at the festival as a ritual, thereby examining its symbolic efficacy. It is shown that Tolai perform tubuan dances and rituals at the festival to demonstrate their superiority over other Papua New Guineans, and that they make their performance effective by using specific expressive strategies.

KEYWORDS: festivals, performance, ritual, power, agency, masked figures

RÉSUMÉ

Le festival National des Masques de Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée est un événement annuel soutenu par le gouvernement national dans le but de préserver et promouvoir la culture associée à des masques représentant des divinités et des esprits, que l'on retrouve dans différentes régions du pays. Au cours des 15 dernières années, ce festival a eu lieu à Rabaul/Kokopo, territoire des Tolai, réputés être l'un des groupes autochtones les plus riches et influents du pays, et qui sont particulièrement connus pour leurs figures masquées, dont le nom générique est tubuan. L'article démontre que les Tolai exécutent des danses et rituels tubuan lors du festival dans le but d'affirmer leur suprématie vis-à-vis des autres Papouasiens et qu'ils utilisent, pour ce faire, des stratégies particulières de performance.

MOTS-CLÉS : festivals, performance, rituels, pouvoir, agentivité, masques

In the Pacific today, we find a number of indigenous cultural festivals regularly held at local, national, and international levels. In these events, which are commonly organized for the explicit purpose of preserving and promoting indigenous cultures and arts, individuals and groups perform dances, songs, or other organized sets of bodily acts considered as central to their own culture for outsiders as well as for themselves. In studying such festivals, anthropologists tend to concentrate on the meanings embodied in the

content and structure of festival performances while neglecting the meanings constructed through the process of festival performances. This paper seeks to address this analytical limitation with reference to the National Mask Festival in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

The National Mask Festival is an annual event inaugurated in 1995. It is one of many indigenous cultural festivals existing in PNG, but one of the few national festivals sponsored by the National Cultural Commission (NCC), a branch of the na-

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tional government whose expressed mission is to preserve and promote the country's cultures.¹ As its name suggests, the festival features masks or, more precisely, masked figures representing ancestral spirits, which are found in many parts of PNG and referred to generically as *tumbuan* in Tok Pisin.² Since 2001, the event has been held in Rabaul/Kokopo, East New Britain Province, which is home of the Tolai people.³ The Tolai are better known than any other group for masked figures; this popularity reflects that the Tok Pisin term *tumbuan* is derived from the Tolai word *tubuan*, which is used generically to describe any of their own masked figures.⁴ As the Tolai host the festival, their *tubuans* play a central role in the whole event during which masked figures from many parts of PNG perform their dances.

In this paper, drawing on a critical review of some of the influential works on indigenous cultural festivals in the Pacific and my own experience of conducting anthropological research among the Tolai,⁵ I analyze the Tolai performance of *tubuan* dances and rituals at the National Mask Festival as a ritual. There are two parts in my analysis. First, I examine the intention of the *tubuan* performance at the festival by situating it in its socio-political context. Based on this examination, I argue that Tolai perform *tubuan* dances and rituals at the festival to demonstrate their superiority over other Papua New Guineans. Second, I turn my attention to the efficacy of the *tubuan* performance at the festival. In providing an ethnographic account of the *tubuan* performance at the festival in comparison with the practice of *tubuan* dances and rituals in their original context, I isolate specific expressive strategies used by Tolai at the festival to achieve their intention and show how they are effective. The paper concludes by highlighting some theoretical implications of this study and suggesting directions for further research in the study of indigenous cultural festivals in the Pacific.⁶

Indigenous Cultural Festivals in the Pacific

The current prevalence of indigenous cultural festivals in the Pacific, which was triggered by the introduction of the Festival of Pacific Arts in 1972,⁷ can be attributed to two major factors. One is decolonization. Since colonial powers gave way to new nations in the 1960s and 1970s, Pacific Island communities have faced the challenge of forging or creating a cultural identity within a nation, region, and ethnic group. This challenge has often been dealt with by the institutionalization of a festival that allows different groups to gather, interact, and perform their traditional dances and songs for each other. The other factor is tourism. Due to their small size, many Pacific Island countries suffer from a relative lack of economic resources. Taking advantage of a popular (Western) image of the Pacific Islands as a paradise with "primitive" people, government agencies have increasingly expected festivals featuring indigenous dances and songs to be potential tourist attractions and a driver of economic development.

While festivals and what is broadly termed celebratory events have long been studied by anthropologists, the preferred types of festive events to study have been sacred rituals and ceremonies practiced within "traditional societies." Those secular festivals which involve self-conscious enactments of traditional practices in non-traditional settings for political and economic purposes, on the other hand, have been largely neglected as a topic of serious investigation until recently because such enacted practices have often been judged as inauthentic.

Influenced by debates on the invention of tradition, which have figured in Pacific anthropology since the work of Keesing and Tonkinson (1982), an increasing number of works on indigenous cultural festivals have emerged that go

1. A recent study has identified a total of 54 indigenous cultural festivals, small and large, in PNG (Whitford and Dunn, 2014: 269). In addition to the National Mask Festival, there are three national festivals sponsored by the NCC: the *Garamut* (slit drums) and *Mambu* (bamboo flutes) Festival; the *Kenu* (canoes) and *Kundu* (hand drums) Festival; and the *Bilasim Skin* (body decoration) Festival. These four national festivals are thematically organized, featuring important cultural properties characteristic of the country's four regions: Islands, Mamose, Papua, and Highlands, respectively. Apart from these national events, the NCC co-funds and helps organize a number of localized festivals upon request from provincial and local-level governments.

2. Tok Pisin is an English-based pidgin/creole language spoken in PNG. Thus, the festival is also known as the *Tumbuan* Festival.

3. In 2001 and 2002, the festival was held in Rabaul, which had been devastated by volcanic eruptions in 1994. However, because Rabaul continued to be heavily affected by falling volcanic ash, the site of the festival was moved in 2003 to Kokopo, about 20 km from Rabaul.

4. The Tolai have two popular types of masked figures, the *tubuan* and *dukduk*. Because the former is superior to the latter in status, the term *tubuan* could refer to both.

5. I conducted 24 months of fieldwork in Kokopo between 2002 and 2004 during my Ph.D. studies. I returned there in July 2015 for one week to attend the National Mask Festival and update my data about it.

6. Earlier, Martin (2008, 2010) and Hayashi (2012) studied Tolai engagement in the National Mask Festival in PNG from different perspectives (local disputes over the authenticity of staged culture and event management, respectively).

7. The festival has since been held every four years in different host countries of the region. Originally called the South Pacific Festival of the Arts, it was created by the South Pacific Commission, as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community was formerly known, to stop the erosion of traditional practices and values by sharing and exchanging culture.

beyond the question of authenticity. Typically, these works analyze these festivals as discourses of identity, thus treating dances and songs performed as traditional practices as symbols or rhetorical devices to assert a regional, national or ethnic identity (e.g., Stevenson, 1999; Yamamoto, 2006). Although these works help us understand the political nature of these festivals, one of their problems is that they place too much emphasis on cognition. This cognitive approach merely looks for the meaning of festival performances, and in this way reduces action to a text that is in need of interpretation. "Analysis of discursive processes," however, "tends to neglect the question of how meanings are socially experienced and lived" (Norton, 1993: 756). To remedy this limitation in the study of indigenous cultural festivals, festival performances need to be analyzed as social actions. Thus, the question that has to be explored is not what is communicated by festival performances, but how social reality is constructed through festival performances.

In a paper on the Festival of Pacific Arts, Kaeppler (2002) made an important step in this direction. Analyzing the festival as a performative event, she argued that it is a venue for rituals of identity. For her, the most important elements in ritual are the process of performing and its efficacy, which are exactly what the festival is all about.

« Encoded in the ritual of performing in the Festival of Pacific Arts and other local festivals is the demonstration of cultural, ethnic, and generational identity. Although the performance products may not be fully understood in all their historic richness, the process of performing in a Festival of Pacific Arts illuminates to performers and beholders their commitment to the preservation of the cultural forms of old as well as to the emergence and development of new performance traditions. This is intertwined with the emergence of traditional and modern states as sovereign groups with distinctive cultural and ethnic identities as well as crossing traditional boundaries into global society. ... Through continuity and change, revivals and inventions, tradition and innovation, the Festival of Pacific Arts as an event is, in fact, a ritual renewal of what it means to be a Pacific Islander. » (Kaeppler, 2002: 17)

While Kaeppler's performative approach is inspiring, it can be usefully criticized on two grounds, particularly with regards to her notion of ritual efficacy, which she contends is achieved when the intention of the performance or the presenters is realized (See also Kaeppler, 2010a). First, like many other scholars on indigenous cultural festivals, she prematurely regards the intention of festival performances as the demonstration of identity without full examination of their sociological circumstances. Pres-

enters and performers, as she rightly points out, are "socially and historically placed individuals" (Kaeppler, 2002: 6), so the meanings that they might impute to their performances in ways that generate the kind of preferred reality, would be socially and historically specific. Their audiences might include their own people, other ethnic or national groups, and international tourists, who are different from them in cultural backgrounds and/or political and economic interests and resources. If, as Kaeppler assumes, audiences are as much a part of the performance context as presenters and performers themselves, the complexity of historically contingent social relations in the performance setting must be considered when the intention of festival performances is examined. The Festival of Pacific Arts and other local festivals might be opportunities for delegations to assert their distinction from their (indigenous) political rivals (Kempf, 2011) or claim autonomy against the agendas of the great powers (Glowczewski and Henry, 2011; Kupiainen, 2011; cf. Phipps, 2010), rather than simply demonstrating their identities.

Second, Kaeppler's insistence that the efficacy of festival performances depends on how they are decoded by audiences or beholders (See also Kaeppler, 2010b) results in obscuring the manner in which festival performances are expressively organized by presenters and performers so that their intention could be realized. It is useful to recall here that in arguing that the efficacy of a ritual depends much on the organization of its performance, Kapferer (1979) directed attention to the importance of examining (1) the arrangement of space and the organization of performers and audiences in the performance setting; and (2) the organizational modes of performative media (e.g., dance, song) in which symbolic action is carried out. Organizational properties specific to the performance of dances and songs in indigenous cultural festivals would become observable when it is compared with the practice of the same dances and songs in their original context. This is exemplified in Shneiderman's (2014) ethnographic study of Thangmi ritual performances in Nepal and India that demonstrated that ritual practitioners creatively define their own performances according to context. Thus, the necessary condition for examining the efficacy of festival performances is a greater recognition of the agency of presenters and performers in transforming dances, songs, or rituals through the staging process.

In what follows, I examine the intention and efficacy of the Tolai *tubuan* performance at PNG's National Mask Festival, which I aim to explain as a ritual of superiority, based on the critical review of Kaeppler's work discussed above. But before proceeding, it is necessary to provide

PHOTO 1. – *Tabu* distributed at a mortuary ceremony, Gunanba, October 2003 (© Tateyama)

a brief yet contextualized description of the Tolai and the *tubuan*.

The Tolai and the *Tubuan*

The Tolai are one of the most distinctive ethnic groups in PNG due to their unique colonial history. As their homeland became a major administrative and commercial center with the coming of Europeans, they lost almost 40% of their arable land, but they took advantage of a range of new opportunities arising from the situation. They were among the first indigenous groups in the previous Territory of Papua and New Guinea to form local government councils and co-operative societies. They also had unparalleled access to Western education over the years, first through mission schools and then through government schools, which allowed a number of Tolai to seek white-collar jobs within and outside their area. Consequently, the Tolai stood out as an indigenous élite in the territory (Epstein, 1969: 60). At the same time these changes occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, they became increasingly aware of wider political and economic issues adversely affecting their lives under colonial rule. Their frustration culmina-

ted in 1969 in the formation of the Mataungan Association, a Tolai-led anti-colonial movement that played a prominent role in establishing self-government in 1973 and national independence in 1975 for PNG. Accordingly, the Tolai emerged as one of the most educated, affluent, and influential groups in the new country (See Bray 1985a, 1985b for some quantitative data), a position they manage to maintain even 40 years after the nation's independence.

The Tolai are also unique for successfully retaining much of their traditional culture despite having closer links with the outside world than many other groups in PNG. The cultural continuity of Tolai society, which is epitomized by the persistent, ceremonial and utilitarian use of the indigenous shell currency called *tabu* (Photo 1), was largely conditioned by how the Tolai came to be engaged in a wider economy during the earliest contact period. While most indigenous people at that time had no choice but to offer themselves as laborers for European-owned plantations far away from home to make money, many Tolai could earn incomes relatively easily by selling a surplus of coconuts and garden produce to Europeans on their own customary land. This tendency was not only achieved by the location of their area in a colonial town, but also facilitated by their predispositions towards

PHOTO 2. – *Tubuan*s dancing at a mortuary ceremony, Gunanur, September 2003 (©Tateyama)

trade and wealth accumulation that had developed through the use of *tabu* (Epstein, 1969: 21). Thus, the Tolai generally refused to work on local plantations, which made their European owners import laborers from other parts of the colony. Accordingly, unlike many other indigenous groups, the Tolai did not allow themselves to be fully absorbed into the labor structure, or to become totally dependent on Europeans. As a result, they adapted well to the new economic realities without significantly changing their lifestyles or leaving their customary practices behind.

The *tubuan* tradition has survived strongly until today even though many early European observers in the area predicted that it would quickly vanish under the influence of European civilization (e.g., Pfeil, 1898). In these days, Seventh-day Adventists and Pentecostals, who have increasingly made their presence felt in the area, denounce the *tubuan* as a satanic cult and therefore refuse to engage in any associated activity, but most Tolai continue to find it relevant to their real lives (See Tateyama, 2006).

The *tubuan* is a masked figure with a conical headdress and spherical leafy dress, which is believed to embody the soul of the deceased (Photo 2). It is controlled by men initiated into an exclusively male society whose members strictly guard its secrets from the uninitiated, particu-

larly women. The *tubuan* is “raised” on ceremonial occasions at a sacred ground located in the middle of the bush, to which only the initiated are granted access and the uninitiated are prohibited from even getting close. Women are also prohibited from approaching or looking directly at it, except on certain ritual occasions. Once raised, the *tubuan* is regarded as highly dangerous and harmful. In former times, the *tubuan* society functioned as a law enforcement agency, as it punished all wrongdoers and settled all disputes through its own court procedure. Today, most disputes and offences are brought before a village or district court, but regulations set to protect the secrets and dignity of the *tubuan* are still enforced, with heavy fines in *tabu* as a major punishment.

Although outsiders often view the *tubuan* simply as a manifestation of male dominance over women, it is important to stress that *tubuan* activities are clan affairs. Each (matrilineal) clan or sub-clan, in theory, has its own *tubuan* with a distinctive design and an individual name, and raises it in remembrance of their clan ancestors. The operation of a *tubuan* necessitates *tabu*; in fact, it is often referred to as *bisnis*, a Tok Pisin term meaning modern “business” activities that generate cash. Each *tubuan* has its own *tabu* fund, which can be collected with fees paid for initiation into the *tubuan* society, fines paid for

the violation of *tubuan* rules, remunerations paid for participation in *tubuan* ceremonies, and contributions made by the clan members. Managed by the clan headman on behalf of his clan members, the *tabu* fund is used in organizing *tubuan* ceremonies for their own clan ancestors. However, a *tubuan* ceremony is a costly event for the host clan, who must reward, with *tabu*, each individual helping them organize it and each *tubuan* invited to participate. The implication is that *tubuan* ceremonies can only be staged by clans that are wealthy enough to do so, and those clans without much *tabu* fund may fail to pass their *tubuans* down through the generations.

The *tubuan* provides the living with not only a strong link to the dead but also a social space where the living make and remake relationships among themselves. All clan members and their close relatives, both men and women, are expected to gather in *tubuan* ceremonies. By actively participating in these events and fulfilling their obligations to one another, they maintain or strengthen a wide network of kin relations now covering many different local communities. Senior male clan members gain or retain their influence in their clan by contributing a lot of *tabu* to their *tubuan's* fund. The clan headman solidifies his leadership position by properly organizing *tubuan* ceremonies to ensure that the dead are appropriately honored. He may gain influence and status beyond his own clan by sponsoring large-scale *tubuan* ceremonies, which require a considerable amount of *tabu* and a high level of organizational skills. This, in turn, would make his clan considered highly influential. In short, the successful staging of a *tubuan* ceremony by a clan is a show of solidarity, wealth, and power. Hence, through ceremonies, the *tubuan* shapes and reshapes multiple sets of relations among the Tolai: relations between the living and the dead, between men and women, between clan members, and between clans.

Today, the *tubuan* represents not only the Tolai clan but also Tolai people as a unified group. The *tubuan* came to stand for Tolai identity first in opposition to European colonizers and later in contrast to other Papua New Guineans (Epstein, 1998). Before independence, the *tubuan* was the government of the people for most Tolai (Salisbury, 1970: 305). Based on this idea, it evolved into the ideological symbol of the Mataungan Association in their struggles against European colonizers. Even after independence, this idea remained so strong that the *tubuan* was adopted as the symbol of authority by the East New Britain provincial government dominated by Tolai and most local-level governments in the Tolai area. Thus, the *tubuan* is now a prime symbol of

Tolai identity that facilitates forming Tolai relations with other Papua New Guineans, as well as continuing to function as a symbol of clan identity working to shape relations among the Tolai.

The Intention of the *Tubuan* Performance at the Festival

Today, Tolai perform *tubuan* dances and rituals at the National Mask Festival as a matter of course. However, it is important to note that there is the general consensus among the Tolai that the *tubuan* should not be displayed before the general public. This consensus is based on the customary idea that the *tubuan* is raised only when it has clan-related ceremonial work to do, but this is also a product of continuous negotiation among Tolai. Therefore, before examining the intention of the *tubuan* performance at the festival, it is necessary to explain why Tolai have accepted the *tubuan* performance at the festival in the first place.

This cannot be explained without referring to Jacob Simet, executive director of the NCC since its establishment in 1994 and a Tolai himself.⁸ The introduction of the National Mask Festival in 1995 was one of his first projects in that capacity, and it was Simet who brought it to Rabaul/Kokopo in 2001. Earlier, however, he was strongly opposed to showcasing the *tubuan* at a festival. Thus, in the 1970s when he studied the *tubuan* society as a research fellow at the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, he wrote:

« I think the biggest and most important element in any art form is the setting. I do not think it is right for anybody, whoever he may be, to help disintegrate an art form like the Tubuan, in order to please and entertain people who don't even appreciate it fully. Some people believe this is a way to 'preserve' the art. Maybe these strangers receive some gratification out of marveling at these fragments—but what price does the society that owns them have to pay? Has it ever occurred to these organizers and preservationists that they are turning artists into performing clowns? » (Simet, 1976: 1)

Moreover, he called this act of promoting cultures and arts as entertainments in the name of preservation "cultural prostitution" (Simet, 1977: 20) and sarcastically argued that

« the tubuan could never become a good prostitute. It does not have enough attractive characteristics to inspire desire from potential customers. In fact most of the tubuan characteristics would turn away many prospective customers. Firstly it needs its relatives' presence to give the customer his money's worth.

8. Simet obtained a Ph.D. in anthropology from the Australian National University in 1991 with a thesis focusing on the Tolai indigenous currency *tabu*.

Secondly, it is bulky and ugly. Thirdly, it charges a high price not counting the amount added for its relatives' participation. Fourthly, aesthetically it is uninteresting to watch, merely tom, tom, tom from the slit drum; and poom, poom, poom from the huddu (or kudu) while it jumps up and down. It can only exist where it belongs to have any meaning. » (Simet, 1977: 21)

However, taking up the post of executive director of the NCC whose expressed mission is to preserve and promote PNG's cultures, Simet was pressed to reconsider his views of festivals. Masked figures were then seldom seen at existing cultural festivals despite being regarded as an important cultural feature of the country. This was so because many of the groups with a mask tradition had reservations about their own masked figures being displayed before the general public because of the sacredness they attach to them. Simet was in a dilemma. There is the risk that the value of masked figures might deteriorate if they were removed from their cultural settings and brought into totally different settings like cultural festivals. However, if masked figures were simply left in the villages where they had originated, their future survival would not be guaranteed under the influence of modernization. In the end, Simet resolved this dilemma in the following way:

« We would have to take our chances because the leaving of masks in their cultural settings have [sic] resulted in a lot of the masks being lost forever. ... We just have to be careful how we handle [the mask culture]. So this is why we are having this mask festival to show it to everybody, so we are all aware of its significance to us. » (*PNG Post-Courier*, 2000)

The National Mask Festival was thus started in Port Moresby, the nation's capital, which was then considered the most appropriate location for such a national event. However, it was realized after four years that the festival was not financially sustainable due to the high cost of bringing in delegations from other parts of the country. The location, therefore, moved in 1999 to Madang, the largest town in the Mamose region where mask culture is relatively strong. But another issue surfaced soon. In spite of the festival's focus on masked figures representing ancestral spirits, most of the performing groups were actually those without any mask or with a mask or head ornament not representing spirits (e.g., Asaro "mud men" from Eastern Highlands Province) (See Toyoda, 2006). Thus, Simet was urged to look for another location again, this time for one that would be able to host more masked figures proper. Logically, his answer was Rabaul/Kokopo, the largest town in the Islands region where mask culture is strongest

in the country. Fortunately, Rabaul, his hometown, was showing signs of recovery following the 1994 volcanic eruption that had buried and ruined the town.

When Simet introduced the National Mask Festival, he did not assume the participation of Tolai and their *tubuan* because he was certain that the *tubuan* would survive without the help of such a festival. Indeed, Tolai did not send delegations to either Port Moresby or Madang due, among other things, to the rule of the *tubuan* that it could not be treated like a man travelling by airplane or ship; after all, it is supposedly a spirit. But after several years of unsatisfactory implementation of the festival, he might have been convinced that having the most popular set of masked figures in the country, his people would be the most appropriate host to the festival.

There are two major reasons why the Tolai decided to host the National Mask Festival and allow the *tubuan* performance despite the norm of disallowing the *tubuan* to be displayed before the general public. First, they were convinced that the festival aims to show the significance of PNG's masked figures to the people of PNG and not to entertain international tourists. When the festival was staged in Rabaul/Kokopo for the first time in 2001, Simet elaborated this point using nationalist rhetoric probably meant to appeal to many Tolai who are proud of having paved the way for the country's independence. Thus, he was quoted as saying that:

« before independence traditional mask leaders had every right to protect the sacred mask culture from being over-exposed by foreigners, who did so for commercial reasons or for tourists. But since independence, people could decide what was best for them and the future of their cultures » (*PNG Post-Courier*, 2001)

Second, the Tolai were assured that the secrets and dignity of the *tubuan* could be protected. According to Simet, "the festival was a way of exposing the mask culture in a controlled manner so as not to over-expose the secrets of the mask society" (*PNG Post-Courier*, 2001). For the Tolai, controlled exposure is possible particularly because the festival is held in their homeland and therefore the cultural setting in which the *tubuan* operates could be maintained.

The continuous participation of the Tolai *tubuan* in the National Mask Festival since its beginning in Rabaul/Kokopo in 2001 testifies to the Tolai commitment to the purpose of the festival, which is to preserve and promote PNG's masked figures. However, this does not necessarily mean that the intention of the *tubuan* performance at the festival is the preservation and promotion of the *tubuan* and, by implication, the demonstration of Tolai identity, as Kaeppler

would say. It should be stressed that Tolai need not perform *tubuan* dances and rituals at a festival to preserve and promote the *tubuan* or to demonstrate their identity because, as noted, the *tubuan* has survived strongly until today and the Tolai already have a strong sense of cultural continuity. Rather, the meanings ascribed to the *tubuan* performance at the festival, I suggest, depend on the socio-political context in which it occurs.

If, as Simet emphasizes, the target audience of the National Mask Festival is the people of PNG and not international tourists, the Tolai should be situated within a national socio-political space, and the *tubuan* performance within a national discursive field. The Tolai, as mentioned earlier, are one of the most educated, affluent, and influential groups in the country. They are conscious of their structural position in the Papua New Guinean society and have a feeling of superiority over other Papua New Guineans. This consciousness and feeling has developed since the colonial period when the Tolai generally refused to work on local plantations. Considering themselves superior to plantation laborers brought from other parts of the colony, they came to call them all by a derogatory term derived from the Tok Pisin term for "work," which "evokes the image of a menial poorly and untidily attired" (Epstein, 1978: 48).⁹ In PNG where ethnic fragmentation is high and ethnic rivalry remains strong, overt expression of superiority can result in conflict and violence, but covert expression would be acceptable. For the Tolai, the National Mask Festival would be a national platform to symbolically demonstrate their superiority over other Papua New Guineans. The festival is a national event, attended by national leaders and groups from many parts of the country and covered by national newspapers and government-run televisions. It is held in the homeland of the Tolai, which allows them to play a central role. Its purpose is to preserve and promote a cultural tradition for which the Tolai are best known in the country because they have arguably worked harder to protect it from outside influence than any other group. In such a situation, the Tolai performance of *tubuan* dances and rituals in the way the secrets and dignity of the *tubuan* is protected would imply the Tolai's superiority over other Papua New Guineans.

A feeling of superiority is evoked in Tolai when they compare the *tubuan* with other masked figures in terms of traditionality. This occurs not just once a year at the National Mask Festival but more ordinarily. The Baining, the Tolai's inland neighbors, are nationally and internationally famous for their "fire dance" in which male

performers wearing huge elaborate masks leap through the flames of a constantly replenished fire. Always performed at night, it has a dramatic and eerie effect. Originally, this spectacle was an initiation and fertility rite, but having been so commercialized, it is now performed for tourists at hotels and clubs in Rabaul and Kokopo at their advance request. In contrast, the Tolai have prohibited their own masked figures, the *tubuan*, from being used this way. For those tourists interested in seeing local cultures, the Tolai have refused to display their own traditions. Instead, they encouraged Baining groups to come down from the mountains and show their popular dance, giving them a chance to make some money, which is otherwise said to be difficult for them. The Tolai themselves enjoy the Baining fire dance as entertainment whenever they have a chance to see it, but at the same time they ridicule Baining masked figures as having fully become performing clowns for petty cash. This leads to their proud differentiation of the *tubuan* from the Baining masked figures and their creation of a sense of superiority over the Baining.

It is in a national context that a feeling of superiority is often manifested by Tolai in relation to the *tubuan*. Once in a while, we find national newspapers articles reporting the Tolai protest against the improper treatment of their famous *tubuan* with an indication of the strictness of its rules. For instance, when *tubuan* masks and *tabu* Europeans attempted to export illegally were impounded by authorities in Port Moresby in March 2004, Simet, in the capacity of executive director of the NCC, was reported to have said that such an incident was not good for the Tolai community and that the impounded *tubuan* masks would be destroyed after appropriate protocols in accordance with the rules of the *tubuan* (*PNG Post-Courier*, 2004). He was also reported to have mentioned that "[a] sacred traditional ceremony had to be performed before the shell money and masks were taken out of the boxes to avoid the spell from being broken" (*PNG Post-Courier*, 2004). Another incident of relevance here is a conflict over the performance of *tubuan* dances for VIPs attending a conference of the European Union in Port Moresby in June 2006. According to a newspaper article, 150 to 200 *tubuan* society leaders gathered at the East New Britain Provincial Government offices to make a complaint against high-ranking Tolai politicians involved in this of breaching the rules of the *tubuan* and to demand the payment of a large amount of *tabu* as fines (*PNG Post-Courier*, 2006). These incidents, publicized nationwide through newspapers, are similar to the National Mask Festival in that Tolai present the *tubuan*

9. On the other hand, the Tolai were often characterized by foreign laborers as greedy or obsessed with financial gain (Panoff, 1969: 124).

to a physically present and/or imagined Papua New Guinean audience in the way it incomparably remains traditional.

The Efficacy of the *Tubuan* Performance at the Festival

It has been suggested that the Tolai perform *tubuan* dances and rituals at the National Mask Festival to demonstrate their superiority over other Papua New Guineans. In this section, I show exactly how they achieve their intention through the *tubuan* performance. More specifically, after contextualizing the *tubuan* performance in the course of preparation and implementation of the festival, I identify specific expressive strategies that are employed to ensure that intention accomplishes its goal. This analysis is based on the material collected from my own fieldwork, mainly through participant observation and some in-depth interviews conducted in Tok Pisin.

I attended the National Mask Festival in 2002, 2003, and 2015. Both in 2002 and 2003, the festival, held in Rabaul for two days and Kokopo for four days respectively, was lively with 30–40 performing groups from many parts of the country and an audience of probably several thousand people. With a much smaller number of performers and attendants, the two-day festival held in 2015 in Kokopo was not as bustling as the previous ones.¹⁰ However, two factors fundamental to my analysis have remained unchanged. One is that the festival is staged for the people of PNG, not for international tourists. A good number of international tourists attend the festival, and yet few efforts are made to explain the meanings and social functions of masked figures and their dances, of which many Papua New Guineans would have some idea, but international tourists would not. The other factor is that the Tolai play a central role in the festival. The organizing committee is dominated by Tolai, including some of the most prominent leaders of the *tubuan* society. They also dominate the East New Britain Tourist Bureau, which supports the event in terms of logistical operations. Accordingly, the Tolai are given the honor of beginning the festival with a series of *tubuan* dances and rituals, which are advertised as the main attractions of the whole event, and ending it with dances and a closing ritual by *tubuan*s,

while masked figures from other parts of the country are allowed to perform their dances in between.

In taking a closer look at the performance of *tubuan* dances and rituals at the National Mask Festival, it becomes clear that the boundary between the practice of *tubuan* dances and rituals in their original context and the performance of the same dances and rituals at the festival is blurred. *Tubuan*s appearing at the festival are “real” *tubuan*s owned by existing clans. This means they are *tubuan*s that have been raised by clans originally for their own *tubuan* ceremonies in commemoration of their ancestors. This is made possible by a specific recruitment process.¹¹ The festival organizing committee starts its preparations the year before by recruiting *tubuan*s to participate in the event. It is against the rules of the *tubuan* society that *tubuan*s are raised specifically for the festival, so the organizing committee first looks for clans planning to raise their *tubuan*s for their own ceremonies the following year, and then asks them to perform *tubuan* dances or rituals, or both, at the festival. If the clans agree, the organizing committee gives them a certain amount of money, depending on the nature of participation in the festival, in the name of helping them organize their planned *tubuan* ceremonies. Because the *tubuan* does not do its work for money (PNG kina), the money received by the clans should be converted to *tabu* (shell money). At the festival, a *tubuan* is accompanied by men of a clan owning it, and even women of the same clan, although fewer in number than those who show up in their own *tubuan* ceremonies, are present to participate in a certain *tubuan* ritual performed by their men.

My observations indicate that *tubuan* dances and rituals are performed at the National Mask Festival almost in the same manner as in *tubuan* ceremonies taking place in villages. The festival begins with the performance of a *tubuan* dance called *kinavai*, in which *tubuan*s dance to a drum beat on a canoe off-shore and are said to imitate flying fish (Photo 3). In its original context, the *kinavai* is performed to mark the kick-off of a large-scale *tubuan* ceremony. As this dance is customarily performed at dawn, the festival starts at 5 a.m. Regarded by Tolai as the most spectacular of the *tubuan* dances, the *kinavai* is advertised as the main attraction of the festival. After landing, the *tubuan*s meet other *tubuan*s waiting on shore, and escorted and followed by men, they proceed to the festival venue where

10. This was probably owing to a lack of funding. According to the organizing committee, they usually assist performing groups from other parts of the country in travelling to Kokopo, but they could not in 2015 due to funding constraints. It is probably because the number of performing groups was smaller than usual that they removed admission fees, which used to be 2 kina for adults and 1 kina for children, although international tourists were charged a two-day entry fee of 50 kina.

11. This was explained to me by the chairman of the festival organizing committee in 2015. He is a Tolai and prominent leader of the *tubuan* society.

PHOTO 3. – A *kinavai* performed at the 2002 festival, Rabaul, July 2002 (©Tateyama)

they perform another dance called *kanavo*. In this dance, which is said to be an expression of happiness for a gathering of related clans in its original context, the *tubuan*s and fully initiated men circulate with distinctive drum beats and dance steps.

This is followed by the performance of *tubuan* rituals called *tutupar* and *varlapang*, which both represent the payment of *tabu* to *tubuan*s. In the original *tutupar*, prominent leaders of the *tubuan* society throw bundles of *tabu* to *tubuan*s that kneel down to publicly demonstrate that they are being rewarded with *tabu* for their participation in a ceremony. These bundles of *tabu* are contributions made by the headmen and senior members of the clans owning these *tubuan*s, or they are remunerations paid by the clan hosting that ceremony. The *tutupar* at the festival is the same as the original version, except that remunerations are paid by its organizing committee (Photo 4). The *tutupar* is immediately followed by the *varlapang*, in which the clan members, both men and women, place short lengths of *tabu* in front of their *tubuan*, still kneeling, as a token of reverence. After these rituals, the *tubuan*s perform their dances that are meant to “please” the clan ancestors. As in their original

context, during these dances, clan elders boast of their expertise in controlling the *tubuan* by shouting “*Iau a melem* (I am an expert!)” and to they give a short length of *tabu* to each man singing with the beats of hand drums as rewards.

Following this set of *tubuan* dances and rituals, masked figures from other parts of the country as well as some Tolai *tubuan*s appear at the festival venue and perform their own dances. Among these, the one drawing the biggest crowd is always the famous Baining fire dance, which is performed at night.¹² Tolai *tubuan*s take center stage again at the closing ceremony of the festival. After performing some dances, they conduct a ritual that always comes at the end of a certain large-scale *tubuan* ceremony. In this ritual, the headmen of the participating clans thrust a large spear decorated with *tabu* into the ground. It is said that by doing so, they express the authority of the *tubuan*, show respect for the ancestors, and take an oath to remain on good terms with the other clans that are present.

Thus, Tolai perform *tubuan* dances and rituals at the National Mask Festival as if they are participating in another *tubuan* ceremony of their own. This is part of their effort to act up to what Simet referred to as “a way of exposing the mask

12. The Baining fire dance is performed additionally right after the festival at a hotel for a private audience of international tourists and others.

PHOTO 4. – A *tutupar* performed at the 2003 festival, Kokopo, July 2003 (©Tateyama)

culture in a controlled manner so as not to over-expose the secrets of the mask society.” However, this way of performing can be noticed only by a Tolai audience because others mostly do not know what a *tubuan* ceremony looks like in its original context. If the *tubuan* performance at the festival is meant to be a Tolai assertion of superiority over other Papua New Guineans, there must be something visibly distinctive to the *tubuan* performance at the festival that allows Tolai performers to communicate that meaning to a whole Papua New Guinean audience. I suggest that could be found in a specific interaction of Tolai performers with international tourists.

As already mentioned, the secrets of the *tubuan* are rigorously kept from the uninitiated, especially women; otherwise, its sacredness is ruined. One of the most important rules of the *tubuan* is that the uninitiated must not approach or look directly at it, except on certain ritual occasions. This is because the mask itself, especially its back side, constitutes a secret. This rule is enforced at the National Mask Festival, but its enforcement is more explicitly carried out against international tourists than Papua New Guineans. The enforcement of the rule against the latter does not require great effort, as they are generally aware of a taboo placed on approaching masked figures and its strictness with the Tolai *tubuan*, thereby

behaving as expected. International tourists, on the other hand, are typically ignorant of the rule, so it is rather explicitly enforced against them, especially women. However, it is done *only* in the presence of a large audience. Thus, when *tubuans* leave the shore following the conclusion of the *kinavai* dance, which draws the largest crowd of spectators during the festival, a large number of *tubuan* society men escort the *tubuans*, driving away international tourists who wittingly or unwittingly approach them (Photo 5). The act of driving away is also observed when international tourists knowingly or unknowingly approach dancing *tubuans* or watching their dances from behind, although only at times during the festival with a relatively large crowd such as the closing ceremony (Photo 6). At the other times during the festival, international tourists are not refused approaching *tubuans* and even photographing them from a close distance. This sort of interaction cannot be seen in performances by other performing groups, who do not explicitly resist international tourists approaching their own masked figures at any time.

This inconsistent behavior among Tolai performers confuses many international tourists at the festival, but it can be explained in the following way. Foreigners are actually exempted from the rules of the *tubuan* because its fame in PNG de-

PHOTO 5. – Tolai men escorting *tubuans* at the 2015 festival, Kokopo, July 2015 (©Tateyama)

depends primarily on the significance attached to it by Papua New Guineans (But see Neumann, 1992: 228). Tolai performers are just acting out the enforcement of one of its most important rules against foreigners on stage to show indigenous audiences how strong the power of the *tubuan* remains compared to that of other masked figures and, by implication, how superior the Tolai to other Papua New Guineans. In other words, the Tolai take advantage of foreigners' ignorance of the rule to communicate their intention to Papua New Guineans. Indigenous audiences cannot miss the message, as it is delivered by the unusual act of indigenous performers driving away foreigners who are there to see their cultures. This is reasonable given that Tolai performers do not see themselves as entertaining international tourists and the Tolai generally view themselves as equal or even superior to foreigners.

There is another expressive strategy that contributes to the realization of the intention of the *tubuan* performance at the National Mask Festival. That is seen in a specific interaction of Tolai performers with national leaders. For the Tolai, hosting a national event requires inviting national leaders as guests of honor. Thus, the 2002 festival was attended by the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, and several other high-ranking government officials, who were allowed to watch performances comfortably seated in a temporary, roofed building with a raised floor. The presence of such prominent national lea-

ders in the audience was not just an indication of the Tolai's great influence in national political circles, but also a situation that helped the performance setting be visualized as a national stage for Tolai performers as well as other cultural groups. In addition to getting such a prestigious reception, selected individuals among these national leaders were invited to participate in the performance of the *tubuan* ritual *tutupar*. Thus, the Governor-General, the Foreign Minister who had previously served as the Prime Minister and is a Tolai himself, and some others threw bundles of *tabu* to *tubuans* that knelt down (Photo 7). In the eyes of the Tolai, this was contextually appropriate because the act of throwing bundles of *tabu* to a *tubuan* is only done by prominent leaders. In this scene, the original meanings and social functions of the *tutupar* were temporarily replaced by new ones. For the Tolai performers, the national leaders' act of throwing bundles of *tabu* to *tubuans* in the presence of other national leaders expressed the nation's respect and admiration for the Tolai. For Papua New Guinean audiences, it would be difficult to see the situation in a different way because those individuals whom they knew well as national leaders were actively and directly engaging with Tolai *tubuans*, or closely viewing that engagement.

It should be pointed out that the appropriation of national leaders in the performance setting is not purely opportunistic. In contrast to the 2002 festival, the one held in 2003 suffered

PHOTO 6. – A Tolai elder asking international tourists to move away at the 2015 festival, Kokopo, July 2015 (©Tateyama)

from the poor attendance of national leaders, a situation that disappointed and angered many Tolai organizers and performers. This reaction relates to the contemporary function of the *tubuan*. As mentioned earlier, the *tubuan* was adopted as the symbol of authority by the Tolai-dominated East New Britain Provincial Government and most local-level governments in the Tolai area. One product of this symbolism is a new convention in which the *tubuan* is raised to greet delegates of the national government or a foreign government with the performance of dances and rituals when they come to the Tolai home of Rabaul/Kokopo for purposes such as celebrating the opening of a new government building or development project that they fully or partly funded.¹³ This should be understood as a symbolic manifestation of the Tolai's desire to be recognized and respected as an autonomous group. From a Tolai viewpoint, the appearance of the *tubuan* at the National Mask Festival, a project sponsored by the National Government, must be matched with the attendance of national leaders who are expected to show respect and admiration for the *tubuan*. In this way, the arrangement of national leaders in the performance setting at the festival is culturally found-

ded. However, it seems that this strategy has not worked well recently, as no national leaders were present in 2015. The organizing committee has now turned defiant, saying that they do not need national leaders to host the festival.

Conclusion

Following Kaeppler's (2002) performative approach to indigenous cultural festivals, this paper has analyzed the Tolai performance of *tubuan* dances and rituals at the National Mask Festival in PNG as a ritual. However, unlike Kaeppler, I have examined the intention and efficacy of the festival performance by paying particular attention to its socio-political context and the agency of the presenters and performers. The Tolai are generally opposed to displaying the *tubuan*, the object of clan ancestral worship, before the general public. This attitude developed among them through their struggle against European colonizers, whom they regarded as organizing such displays for commercial reasons or for tourists. However, after independence, when their rivals were no longer European colonizers, but

13. This new function of the *tubuan* had already been codified before independence in the constitution of the Warkurai Nigunan, the Mataungan Association's own council (See Tateyama, 2006: 285).

PHOTO 7. – A national leader participating in a *tutupar* at the 2002 festival, Rabaul, July 2002 (©Tateyama)

other Papua New Guineans, they found their own purpose in displaying their strongly surviving *tubuan* at the National Mask Festival that is held to preserve and promote PNG's masked figures. That is to demonstrate their superiority over other Papua New Guineans. The Tolai play a central role in this national event, and this situation itself contributes to the realization of their intention, but they have specific expressive strategies in their own mask performances that work to communicate it to their target audience, the people of PNG. Thus, while they perform *tubuan* dances and rituals at the festival which are basically similar to those performed at their own *tubuan* ceremonies, their arrangement of international tourists and national leaders within the space and time of their performance lead to symbolically representing the *tubuan* as superior over other masked figures. This symbolic representation is effective because it serves to impose that meaning upon the relationship between the Tolai and other Papua New Guineans by bringing symbols and contexts into relation with one another within the order of the performance. In this way, the *tubuan* performance at the National Mask Festival is explained as a ritual of superiority.

In concluding, I argue that festival performances are not only strategies to define and

claim identities but also strategies through which people actively seek to negotiate and promote their position in their increasingly broadened socio-political environment. Indigenous cultural festivals often have the explicit purpose of preserving and promoting indigenous cultures that have been perceived as being lost under the influence of modernization. Especially in the Pacific Islands, which are physically remote from the major tourist-generating markets of Europe and North America, indigenous cultural festivals are explicitly claimed as a regional or national celebration organized by locals for the locals. These factors may make us prematurely regard indigenous cultural festivals simply as venues for forming identities and fostering unity and solidarity. However, a sociological analysis of festival performances would reveal that they express and produce conflict and divergence as well as consensus and convergence. In indigenous cultural festivals, performers and audiences are divided along the line of ethnicity or race, but they are also often marked by disparities in wealth and development that are shaped by broad historical processes. As demonstrated in this paper, the meanings embodied in festival performances are determined by the socio-political relations between the performers and audiences, and then these meanings are imposed back upon the social

reality through the process of performing. Indigenous cultural festivals have become popular in increasingly globalized and highly differentiated societies. If we are to fully understand this phenomenon, we must pay more attention to how meanings are socially and actively constructed through festival performances.

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