8. The Sepik River, Papua New Guinea: Nourishing Tradition and Modern Catastrophe

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... although, it brings so much to the people, they know it can never be trusted and they will never laugh at it. It is there for their use but also for their veneration. Too many of them have been sucked under by its temperamental currents and its grisly executioners, the crocodiles; too many of their dwellings and gardens have been ruined by its raging flood; too many canoes and boats have floundered on its submerged logs for men to regard it lightly. All its moods and changing scenes of mist shrouded rain squall, glistening rainbows, harsh sunshine, dawns and sunsets and delicate moonlight add to its peculiar mystique. (Unnamed writer, *Papua New Guinea Scene*, October 1970, quoted in Leigh and Perry 2011: 200)

Introduction

In 2010, I returned to Tambunum village, an Eastern Iatmul community along the banks of the Middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. Fifteen years had elapsed since my last fieldwork season. A lot of water had passed under the proverbial bridge—a *lot* of water. And lest I appear to impose an alien figure of speech on local experience, I note that Eastern Iatmul understand the Milky Way as a celestial bridge that spans the Sepik.

From Wewak, the commercial and political hub of East Sepik Province, my Iatmul companions and I boarded a passenger truck bound for the river. Hours later, we disembarked at the river's edge in Angoram, one of three administrative centres along the Sepik. We hauled our gear into a fibreglass dinghy equipped with a 40-horsepower outboard motor, a type of vessel increasingly seen nowadays, and headed upriver for about 80 km. As in years past, I glimpsed few signs of modernity. But one actually sees very little while travelling along the Sepik—mainly dugout canoes, tall reeds and swordgrass, the occasional hamlet and a few distant hills. For the most part, the river permits a view of only its own presence, a vast aquatic world endlessly in flow.

We travelled the main serpentine watercourse for several hours, often navigating slowly through smaller channels that slice across the many oxbow bends and lagoons. Then we rounded a familiar point. I would again, after so many years, 'be there' in the field and reunite with village kin. But as I clambered out of the dinghy that drizzling afternoon, my nostalgic elation turned to bewilderment. The village had largely vanished. In its place was water.

Globally, the Sepik is a relatively minor watercourse—ranked 145th in terms of its length (Wikipedia 2015a). Yet, the Sepik is often hailed as the largest 'pristine' river in the world, unsullied by bridges, dams, pollution or industry (Wikipedia 2015b). Global comparisons, however, fail to capture the enormity of the river in its local eco-cultural setting. Indeed, the region is not so much a landscape as a 'fluidscape' (Strang 2006: 149). The Sepik is a traditional mother figure of nurture and sustenance (Silverman 2001: 15). But the river also has an appetite, especially in the last few years, swallowing huge parcels of ground in Tambunum, including houses and trees (see Figure 8.1). During my most recent fieldwork in 2014, erosion dominated village conversations. The very 'ground' of social life is dissolving.

Figure 8.1 Where village land was, is now only river.

Source: Photo by the author.

From source to mouth, in a direct line ‘as the crow flies’, the Sepik covers a distance of just over 402 km. But the river flows for almost three times that distance, constantly twisting anew, relentlessly washing away any sense of stability. Local men do their best to anchor the world, but such gestures of permanence and solidity are illusory, especially today. Reality is fluid, both in terms of traditional cosmology and people’s confrontation with modernity. Moreover, as the Sepik increasingly threatens the viability of the village, it also surges as a local metaphor for broader struggles amidst the lack of ‘development’. And while the name ‘Sepik’, which dates to the colonial era, persists as an important post-colonial regional signifier, it also betokens a sense of backwardness, because the river is a kind of ‘backwater’. My overall argument, then, focusing on recent flooding but also on more distant historical events, is that the Sepik River symbolises contrary or dialogical¹ meanings: future and past, land and water, prosperity and underdevelopment, male and female, culture and loss.

1 For the theory of cultural dialogics that frames this essay, see Lipset and Silverman (2005).

Torrential Water and Magical Dirt

During the 2009–10 rainy season (roughly December to April), Tambunum suffered a devastating flood. The river overflows every year, but this was altogether different. Gardens were inundated, fruit trees died, dogs and chickens drowned. Anything not lashed to a house post, or pulled inside a dwelling, floated away. Waves rolled through the village as if they came from the ocean. Paddling was impossible. ‘The water was as dark as the sea’, people told me. Women cooked indoors, and so house fires were a constant danger. Most people fled to a hill in the hinterlands after travelling downstream for a few hours.

I arrived in 2010 at the start of the dry season. By then the village was dry and the river had receded. But people spoke of a ‘disaster’. Dozens of families had lost their land to the flood, and so took up residence elsewhere in the region. The community was dispersed, lacking any ‘centre’, its vibrancy diminished when compared to the 1980s. The Sepik is overwhelming us, people said, it is *daunim ples* (‘destroying the village’ in Tok Pisin). Many advocated relocating the *entire* village elsewhere as the only viable option for rescuing the community from the water.

The establishment of a new village is no trivial endeavour. The practical labours are substantial—clearing trees, rebuilding houses, and so forth. But men emphasise instead the numinous perils associated with relocating the senior cult house. They must unearth dirt from beneath the current central posts and rebury this soil under the new structure. This is no ordinary dirt, having originated in the uterine, mythical pit that gave birth to the world. The same dirt was shaped into the first humans and ferried from place to place during ancestral migrations. By re-interring this magical dirt, men and *not* women ‘replant’ the totality of ‘ancestral law’ (*ara* in the eastern dialect of the Iatmul vernacular).² Of course, men *only* need to enact this rite of reburial on account of riverine erosion. The Sepik, it is crucial to note, is generally coded as female. Land and river, then, form antiphonal voices in a wider, ongoing dialogue about gender.

2 People in Tambunum village are bilingual in Tok Pisin and the eastern dialect of the Iatmul language. Those who have attended school—a sadly decreasing number of children these days—can also converse in English to differing degrees. My fieldwork has made use of all three languages.

In the Indian state of Maharashtra, rivers represent abundance, nourishment and cleansing (Feldhaus 1995). Yet riverine fecundity is wild and perilous, like women's menstrual flows. The Sepik evokes similar meanings, at once a predictable source of everyday sustenance but a source of floods and erosion that humans cannot tame and that threaten the 'ground' of sustainability. The ancestral spirit of the Sepik will also punish—even slay—the kin of anybody who frolics in the middle of the river or dares to swim across. But Eastern Iatmul do not fear the water or its denizens, including crocodiles. Children learn to master the river, playing and swimming alongside moored canoes. Nevertheless, Eastern Iatmul perceive the Sepik as something 'wild', especially today, and even as an obstacle to 'development'. Other regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) benefit from petroleum, natural gas, gold and copper. But the people of Tambunum say that they 'only have water and fish'. They also mention another resource, namely woodcarvings made for tourists, but there are few tourists nowadays. So distraught are some villagers with their current relationship to the river that they now advocate abandoning the Sepik entirely, thus reconfiguring their identity from being 'river people' to being 'bush people'. There could be no more striking an admission of defeat.

Currently, what the Eastern Iatmul refer to as an unnamed 'Asian' company is harvesting hardwood trees on land claimed by the Mogua (or Fish) clan, several hours downriver from the village. Until recently, the logging was allegedly illegal, or so the people of Tambunum say, concealed by a licence for palm oil. In April 2015, however, I received an email copy of a semi-completed 'customary landowner's consent' form, issued by the PNG Forest Authority, on which 75 village men approved the harvesting of timber by Summit Agriculture Limited. The company provided an address in Port Moresby, the capital of PNG, but a few minutes with Google revealed connections to Singapore and Malaysia. The consent form is nothing more than a legal fiction, declaring the timber otherwise 'wasted' from local people clearing the land for use as a 'garden area' (which, in fact, was never the case). In 2014, I saw hundreds of logs stacked along a recently graded dirt road that leads from the harvesting sites to Wewak. Many men from the Fish clan, employed by the loggers, camped with their kin beside the road in shelters, several kilometres away from the river. It is here that some people propose establishing a new village, one entirely bereft of the riverine resources that define the Iatmul *as* Iatmul (see Figure 8.2). Instead of tying the village to the riverbank, like a canoe, this effort would root the community in the 'bush'.

Figure 8.2 Woman and child fishing.

Source: Photo by the author.

Traditionally, each of the roughly two dozen Iatmul villages exchanged fish for processed sago starch with their inland neighbours, the Sawos (Gewertz 1983). Three such nearby hamlets once envied the affluence of Tambunum, which mainly arose from the riverboat tourism that peaked in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, however, Eastern Iatmul aspire to the wealth currently enjoyed by some of the nearby Sawos villages, whose people they still deride as filthy, uncouth and uneducated, but whose hardwood forests now produce logging revenues. The economic, but not the moral, topography of the region has thus been inverted: the river, once an asset, is now viewed by Eastern Iatmul as a liability, while the bush, a former source of impoverishment, is seen as a source of prosperity.

Despite this reversal, Eastern Iatmul continue to identify as ‘river people’, and the Sepik remains a ubiquitous cultural motif. Thus, wave patterns still decorate almost all of their material culture (Figure 8.3). The river endures as a principal schema for organising reality into a fluid state of female flow that men seek to stabilise through their labours, such as building houses. To be sure, local people now contemplate this aquatic metaphysics with heightened ambivalence. The inability to control the river indexes a wider powerlessness to shape the fate and prosperity of the community. But the river remains the foundation for their ontology.

Figure 8.3 House ornamented with wave patterns.

Source: Photo by the author.

An Aquatic Presence and Modern Identity

The Sepik catchment area encompasses some 78,000 km², and nowadays more than 400,000 people—more than 70,000 in the floodplain alone (Dudgeon and Smith 2006: 207). During the rainy season, the river may swell in places to a width of 30–70 km for a period of five months. The depth of the lower reaches of the river may extend to 35 m, but sandbars quickly form in the shallower middle and upper reaches, ensnaring drifting trees and branches that can swamp or shatter canoes. Furthermore, thunderstorms can churn surprisingly high and erratic waves. Some stretches of the river flow between sun-baked mud banks that can rise several metres above the normal waterline, but other stretches spread into impenetrable marshes.

The main Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum—or what remains of it—curves for about 1.5 km around a large point jutting from the southern bank.³ The lower (downstream) half of the village slopes gently to the water, and the upper half once did likewise, but now a steep embankment, formed by slabs of ground tumbling into the river, makes for a perilous climb down to the water (see Figure 8.1). In the late 1980s, the main village contained more than 130 houses, but only 77 dwellings remained in 2014. The entirety of what was the upper half of the village in the 1980s and 1990s, which included dozens of dwellings as well as the main cult house and a long ceremonial plaza, is now water. As noted earlier, erosion has forced most households to take up residence elsewhere, mainly on the other side of the river, extending downstream for several kilometres. Tambunum today is not so much a well-defined village as an ideal that loosely enmeshes detached, dispirited hamlets. Many people yearn to revive tourism, yet there is frankly no ‘place’ for tourists to visit.

In 2014, Eastern Iatmul people remarked in various ways on their current inability to sustain a ‘real’ village. The community is unkempt, as tall grass overgrows abandoned paths and plots. While the grass attracts snakes, it also represents an intrusion of nature on culture. With the death of the older ‘big men’ and the loss of their esoteric knowledge, the village lacks the discipline and force of ‘traditional law’. Theft is increasing; young people smoke marijuana and drink ‘homebrew’; gardens are meagre; and there are few of the coconut palms that constitute a local metaphor for intergenerational sociality. Lacking manpower and money, moreover, the community is unable to construct the massive domestic houses for which it was once renowned. In the 1980s, over a dozen such dwellings, unparalleled in the region, enthralled tourists. Today there are none. And if they did build such houses, men say, the structures would only topple into the river. As one man remarked with disgust, the community now ‘looks like a swamp’.

The river dominates the poetics, prosaics and mundane particularities of everyday life. The river, too, distinguishes Iatmul (and other communities who live along the Sepik) from the rest of PNG. People throughout the province self-identify as ‘Sepiks’, an ethno-regional designation that dates to the early colonial era. The word ‘Sipik’ was first reported by Full (1909: 339) as one of two names for the watercourse—the other

3 On Google Earth, you can view a 2011 image of the village, centered at 4°11'05.68"S and 143°35'54.47"E.

being ‘Abschima’—that were used by ‘natives’ living at the mouth of the river. A few years later, Schultze (1914) applied the term ‘Sepik’ to the entire watercourse, and this usage prevailed. Regardless of its European derivation, the term came to define a key coordinate of local identity. In Tambunum, the vernacular name for the river is Avatset, a compound of the words for ‘bone’ (*ava*) and ‘lake’ (*tset*). But Iatmul do not really designate themselves as ‘Avatset people’; they are simply ‘Sepiks’. Thus, men chisel the name into the woodcarvings made for tourists, while women weave riverine references into the baskets they sell to other Papua New Guineans in town markets. These references include ‘Meri Sepik’, ‘Sepik Souls’ and ‘PS’, the latter being an abbreviation in Tok Pisin for ‘Pikinini Sepik’ (‘Sepik Child’) (see Figure 8.4). This phrase, in the context of local idioms of motherhood (Silverman 2001), declares that Eastern Iatmul people are born of the river. The Sepik is their mother.

Figure 8.4 Women selling baskets with ‘PS’ and ‘Sepik’.

Source: Photo by the author.

In the past, Iatmul villages were threatened not just by erosion and flooding, but by crocodiles as well. In 1935, for example, Sarah Chinnery, whose husband was both an anthropologist and Australian colonial official, travelled up the Sepik and reportedly learned from an expatriate trader that ‘[c]rocodiles get a lot of women who go fishing round the

low, swampy parts of the river’ (Fortune 1998: 162–3). More recently, *The National*, a PNG newspaper, reported in January 1995 that a man in Tambunum ‘dived straight into the mouth of the crocodile, watched by his helpless wife’. Today, however, crocodiles are scarcely seen or feared. After decades of being hunted for their skins, coupled with the effects of wetlands degradation, Sepik crocodiles are now the beneficiaries of conservation projects (UNDP 2012). They do inhabit the smaller tributaries and swamps, they do occasionally attack people, and in the local cosmology, crocodile spirits (*wai-wainjiimot*) continue to preside over daily and ceremonial affairs. However, most of the crocodiles seen today are decorative images (see Figure 8.5).

Figure 8.5 Crocodile clock sold by a man from Tambunum to a tradestore in Wewak.

Source: Photo by the author.

In fact, the crocodile (*pukpuk* in Tok Pisin) serves as the riverine mascot of pan-Sepik identity. Crocodiles adorn the provincial flag, the One Kina coin, hotel bars, clothing and woodcarvings sold to tourists and shopkeepers. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) sponsors a quasi-annual Sepik Crocodile Festival. In town, women sell colourful beaded bracelets that proclaim ‘PS Pukpuk’ (short for ‘Pikinini Sepik Pukpuk’ or ‘Sepik Crocodile Child’). The Wewak Christian Bookstore displays

souvenir crocodiles beside posters of Jesus. A crocodile mask, draped with the PNG flag, ornaments the Avis car rental agency in Wewak. In 1994, two men from Tambunum carved a crocodile slit-drum in the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University (Silverman 2003). I have even seen crocodiles painted on a pair of trousers, accompanied by the phrase 'PS trust me' (Figure 8.6).

Figure 8.6 Decorated jeans: 'PS trust me'.

Source: Photo by the author.

The name ‘Iatmul’, like the ethnic signature ‘Sepik’, also dates back to the colonial era (Bateson 1932: 249n; also Claas 2009). But people from Tambunum never refer to themselves as ‘Iatmul’, even in contrast to other linguistic and cultural groups. I did hear a few utterances of the cognate ‘Iatmoi’ in the 1980s, but this usage seemed forced. It is fair to say that Iatmul villages and speakers simply do not unite *as* Iatmul. They do, however, identify today as ‘Sepiks’. But in consequence of the dialogical role of the river in their everyday lives today, the people of Tambunum emotionally respond to their own self-identity with open ambivalence.

Historical Currents

In Iatmul myth, the beginning of the world was aquatic.⁴ Wind stirred the primal water, and land surfaced amid the waves. A ‘totemic pit’ (*tsagi wangu*) cleaved the ground—just north of the middle reach of the river, near the Sawos village of Gaikarobi—and the ancestors emerged from it. They pushed up the sky and set out to create the ‘paths’ of the world. Ground materialised beneath their footsteps. Their descendants continued on these mythic journeys, often paddling canoes (see Figure 8.7), and named the features of the world as they came into existence. Each tale of creation forms a travelogue of land and water, the grand plot of which is the genesis of terrestrial differences from the original aquatic void.

The ancestors of the Shui Aimasa (Pig) clan created the land that spreads north of the river. The Mboey Nagusamay (Sago) clan claims the world that lies to the south. The Mogua (Fish) clan oversees the eastern world of the Lower Sepik, the ocean and everything overseas. And the riverbed—but not the water—is the totemic realm of a minor group called Wyngwenjap, whose ancestral eel and snake formed the riverbanks. Members of this clan are said to have filled the Sepik by pouring water from a magical bamboo container, given to them by a lineage of the Sago clan affiliated with the nearby Karawari River. The heads of the totemic eel and snake glower at each other, as if in a staring contest, at a narrow stretch of the upper river near Yambon village, featuring dangerous rapids and whirlpools. This was formerly the western limit of Eastern Iatmul knowledge. The tails extend beyond the mouth of the river to Manam,

4 The floodplain was covered by an inland sea during the late Quaternary period (Swadling and Hide 2005).

a volcanic island in the Bismarck Sea (Lutkehaus 1995). When the tails periodically touch, the Manam volcano erupts. The Sepik, then, served as a sort of *axis mundi* in Iatmul cosmology.

Figure 8.7 Paddling to school.

Source: Photo by the author.

Not surprisingly, the history of European contact with the Iatmul is a tale of the river. In 1884, Germany asserted colonial control over New Guinea. The colony was initially managed by the New Guinea Company, a commercial enterprise, which christened the territory Kaiser Wilhelmsland (Buschmann 2009: 35). The first European ship to enter the river's estuary was the Samoa in May 1885. The 'mighty' river, as it was described in the company's annual report for 1886–87 (Sack and Clark 1979: 15), was termed Kaiserin Augusta Fluss. A year later, the Samoa returned to the estuary and launched an open whaleboat in a failed effort to reach the Dutch–German border. The company and government officials returned some months later on a steamship to assess the economic potential of the river. Thereafter, German interest in the Sepik focused on collecting artefacts and native labourers, the latter being put to work on coastal copra plantations (Buschmann 2009: 105).

Of course, Europeans also travelled the Sepik to stake claims over native souls. In June 1887, the *Samoa* returned with another scientific expedition as well as a dozen Malays, eight men from New Britain and, most significantly, two members of the Rhenish Missionary Society. On 30 June, as the ship neared Tambunum, one of the missionaries wrote that ‘everybody [in the village] ran back and forth shouting and grabbed for the spears’ (Claas and Roscoe 2009: 340). Warriors gestured for the Europeans to move on. A few of the scientists set off in a boat to take photos. ‘At that, the people got even wilder.’ Much further upriver, local people fired arrows at the expedition, and the Europeans discharged their firearms in response. Following this expedition, the annual reports have nothing to say about the river for the next two decades.

But the Sepik was hardly forgotten, especially by the missionaries. The *Societas Verbi Divini* (SVD), or Society of the Divine Word, started to proselytise along the river in the 1890s (Huber 1988). Evangelists deliberately uprooted local cosmological, ritual and social tenets, and especially targeted the male initiation cult. Today, Tambunum is served by a small cement church located across the river from the main village, adjacent to the primary school. Interestingly, Eastern Iatmul do not practice riverine baptism, despite their use of the Sepik for both everyday and ritual bathing. It is as if the ‘natural’ watercourse is thought to be unsuitable for the ‘civilising’ project of Christianity.

The next mention of the Sepik in the annual reports of the New Guinea Company occurs in 1907–08. The river’s ‘powerful tribes’ are reported to have resisted recruiters, missionaries and government agents (Sack and Clark 1979: 277). But Indigenous ‘power’ was undoubtedly weakened by shipborne diseases such as smallpox and influenza (Crosby 1997). At the same time, there was a growing European presence along the river (Bragge et al. 2006: 102–3). In the early twentieth century, the river was explored by the *Südsee Expedition* sponsored by the Hamburg Academy of Science, the German–Dutch Border Expedition, the *Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss Expedition* and George Dorsey from the Field Museum in Chicago (Reche 1913; Schultze 1914; Behrmann 1922; Schindlbeck 1997; Welsch 2001). In 1909, one German museum director even compared the Sepik to the Friedrichstrasse, a popular shopping district in Berlin (Buschmann 2009: 86). The river and local subjectivities were now thoroughly ‘glocal’.

In 1913, the German colonial administration established an outpost at Angoram, which remains one of two administrative centres for the Middle Sepik. The other, Pagwi, is much further upriver. Angoram and Pagwi are the only locations along the entire river with regular public transport by road to Wewak. By the outbreak of World War I, riverine folk were making regular use of European tools, wearing Western garb, speaking rudimentary Tok Pisin and exchanging manufactured porcelain replicas of shell valuables. They greeted every European with art and artefacts in hand (Firth 1982: 163–4; Kaufmann 1985). Yet cross-cultural relations remained fraught, even sometimes brutal (Firth 1982: 96; Schindlbeck 1997: 35; Scaglione 2007: 351). My point in sketching this history is simply to show that, beginning as early as the 1880s, the river facilitated the ongoing flow of disruptive, albeit often celebrated, European novelties, institutions, constraints and privations. So the river is not only the font of local origins, identity and prehistory, but also the source of the encounter with modernity, with all of its promises and frustrations.

During World War I, Australian naval vessels occasionally patrolled the Sepik, but there was little administrative oversight along the river. In consequence, conflicts between local people and German labour recruiters escalated, largely because the latter now felt unrestrained. Some recruiters turned not just physically but also sexually abusive (Hiery 1995: 89). In one instance, a notorious recruiter protested to the administration about an attack on his men by Sepik people—even though he admitting to killing dozens of Melanesians. In response, an Australian military vessel fired on villages up and down the river, while also pilfering artefacts for an Australian museum (*ibid.*: 88–9). Despite European terror, one Sepik man, having laboured on a plantation in Australia, tried to assert a Queensland identity (*ibid.*: 101). Local people resisted Europeans—sometimes killing them—even as they drew on European idioms to reconstruct their identity. To ‘see’ the river today as in some sense pristine, or untouched by the tides of history, is to ignore the currents of a tumultuous past.

After the war, Article 22 of the Treaty of Versailles transferred the colonial administration of New Guinea to Australia as a ‘sacred trust’, requiring nothing less than the civilising of local people ‘not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world’. In the Sepik, this moral imperative resulted mainly in the continuation of the colonial status quo: labour recruiting, evangelising, amassing art and artefacts, and prospecting for resources. In the 1920s and 1930s, the

river was navigated by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the Crane Pacific Expedition (Shurcliff 1930; Webb 1997), by orchid hunters and by Beatrice Grimshaw, the unofficial publicist of the Australian colonial administration (McCotter 2006: 85). Several voyagers entered the river simply seeking adventure. They included William Albert Robinson, a young American sailing the world in a 32-foot ketch (Robinson 1932), and Margaret Matches, who popularised her trip along the 'River of Death' in a book called *Savage Paradise* (1931). Even Errol Flynn visited the Sepik, which he described in the *Los Angeles Times* as 'the nearest approach to hell on earth I can conceive'. The unpublished field notes of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (n.d.), who lived in Tambunum for six months in 1938, indicate regular traffic by Europeans with varying commercial and official interests.

World War II proved horribly traumatic in the Sepik (Harrison 2004). In the later 1980s, a slew of older people in Tambunum could still recall gunboat patrols, aerial battles and bombing that destroyed the old men's house, and horrible deprivations under the Japanese military occupation, including summary execution. A few men laboured for the Australian army; many people fled; everybody suffered food shortages. This history is far too complex for a cursory summary. I do note, however, that in 2014, I walked up the village to photograph bomb craters I had seen years before in the bush beside the cult house, but I only found water. The evidence of the war, once so noticeable here, had eroded into the river.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Tambunum was enmeshed in regional exchange networks (Gewertz 1983). This trade was multi-ethnic but still localised and bounded. Such insularity, however, ended long ago, despite the common claim that, as Symbiosis Custom Travel (2015) declares, the Sepik remains 'scarcely contacted by the outside world'. As I have shown, the river has facilitated enormous, globalised transformations since the very beginning of the colonial period, allowing for distant influences, people, objects and commodities to flow into the region, and for art, artefacts, labourers and—more recently—timber, cacao, vanilla and 'organic Sepik rice' to flow away. Eastern Iatmul experience the river as a singular force that ceaselessly erodes the 'ground' of society. But they also fault the river for socio-economic sedimentation. Thus, the river simultaneously sustains and subverts modernity.

Cleanliness and Dirt

The Sepik River lacks large-scale commercial enterprises. This absence delights environmentalists and the few tourists who still travel along the river. Travel brochures fulsomely describe the Sepik as mystical and mysterious, ‘one of the last unspoiled freshwater ecosystems within Asia ... making for a pristine environment not far removed from ancient times’ (Remote Lands n.d.). But people in Tambunum voice no such delight in their ‘ancient’ ways. It is, to be sure, picturesque to observe a group of women cleaning their daily catch in the water (see Figure 8.8), but they would much rather be opening a can or a package.

Figure 8.8 Women cleaning fish.

Source: Photo by the author.

Iatmul, wrote Bateson (1932: 249) almost a century ago, ‘are entirely dependent on the great river and the fens for their food and life’. The same is true today. The river provides fish, prawns and mayflies. The river continues to be used for drinking and bathing as well as laundering. Dugout canoes remain the primary means of transportation. But Eastern Iatmul see this continued reliance on the Sepik not as a trophy of noble self-sufficiency and tribal authenticity but as a daily reminder of their thwarted desires to attain modernity, leading them to say that ‘we are

going backwards'. The 2009–10 floods only served to intensify this despondency by necessitating the rebuilding and replanting of social life just to maintain what they regard as the *same* woeful level of 'development' that they suffered *before* the deluge.

The Sacred Lands Film Project (2017) has announced that the Sepik is the 'soul' of PNG. People in Tambunum voice a more pragmatic assessment of the river: as an untapped resource and, worse, an outright hindrance to development. This is not to say that local people would welcome ecological devastation. They are keenly aware of the perils posed by extractive industries. Nevertheless, Eastern Iatmul bewail the absence of a 'road' to development.

The idiom of a 'road' reflects a traditional view of reality as parsed into multiple paths, each pertaining to different forms of being such as humans, the dead and spirits (see Bateson 1936: 237). It also reflects the many cosmogonic routes of ancestral migration and the criss-crossing of footpaths found in an intact village unharmed by the river. This idiom also speaks to the yearning for a modern road to town and a metaphorical road to modern prosperity (Silverman 2013). Moreover, as one man put it in 2008, Eastern Iatmul must now choose among several, often incompatible, lifestyle 'paths' defined by tradition, the church and things that are 'new' (*kupi* in Iatmul). The ongoing quest for a 'road', however it is variously defined, dethrones the river from its centrality in the local cartography and cosmology. For while Eastern Iatmul proudly affirm their identity as 'Sepiks', they also aspire to 'rise up' to be something more than a mere river people possessing 'only water and fish'.

We can also understand modern ambivalence towards the river with regard to the value of bathing and cleanliness. River folks, as I mentioned earlier, disparage their bush-dwelling neighbours. The Sawos may benefit from timber, but they lack the river, and so remain rank and grubby, say Iatmul, infected with scabies and foolishly content to drink foul water. The Sawos are also inept at swimming and paddling canoes. The river, then, defines Eastern Iatmul as financially wanting but morally and bodily superior to the Sawos. Indeed, Iatmul today see the Sawos as little more than the proverbially unschooled, unworldly *nouveaux riche*.

Major Iatmul rituals typically conclude with bathing. During the famous Naven rite, for example, participants are besmirched with filth, then often make a show of rinsing in the river (Silverman 2001). The Sepik

cleanses Iatmul bodies and society. Recently, however, local people have been lamenting their impoverishment through the very same insults that they hurl at their neighbours, saying ‘our bodies and clothing are dirty’. This dirt signifies the moral failure to uphold the ideals of hygiene so important to colonial legal regimes and post-colonial notions of civility and citizenship. But this newly observed pollution also scorns the river, once a source of cultural superiority, as now being incapable of cleansing Iatmul persons and polity. And while some Eastern Iatmul advocate relocating the community inland as a solution to riverine erosion, others declare that any such move would irreparably transform Iatmul culture into something ‘no better than the Sawos’.

In the late 1980s, tourists regularly disembarked in Tambunum from the *Melanesian Discoverer*, the ship that replaced the *Melanesian Explorer* featured in the film *Cannibal Tours* (Silverman 2013). The boat set sail several times each month from a luxury resort in the coastal town of Madang.⁵ At that time, the village received a sizable and regular income from tourists and artefact buyers—especially in comparison to nearby communities. Admittedly, Eastern Iatmul never assessed these revenues as a genuine form of ‘development’, but the river still brought forth a modicum of modernity. However, these visits ceased when the *Melanesian Discoverer* was sold in 2006. No other tourist boat now regularly plies the middle river. By 2015, another tourist ship that travelled the river, the *Sepik Spirit*, was permanently moored upriver near another Iatmul village (Trans Niugini Tours 2015). It remains in use today. Visitors arrive by charter flight to the Karawari Lodge, located along the Karawari River, but they rarely, if ever, visit Tambunum in smaller ‘river truck’ boats. In the late 1980s, nearly all men and women in the village were creating some form of tourist art, but such creativity has diminished.

According to local people, the collapse of tourism in Tambunum occurred at the same time as the breakdown in the delivery of ‘basic services’ by the provincial government. Then came the terrible flood. Eastern Iatmul tend to condense these three misfortunes as manifestations of a single and pervasive decline. Recent statements about communal filth, then, comment on economic marginalisation as much as they do on the river. By judging their bodies, clothing and community as being ‘dirty’, local people also call into question their status as authentic Iatmul who keep

5 See www.mtspng.com/.

clean and bathe in the river. Cleanliness also signals adult competence and care rather than childhood dependence (Silverman 2001: 95, 125–7). Eastern Iatmul fastidiously sweep the plazas by their dwellings, trim the grass, shovel away animal faeces and otherwise remove ‘dirt’ from public view. Even during the heyday of tourism, local garments were stained and tattered, but villagers rarely remarked on this. Today they often do. By highlighting soiled clothes, as well as the unkempt state of the village and dirt more generally, Eastern Iatmul signal their failure both to attain modernity and to retain their Iatmul identity. These statements also indict the river for failing to sustain the local culture. The Sepik itself is now ‘dirty’.

In the aphorism made famous by Douglas (1966), dirt is ‘matter out of place’.⁶ Recent declarations of social and bodily filth by Tambunum people suggest that the village itself is ‘out of place’, located neither in the traditional past of unclothed cleanliness, nor in the modern future of laundered clothing. In this liminal space, Tambunum lacks stable and well defined categories. No longer does the once cleansing river provide cultural clarity. Menstruating and post-partum women formerly helped to preserve the ‘purity’ of the Sepik by bathing in the swamps behind the village, but now they just wash in the river. Many men say that this gendered transgression also contributes to the wider desecration of social life and the natural environment.

Some villagers affix corrugated metal panels to the thatched roofs of their houses to divert rainwater into metal drums or plastic barrels. Unfortunately, these supplies last only a few weeks into the dry season. Everybody therefore relies on the Sepik for drinking water, and most people do so throughout the year. Yet there is widespread recognition that the river harbours parasites and other forms of ‘dirt’ that are especially deleterious for children. That villagers still drink from the Sepik, and thereby suffer ill health, is another remarked upon sign of their backwardness.

Surprisingly, the Sepik is a ‘relatively unproductive fishery’, yielding only 10 per cent of the catch from comparable rivers worldwide (Coates 1985, 1993). In fact, the river is ‘distinctive because of what is absent, rather than what is present’ (Dudgeon and Smith 2006: 207). To remedy this absence, the PNG Government partnered with the United Nations

6 Douglas is usually credited with this phrase, but it was also used by Freud and others. While often attributed to Lord Chesterfield, the phrase probably originated with Lord Palmerston (Fardon 2013).

Food and Agricultural Organization on several fish-stocking projects in the 1980s and 1990s, introducing almost 10 exotic species into the Sepik. Previously, other exogenous fish had ‘escaped’ into the river from harvesting projects elsewhere in the region—most notably tilapia (*Oreochromis mossambicus*) in the 1950s and the common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) in the 1970s. Although widely consumed by local villagers, these introductions reduced the stock of native species.

Since then, many other exotic fish have colonised the Sepik, such as the Java carp (*Barbonymus gonionotus*) and a species of *Prochilodus* from the Amazon Basin known in Tok Pisin as *raba maus* (‘rubber mouth’).⁷ These fish are now reported to have decimated the fish introduced in earlier decades, which had become staples in the local diet. Several people in 2014 remarked that all the fish I ate in 1988–90 were ‘finished’. Now, they said unhappily, ‘we only have new fish [or] rubbish fish’ that cause intestinal and other ailments. They yearn for the river that once was, saying ‘we want the fish we grew up on’. Again, the Sepik is no longer seen as a source of nourishment.

We must also consider the introduction of exogenous plants. In the 1970s, *Salvinia molesta*, a floating fern native to Brazil, was inadvertently introduced into the Sepik, followed in the 1990s by the South American water hyacinth. In both cases, the rapidly proliferating weed choked small watercourses and lakes, obstructed canoes, killed fish and threatened the very livelihood of many communities (Gewertz 1983). In both cases, the Australian Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) successfully introduced weevils as biological control agents (Thomas and Room 1985; Julien and Orapa 1999). The ‘pristine’ state of the Sepik, so often celebrated by environmentalists and travellers, rests upon a naïve view of ecological change that mutes the experiences and voices of local people.

Villagers are well aware of the fragility of the Sepik. They also toss the detritus of modernity—like empty food tins, batteries and plastic wrapping—into its waters. In the 1980s, most people casually dismissed any forewarnings about pollution by affirming the power and size of the river to overcome any human activity. Today, Eastern Iatmul voice far less

7 For the identification of this fish, I thank Heiko Bleher, via Gerry Allen, who forwarded the identification to Robin Hide, who posted the information on ASAONET@LISTSERV.UIC.EDU on 21 June 2015. See also Dudgeon and Smith (2006: 208).

confidence in its invulnerability, especially with regard to the massive gold and copper mine due to be developed along the Frieda River, an Upper Sepik tributary. The mine, one of the largest in the world, is expected to begin production in 2020, processing 700 million tonnes of material over its initial 17-year lifespan (PanAust 2016). Eastern Iatmul, mindful of similar projects elsewhere in PNG (Kirsch 2006), reasonably fear that the mine will ‘pollute’ the river. Many villagers already claim that prospecting activities have degraded grasses and reduced some fish species to ‘skin and bones’. Several years ago, people in Ambunti, an Upper Sepik administrative centre, similarly attributed a fish kill to chemical pollution from the exploration camp (Colin Filer, personal communication, October 2017).

Additionally, some Eastern Iatmul now tell of plans to cut an enormous channel through the twists and turns of the Sepik. The aim of this project is supposedly to facilitate the efficient passage of barges carrying mineral ore to the sea. I was also told that the ‘government’ ordered all villages in the floodplain to relocate several kilometres inland to escape the imminent pollution. To add insult to injury, they said, the mining company would only subsidise new housing and food for five years. Neither rumour, of course, is realistic or feasible, yet both stories flag local anxieties over the future capacity of the river to sustain local culture. Both rumours also suggest that the Sepik will fail riverine dwellers while profiting Europeans and elite, non-local Papua New Guineans.

As previously noted, the large volume of water in the river was once seen as an asset that would effectively wash away any possible pollution. Today, ironically, many Eastern Iatmul say that the river was much smaller in the past and has swelled in recent years due to global warming. Similarly, the river is said to flood with greater frequency and devastation. Local people also speak of melting ice caps and rising seas that threaten nearby coastlines (see Lipset 2011), and the unstable, unpredictable timing of the wet and dry seasons. Characteristics of the river that were once beneficial are now seen as liabilities caused by forces that lie well beyond local control or understanding.

Ritual Waters

Recall that the local cosmogony highlights the creation of terrestrial differentiation out of an original aquatic formlessness. River and ground should remain apart—a message conveyed by myths that often situate death and tragedy at the liminal riverbank, where water meets land. But the ornamentation of ceremonial spirits does just the opposite—combining motifs and animals from different topographic realms. In a ceremonial context, these ornaments must shake and blur to recall ocean waves breaking on the shore. Everyday life requires the separation of river and land that otherwise results in dangerous disorder best confined to the spiritual realm.

Figure 8.9 *Aqwi* floating islands.

Source: Photo by the author.

With each rainy season, the surging river regresses the world to the primal sea—albeit in a temporary reversion that regenerates gardens. During these months, the Sepik restricts social life to the interior of dwellings. Houses are likened to clumps of grassy ground or floating islands, called *agwi* in Iatmul, that drift down the river (see Figure 8.9). The king posts of each house are also thought to contain a spirit known as the *agwi* of the house. Houses, too, like most Iatmul artefacts, are decorated with wave motifs (see Figure 8.3). Aesthetically, then, the entirety of human artifice appears

to float on the Sepik. In fact, Gregory Bateson (1936: 230) and I, despite the gap of more than half a century separating our respective periods of fieldwork, were both told by Iatmul men that the visible, material world is merely a reflection of water ripples. All efforts to 'ground' social life are therefore ultimately futile, since the true nature of reality is flowing, feminine water.

Mythical and historical narratives often detail the land-based exploits of male ancestors, especially the planting of trees and the construction of villages. Today, the ground is similarly said to be 'built up' by the work of daily life. Human endeavour, in this sense, seeks to stave off riverine erosion. But there is a gendered nuance to the relationship between land and water. The word for 'coconut palm' (*tupma*) also connotes a village. Myth associates coconuts with testicles. Similarly, patrilineages are likened to tall trees, while smaller groups are described as *yarangka* ('branches')—a term that also refers to streams. In general, Iatmul culture encodes a wide-ranging dialogue between the feminine river and terrestrial manhood.

Mortuary ceremonies reveal the same symbolic dialogue (Silverman 2016a). To open the rite, men plant the stalks of totemic plants in front of the cult house. This 'father tree' (*nyait mi*) signifies a male desire for genealogical rootedness in a world threatening to dissolve into the river. But the final scenes of the funeral challenge this symbolism. Mourners wade into the Sepik to wash away their grief. Afterwards, women on the riverbank burn effigies, along with some of the deceased's possessions, and sweep the cinders into the current. The ashes, like the ghosts, are borne out to sea, and to the village of the dead, by ancestral crocodile spirits, floating islands or mystical canoes. The death of both humans and ground entails immersion in the river and, during the funeral, the river itself becomes a liminal path between the living and the dead, and between the land and the sea (see Tuzin 1977). Despite their best efforts to 'build up' the land, the Iatmul always return to the river.

Each evening, Iatmul moor their dugout canoes and modern dinghies at the riverbank. In a similar fashion, men appear to tether the cult house to the 'father-tree' during a funeral. This gesture symbolically prevents the feminine Sepik from washing away the cultural creations of manhood, and yet this gesture ultimately fails to achieve its aim.

There is something graceful about the sight of Eastern Iatmul silently canoeing through the morning mist (see Figure 8.10). Equally elegant is the basso sound of a woman's paddle, intentionally carved at a slight angle, as she dips the blade in the water. Both aquatic images of reverie represent the agile, forward momentum of human agency in the creation and maintenance of social life (see also Krause 2013). The proper role of humanity is to master the river, but nowadays the river masters the community.

Figure 8.10 Man paddling in the morning mist.

Source: Photo by the author.

Some Eastern Iatmul attribute the recent deluges to Mendangumeli, a fierce male crocodile spirit who mythically flooded the world to punish human immorality (Silverman 2016b). All crocodile spirits, regardless of gender, contribute to the masculine ferocity of the river. When Mendangumeli's flood subsided, the spirit slew a young woman. I was recently told that all flood waters seek to kill someone—typically a child—before they recede. Some people allegedly speak to the Sepik directly, asking the river to spare its victim. And yet, as I intimated earlier, the river connotes both death and uterine fertility (Silverman 1997: 113).

Similarly, the ever-flowing and meandering Sepik ceaselessly erodes the terrestrial footing of humanity, but the constant deposition creates sandbars that act as levees sheltering new 'grounds' of social life. Additionally, house posts are only secured in the ground by the annual floods, when the silt acts like mortar. As a fertile source of nurture, the river enables and anchors social life; however, as an aggressive warrior, the Sepik threatens to engulf society in the waters of instability.

Iatmul today cut coffins from old canoes—a modern custom that they attribute to Catholic decorum and colonial sanitary standards. Large canoes represent a key dimension of male personhood, both in terms of the memory of past warfare and in relation to the ongoing practice of chiselling aggressive spirits into the prows. Men proudly affix outboard motors to their canoes; they feel somewhat diminished if they lack a motor and therefore must rely on others to haul cargo or speed along the river. Small canoes are associated with women and therefore with children, food and motherhood (Silverman 2001: 77). All canoes, especially large ones, represent crocodile spirits, and men associate canoes with the reproductive phallus in contrast to uterine water. Crocodile spirits are said to oversee or determine pregnancy. However, as I noted earlier, the downstream journey made by the spirits of the newly dead returns them to the prenatal uterine realm of the ocean (Silverman 2016a). There are numerous ways in which the river, either directly or through its creatures and vehicles, conveys a complex dialogue about the gender of reality.

Conclusion: 'Ball Cutters'

As we have seen, trees, villages and land can take on a masculine identity in contrast to the feminine and uterine associations of the river. However, just as the river is not wholly female, so the land is not wholly male. During one ritual dramatisation of creation, maternal ancestresses, personified as floating islands, lay eggs in the form of land. Some say these mythological isles still support the terrestrial world above the primal sea. Others place the islands on male crocodile spirits, themselves floating on the feminine ocean. But the opposition of the river to the land may be an illusion. Henry Gawi from Tambunum told me that land is female, not male, because men in PNG really only fight over two things—land and women—and from this he concluded that there is no true 'ground', just water, waves and women. And while local women would not necessarily appeal to the first point in Henry's argument, they nonetheless concur

with his overall sentiment that femininity, and motherhood in particular, is what sustains social life. That is to say, women in Tambunum interpret masculine bluster as little more than a façade for the pitiful contributions that men make to ‘raising up’ society.

As part of several ceremonies, and sometimes during the night in the dry season, men perform bamboo flute duets. Women must never glimpse the flautists or the instruments. Men visualise the melodies, said to be the voices of crocodile spirits, as a pair of brothers paddling a canoe. The repetitive, cyclical tunes are named by reference to aquatic imagery, such as brisk currents, swift fish and rivulets of rainwater coursing down from the distant mountains. According to Henry Gawi, the melodies also evoke the hidden truth that reality is a state of watery motion and uncertainty (see Yamada 1997). This is the ultimate truth, if there is one, to Iatmul ontology in Tambunum today.

During the disastrous flood of 2009–10, most people in the community sought refuge in the bush. The deluge destroyed nearly all of their food resources, so that when they returned to the village—or what was left of it—they could only dine on sago and the fish they netted, hooked or trapped. In the 1980s and 1990s, Eastern Iatmul regularly purchased packaged foods, especially rice and tinned mackerel, in village trade stores. At that time, a meal of sago and local fish was seen as traditional but also a sign of indigence. But the decline in revenues from tourism in recent years, coupled with the escalating cost of petrol, resulted in the closure of all the village trade stores. Most Eastern Iatmul now depend again on subsistence gardening, sago harvesting and fishing. They have, as they often say joylessly, gone back to living like their ancestors—and they often attribute this regression to the river. In this sense, the Sepik has reversed the march of time.

Most cash crops, such as coffee and rubber, cannot withstand the annual floods. Vanilla and cacao are exceptions, but financial returns are meagre. Crocodile farms require capital investment in equipment, and so remain largely unfeasible. The recent flood also drowned local confidence in the capacity of local, provincial and national governments—even the wider world—to offer assistance. Indeed, several villagers told me that PNG’s prime minister at the time, Michael Somare, stated publicly that ‘they are river people, and so are used to this’. Tambunum became a shadow of its former vitality and splendour—not the qualities of some romanticised past of primitive grandeur but of the recent past of only 20 years ago.

The water lines of the recent floods, easily visible on trees and house posts, serve as a constant reminder of the fragility of land-based social life amid a watery fate. Iatmul speak with almost one voice—a rare occurrence under normal circumstances—when they say that they have been defeated by the river and are only left with ‘water and fish’.

According to several village men, the source of the 2010 flood was a combination of three things so often said in PNG to bedevil the modern male self: lack of commitment to entrepreneurial spirit, envy of other people’s financial successes and inebriated misconduct. According to one story, a hardworking gardener from an upstream village earned a small profit from selling sweet potatoes in town, but a lazy man (*lesman* in Tok Pisin) was envious when the gardener, in typical PNG fashion (their phrase, not mine), spent his earnings on beer and then drunkenly insulted others. The lazy man cast a spell on the river, thus unleashing the flood.

There are mythical sources for this scenario. Long ago, a man was horribly misled by his cross-cousin into killing his wife. Furious at the betrayal, he beseeched Mendangumeli, the fierce crocodile spirit, to exact revenge, and that is why the spirit flooded the world. In one version, the waters gushed from a severed flower said by men to symbolise Mendangumeli’s penis. In 2014, when I asked women to comment on this interpretation, they burst into laughter. They also berated men for so obviously yet pitifully trying to assert masculine primacy despite the overwhelming importance of women who give birth to children, work without rest and provide for the community (Silverman 2016b). In private, men agree with them! They confess that women ultimately ‘support’ and ‘sustain’ the village. The terrible flood of 2010 similarly attested to the futility of masculine achievement and the destructiveness of male competition. Although men were actively rebuilding the ‘ground’ of social life after the waters receded, their work was hardly triumphant. There was a sense of dejected resignation to the power of the river.

We can now understand the symbolism of another invasive fish in the Sepik, the pacu (*Piaractus brachypomus*). This omnivorous fish, originally from the Amazon and closely related to the piranha, is known throughout the Sepik as the ‘ball cutter’. The reputation of the pacu has garnered considerable worldwide attention. One example is an April 2011 television episode of Animal Planet entitled ‘River Monsters’:

Jeremy Wade [host of the show] travels to Papua New Guinea to investigate a spate of bizarre deaths on one of the world's last great unexplored rivers, the Sepik. A creature there is tearing chunks from unsuspecting fishermen and devouring certain male body parts. Jeremy has never fished in this part of the world and knows little of what might be there. Nothing could prepare him for what he discovers. (Animal Planet 2011)

This 'testicle-eating fish' now purportedly menaces bathers from Scandinavia to Texas.

The pacu was introduced into the Sepik in the 1990s as yet another potential food source, but it rapidly denuded the local flora with the massive teeth that it uses to crunch berries and seeds, and contributed to a further decline of native fish species (Bell et al. 2011: 587). Eastern Iatmul report that the 'ball cutter' specifically consumes the eggs and hatchlings of these indigenous species. Scientists are sceptical about the alleged testicular attacks (Dau 2001), but that is beside the point. This is just another example of the multiple ways in which the river has betrayed the people of Tambunum. The very name 'ball cutter' certainly speaks to men's anxieties today at the sense of being emasculated by the river.

In the coffee-table book *Cousteau's Papua New Guinea Journey*, the chapter on 'River of the Crocodile Men' describes the Sepik in redolent prose as a 'fluid prairie' and a 'rubbery world' of 'uncommon quiet' where '[l]ife changes ... and life does not change at all' (Cousteau and Richards 1989: 131). But the Cousteau expedition phrased their account as an affirmation of an earlier, simpler era of spirits, ritual and myth. In Tambunum today, such a contradictory statement is less like a celebration of an enduring cultural tradition and more like a resigned acknowledgment of the failure of social and economic progress, akin to paddling a canoe against the current and getting nowhere. Like river water, social reality in the Middle Sepik today offers nothing stable to grasp.

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