

Epilogue

During the period of Australian colonial administration, beyond Port Moresby the network of patrol officers/district officers/district commissioners – *kiaps* – was, for some time, *the government*. The kiaps were police officers and magistrates, health workers, road and bridge builders, and census takers and they played a major role in general dispute settlement, especially with respect to claims to land. As independence approached, some of these functions were taken over by local government councils and specialized departments and agencies, but the kiap system continued to underpin the structures of government. The best of the kiaps not only exercised their responsibilities in the field but engaged with the people they worked amongst in order to understand their cultures and the ongoing interaction of tradition and change. In the 1950s and 1960s, especially, their patrol reports – often reporting on the first substantive contact between local communities and the government – contributed immeasurably to what was known about the Melanesian populations. In 1956 the then Minister for Territories, Sir Paul Hasluck, wrote, ‘The patrolling has been arduous and difficult and sometimes dangerous and has called for great qualities of endurance, patience and keen observation. The straightforward day-to-day records of these patrols are some of the most heartening documents it has ever been my privilege to read’.¹

Laurie Bragge was one of the best. Arriving in Papua New Guinea in 1961 he was posted to the Sepik in 1964 and carried out several important early patrols in the Upper Sepik. He was quick to appreciate that any attempt to resolve disputes over land required an understanding of local histories, dating back over generations, of groups of people who had been migrating, raiding one another, resettling, and taking in refugees from fights elsewhere. These histories, gathered over many patrols and copious interviews (mostly with people no longer alive) provide much of the foundation for *Sepik I*, *Sepik II* and *Sepik III*, which Laurie subsequently augmented by later interviews and extensive reading of the emerging archaeological, geomorphological, ethnographic and linguistic data. There is a great wealth of information in this, which it would have been impossible to collect in later years. At the same time Laurie’s interest in material culture has given us valuable photographic images and has resulted in the preservation of artifacts now in museum collections, which would otherwise probably be lost (as much of the Gazetted national cultural property in Sepik villages has been lost, to indifference, local disputes or natural degradation).

Having started out collecting information in order to do his job, Laurie – like most of us who were in Papua New Guinea since before independence – took on a lifetime interest in the country, and in Laurie’s case in the Sepik. After his career as a kiap came to a close in 1978 he returned to the Sepik as a tourism operator, an artifact dealer and as a field manager for an oil exploration company. And like all of us who undertook fieldwork at village level, and listened to the stories of village elders, he was asked – or more likely told – by village elders to write down the stories so that they might be preserved.

It is a sad fact that memories that were handed down through stories, in some cases it seems for thousands of years, have in recent times been largely lost within a generation or two in the transition from traditional communities to modernizing societies under the impact of

¹ *Ministerial Press Statement*, 7 November 1956, ‘Uncontrolled areas in Papua and New Guinea’.

churches (especially in recent years evangelical churches), Western schooling and globalization. In the early 1970s I took some students from Yangoru High School into surrounding villages to collect information about *talipuns* (a decorated shell artifact used in bride price and other transactions, and featured on Papua New Guinea's K5 bank note). In one village an old man began with a story, in a mixture of *Tokpisin* and the local Boiken *tokples*, describing how all the land had once been under water. This was the first time I had heard this, and I suspected that it might have come from some catechist's story of the Biblical great flood; it was only later that I learned that (as Laurie describes in detail in *Sepik I*) after the last great ice age, some 6,000-7,000 years ago what is now the Lower and Middle Sepik was part of a large inland sea. The young man interrupted the old man and 'translated' his story: 'He says the people from here used to go the coast, and light fires to signal the people from the islands to bring the shells'. Enough of the story had been in *Tokpisin* for me to understand its substance, and I told the young man that that was not what the old man was saying. The young man looked at me disdainfully and said, 'Well, that is what he meant to say'. More recently I drove from Wewak to Maprik, where one used to see the magnificent *haus tambarans* in the villages of the Abelam people. There was not a *haus tambaran* to be seen. In the early colonial period some over-zealous missionaries burned *haus tambarans* and destroyed sacred objects, and during the Second World War many *haus tambarans* were destroyed by Allied bombing (as Laurie recounts) but by the 1960s most had been rebuilt. What had happened to them, I asked an Abelam friend. Now, he said, most of the villagers are evangelical Christians. In 2014 the speaker of the National Parliament, inspired by Israeli 'prayer warriors', even took a chainsaw to traditional carvings (which he mistakenly described as Sepik) adorning the Parliament building in Port Moresby in the belief that they represented evil spirits who had corrupted the work of the parliament.

It is likely that not all Sepiks will welcome Laurie Bragge's detailed history of the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Just as many Australians have been in denial about early settlers' brutal treatment of Aboriginal communities, and advocates of Western Christian scholarship tend to avoid mention of the Inquisition and the evils associated with early European expansionism, some Sepiks (and some foreigners) seek to erase memories of such traditional practices as headhunting and cannibalism. But it is important for us as communities to know where we have come from, and in Laurie's volumes it is the Sepiks themselves who provide the stories.

Similarly, in the volumes on the Second World War in the Sepik and 'Coming to Grips with the Future', Laurie, while drawing on official documents and archival material, private memoirs and the work of academic researchers, derives much of the material from interviews with Sepik informants as well as his own experiences as a kiap. There are some accounts of the war in the Sepik in the official Australian history of the war and the memoirs of veterans who took part in the conflict (to which Laurie refers), but nowhere else is there the detail of the activities of ANGAU officers and Papua New Guinean police and collaborators, or of the ways in which traditional enmities and alliances played out during the war years, which is to be found in *Sepik III*. And in *Sepik IV* there is a wealth of material which comes in large part from Laurie's first-hand accounts of changes which took place in the Sepik (especially the Upper Sepik) in the postwar years.

In short, this is not your average history. Nor is it simply another collection of kiap's memoirs. This 7-volume opus, of around 2200 pages, constitutes a major contribution to the stock of documentation and scholarship on the history and culture of Papua New Guinea by someone who has devoted much of his life to Papua New Guinea and specifically to the

Sepik provinces. It is an immensely rich source of information and reflection for Papua New Guineans coming to terms with their nation's story, from prehistory to independence and beyond, for scholars and administrators seeking to understand contemporary issues facing the people of the Sepik, and for people, with or without a close association with Papua New Guinea, who wish to know more about this fascinating country.

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