



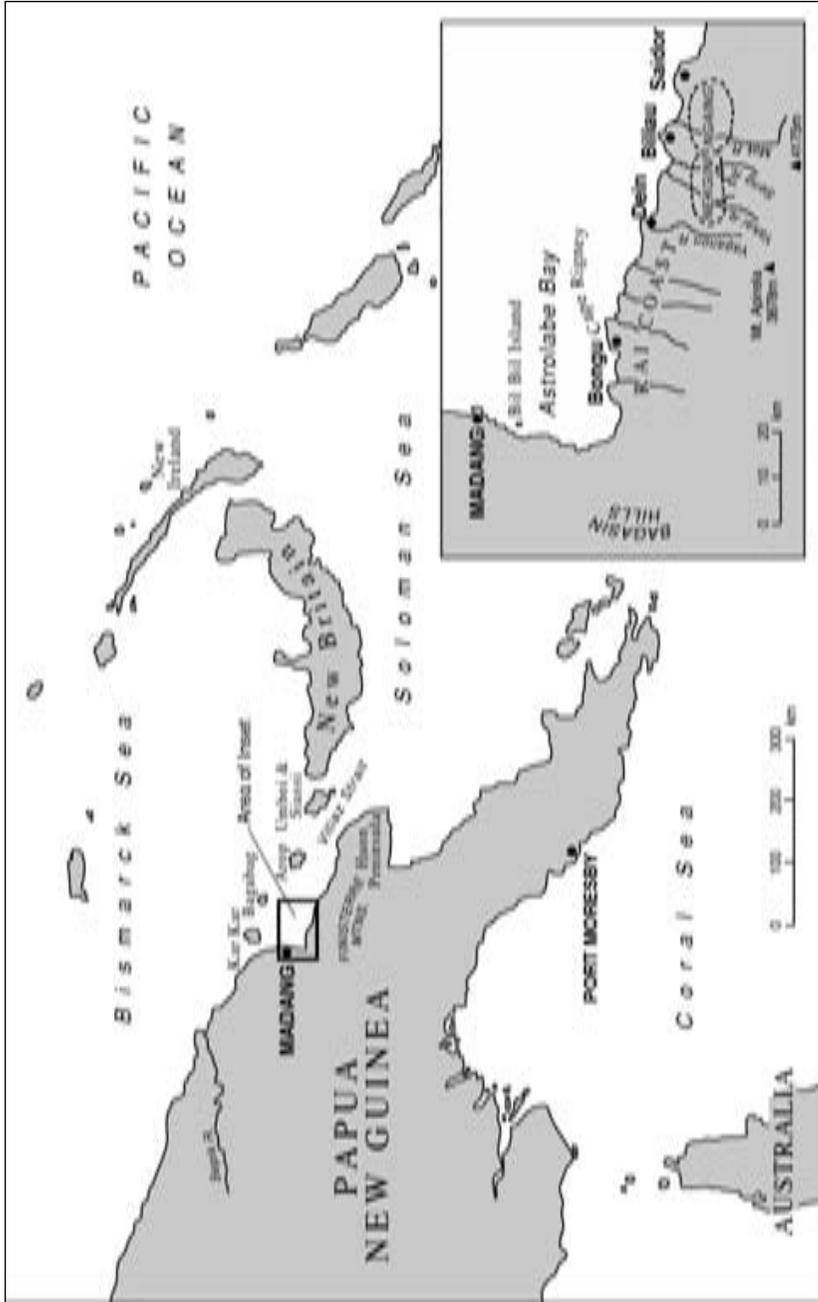
Introduction

The Rai Coast

In December 1993, I arrived in Madang on the tropical north coast of Papua New Guinea, with the idea of finding a field site somewhere in the group of islands lying off that coast in the Vitiaz Strait. From Madang, the obvious choice was Arop, or 'Long Island', a destination I had picked out while still in England. Arop lies around 40 km from the Rai Coast, and 80 km from Madang town. I was already changing my plans though.

Through introductions made by my new friend Moses (who worked for the town council and thus knew many people)¹ it appeared transport to and from the island was erratic, or expensive, or both. Saidor, situated along the coast and nearer to the island, gave me something to aim for. Perhaps there was transport from there. If not, at least I would not be kicking my heels in this strange mixture of a town, which was unsettling me by its combination of expensive hotels, quiet pretty streets lined with Bougainvillaea and Frangipani, intense heat, and unfathomable mixtures of people. The latter was what I had come for, yet this seemed a frontier town, located between the familiar model of northern Australia, and something inaccessible, embodied by the majority of the people I saw there. The Rai Coast had also been of interest in my pre-field reading, and anxious to achieve something, I made up my mind to visit it.

With Moses' help, I arrived on the right bit of concrete wharf in Madang's extensive and many-bayed harbour to board the MV *Nara* to Saidor. Moses had telephoned the District Administrator (D.A.) in Saidor on my behalf the previous day, and warned him of my arrival. I had no idea of the kind of journey involved, nor of how long it would take. Being unused to the rhythm of such journeys (something that was to change soon enough) I had armed myself only with a bottle of mineral water, a novel, and a sleeping roll. I expected to arrive in Saidor, discuss my proposed research with the D.A., and perhaps even make it back to Madang by light aircraft the same day.



Map 1 Madang and the Rai Coast

MV *Nara* was the 15m, steel-hulled diesel launch belonging to Lagap Plantations. It ran (and still did in 2001) between Saidor and Madang carrying copra and passengers to town, and 'store cargo' of rice, tinned meat and fish, biscuits and batteries back to the company store located between the plantation and the outskirts of the station. Other store-keepers from the hinterland around Saidor used the boat for the same purpose: carrying goods from town to stock their businesses. Arriving early in the morning (there being no specified departure time), I sat aboard the boat in anticipation of movement, periodically shifting from one perch to the next as I found myself in the way of loading. I became concerned as the morning passed. Each time I thought we were preparing to depart, that the hold must be full, another truck arrived and hundreds of bails of rice and cartons were loaded. Also, embarrassed at my inactivity in the midst of such labours, I tried to help at times with the loading. I later discovered that this confirmed peoples' suspicions that I was connected in some way to the white man, 'Bill', who ran Lagap plantation. The captain and crew were impressive to watch, the tattooed captain looking like a true sea-dog with a long black beard, and his shirtless crew displaying powerful physiques. The heat and grime of the boat and the long wait were balanced by the excitement of being in the midst of something of which, as I began to realise, I had no understanding. Time (Telban 1998: 43) was my most obvious confusion that day, but my misunderstanding regarding departure pointed to other aspects of the journey which, it belatedly dawned upon me, were not within my control.

Nara left well after midday, the deck, and the roof of the wheelhouse covered with tightly packed passengers; women with babies and small children, old men grasping canvas holdalls and string bags, younger men chewing betel nut and laughing together. We were cramped up, the hull low in the water, as the diesel engine thumped laboriously through the entrance to Madang harbour and out into the open crystal-blue sea. The vista of the Rai Coast mountains, blue and hazy in the distance, opened up as the backdrop to the plodding boat which appeared to stand still in relation to all around.

The Rai Coast is the narrow land which falls from the steep and rugged Finis-terre mountains to the sea in Madang Province, on the northern edge of the mainland of Papua New Guinea (see Map 1). It begins at Astrolabe Bay (where the Russian scientist Michlouho-Maclay first landed at the village of Bongu, in 1871), 30 km south of Madang town, and the name is applied to the coast as far as the border of Morobe Province, more than 100 km to the east. The coastal plain is narrow, hemmed in by the mountains which rise steeply to peaks reaching as high as 4000 m, at some points within 25 km of the coast. The terrain is characterised by the fast-flowing rivers which pour from the high mountains, cutting deep channels between sharp forested ridges, as they rush from the heights. This series of parallel ridges, which run roughly south to north towards the coast, make travel in the area difficult everywhere except adjacent to the shore. Even here, for all but the dry season between May and October, the flooding rivers make travel hazardous.

In pre-colonial days, the coastal people of this area were connected to the islands just south of Madang town (Bilbil, Yabob) as ports of call made on sea-going trading expeditions from these islands (Finsch 1996). Thus they were part of the Vitiaz Straits trading system. This system incorporated people as far afield as West New Britain, and the eastern tip of the Huon Peninsular (Harding 1967; 1985), and relied upon large-masted sailing canoes with outriggers, their sides built up with planks. People inhabiting the coastal hinterland and the mountain ridges tended to have 'trade friends' on the coast (Lawrence, 1964: 27), which could be reached by following their respective ridges straight down to the sea and were thus also part of the system that moved shells and clay pots into the mountains, and feathers, dogs' teeth, and wooden bowls to the coast. However, they made little contact with those to the east or west of them, due both to the difficulties of travel and to mutual hostility and fear between small language groups. The coast has a markedly seasonal climate, with north-westerly winds ('Rai' winds as they are known locally) prevailing during the dry season between May and October, and easterly winds (or 'Talió') for the rainy months of November to April.

During 1994/95, the coast (away from Saidor with its airstrip and plantation boat) was serviced irregularly by small boats which collected copra and passengers roughly once a week for the sea voyage to Madang. It was also connected to Madang by a road (the grandly named Saidor-Madang Highway) built along the coast, although this road was only used for a few months of the year. The ferocity of the rivers flowing from the mountains during the wet season each year prevents the construction of lasting bridges, and thus the road could be used only when fording these rivers by motor vehicle was practical.

People seated around me on the MV *Nara* were not unfriendly; but I did not have enough confidence in Tok Pisin² at this point to initiate conversation, and they left me to myself as I surveyed the approaching coast with wonder, and watched people around me open and drink green coconut, chew betel, and roll long cigarettes out of newspaper. From mid-afternoon on we tracked along the coast. Close enough to see into the mountainous forested interior, I plucked up courage to ask my fellow passengers if there were people and villages there. 'Oh yes', they replied, 'lots of villages', in a rapid-fire Tok Pisin that despite their obvious willingness to talk, made me even more reticent than before.

By dusk, with no sign of our destination, I began to feel really concerned. Here we were, teetering across the open sea, with the rapidly darkening coast showing no signs that it was going to offer a comfortable haven after what had turned into a marathon day already. By 1993, Papua New Guinea had a reputation for highway robbery and violence. I heard (perhaps half imagined) talk around me of criminal gangs (*raskals* [T.P.]), and looked nervously at the fires that occasionally twinkled across the sea from the coast. I had been in Papua New Guinea only two weeks, and that spent in towns. That morning, thinking a pleasant couple of hours across Astrolabe Bay, on something resembling a pleasure steamer, would bring me to Saidor in time to organise accommodation, I was unprepared for arrival at

night. Moses, probably in his characteristic way not wanting to refuse, or to worry me, had given me no idea there might be a problem. I think perhaps, on reflection, he has never been to Saidor. Once I had set my mind to going, there was little he could do without appearing rude. It turns out that there is no way of booking accommodation in Saidor without knowing people there anyway. There is no such thing as a guest-house or hotel. Perhaps Moses felt that pointing these things out would just cause me worries he was unable to solve.

Nara arrived after 9 p.m., in the pitch dark, at a rough concrete jetty in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. It was in fact the edge of Lagap coconut plantation. Passengers, told they might return and collect their heavy cargo in the morning, began rapidly dispersing and disappearing into the shadowy coconut palms, which stretched away in all directions ahead. Realising belatedly that I was in need of some advice, if not assistance, I began looking for someone I might talk to, and noticed a couple of young men, who enquired politely in a mixture of Tok Pisin and English, where I was going. Having had the outcome that it did, I now think fondly of this adventure; but my friends on the Rai Coast still wince at this tale of stupidity – arriving at night, forty-five minutes walk from Saidor station, in the pitch dark, knowing nobody, and sticking out like a sore, white, thumb. In fact, being in Papua New Guinea came to my rescue on this occasion. It is the place that I have found people to habitually be most considerate in their interest in strangers. My rather reticent and guarded answer to these two, that I was here to see the D.A., and could they direct me to his house, brought an offer of guidance that I still think of gratefully. They led me, asking about where I had come from and what I was doing, through the plantations, along the side of the grass airstrip, and finally through the huts of the dark station itself to a large house on the hill that belonged to the D.A. Savage dogs greeted us there, and a bleary-eyed man emerged at their frenzied barking. He had expected me by plane at a reasonable hour that morning, he said, and not seeing me, had forgotten all about it. He sent me off, with an in-law, Tom Yangoi, to seek out somewhere to stay.

Tom led me back through the station to the Catholic church, and knocked up a very irritable old German priest who wanted to know of Tom why on earth he had not come at a reasonable time. He also spoke rapidly in Tok Pisin, never addressing me. Nevertheless, Tom got from him a key to a concrete-floored room with a bed, where he left me. When morning arrived I found my way, again with the help of one of the young men who had brought me through the plantation the night before, to the office of the D.A. We had a brief and unsatisfactory meeting. He thought getting to Arop was too difficult, that if I wanted to study culture I might do so in any of a couple of villages where they were 'still very backward'. In ten minutes our interview was over. It appeared, probably correctly, that he had no interest in the work I proposed, and made no offers of introductions. At least he knew who I was, and had helped me the night before; but as I left the Nissan hut on stilts that was the District Offices, I was depressingly aware that I had no new leads, and probably would fly back to Madang no nearer my goal of finding a fieldsite.

Outside the office I came across Tom again, who introduced me to his brother Timothy. They showed me how to chew betel nut. They laughed, and said that betel was the most important thing on the Rai Coast. Tom then said that he did not speak good English, but his uncle did, and would I like to come and eat mangoes under his uncle's mango tree? This moment, of spontaneous hospitality and interest in a stranger, was definitive. Tom's uncle, Peter Nombo, welcomed me from where he sat on the gravel in the shade of that mango tree. It stood at the back of the single-story two-roomed brick house that his wife, a nurse at Saidor hospital, rented from the government, and they shared with five children, several in-laws and grandchildren, and endless relatives visiting from their villages. 'Oh yes', Peter said, 'I know about anthropologists. I have met Peter Lawrence and read his book (which was not all accurate, as I told him!) I think it is good that you want to come here and write about our past ways. They are rapidly changing, and much good knowledge is being lost. I will help you.' Brushing aside my desire to explain myself further (the notion I might be doing 'salvage anthropology' worried me), he extended his hospitality and introduced me to the extended family that was always around the house.

That day we went, in a government-owned yellow Toyota Landcruiser, 20 km along the coast back towards Madang, and from there up into the mountains to the village of Maibang, from where Tom came. Peter, as Tom's uncle, was held in high esteem there. I cannot remember the reason for the trip, but was thrilled by the company and scenery. Peter shouted out of the cab window for Tom to point out the village of Sor, where Lawrence had spent much of his time. I felt as if I was in the right place at last. Looking out from the open back of the Landcruiser as we climbed into the foothills, I saw, across a sea flattened by the height from which we were looking, a long flat island with peaks at either end. It was Arop, and in my subsequent three years spent in Madang and on the Rai Coast, indeed to this day, that view from the coastal mountains is all I know of it.

Reite

Over the next three months, I made trips back and forth between Madang and Saidor (although never in this period on board the *MV Nara*), and each time Peter organised for me to 'patrol', seeking villages where I might pursue my research. The first began again in Maibang, from where after a couple of days, Tom sent me on a loop with his younger cousin Albert Samaik, to Reite in the neighbouring language group, (and from where Peter originated) and then down to the coast at Warai. I spent a night in each of these places, talking with old men and leaders about their interest in what they call *kastom*, and trying to assess them as potential fieldsites. On another trip, I went with a contact of Peter's along the coast to the east this time, and stayed on the white sands of Bonga, a beautiful village on the beach. As seems right in retrospect, it was more the case that a village chose me than the other way around. All expressed interest in my arrival and a desire to



Photograph 1 *Looking North over Reite Lands from the Coastal Hills*

accommodate me, but only in one village did I detect real excitement about the subject of my research. This village was Reite, where an old man, known there as Kiap,³ showed me with shining eyes and much good-humoured intensity, the paraphernalia of the male cult as proof of their continued knowledge of kastom. He told me if I wanted to come and learn about his kastom, I would have to cook a pig for him, and laughed. I was in no way led to believe from his laughter, however, that he spoke in jest.

The hamlets of Nekgini-speaking people (of which Reite is one cluster) are located in an area between 146°12' and 146°17' east longitude and 5°38' and 5°42' south latitude. They are in the subcoastal foothills of the northern side of the Finisterre range, between 7 km and 11 km inland from the coast, and between 300 m and 800 m above sea level. The hamlets of Reite, in which I subsequently lived, lie between the Seng river to the east and the Yakai river to the west. Hamlets are situated along the tops, and on buttresses formed by, limestone ridges. The terrain is heavily forested with tropical trees and shrubs, and has rich dark soils. The vistas, when available, are of patchwork green hillsides (the legacy of shifting cultivation and rapid regrowth), recent gardens appear lighter and less dense than older gardens. The patches of dark emerald green and deepest shade indicate spirit abodes where the forest is never cut for gardens. In the distance to the north lies the sea, and to the south, the huge and densely forested Finisterre range. From my house in Reite at about 500m above sea level, I could see the 3,700 m

peak of Apirella, only 15 km away. Between the steep ridges of Reite lands run many watercourses, which bubble up from many springs, and run away to the two main rivers which drain from higher in the Finisterres. These streams run fast, contained by their narrow beds.

Nekgini is a non-Austronesian language (Wurm 1981) which had a total of around 800 speakers in 1994.⁴ This population is divided into four main administrative ‘villages’ which go by the names, from east to west, of Serieng, Reite, Asang, and Sorang. Local people make much of the differences in dialect between these villages. Each contains roughly one quarter of the Nekgini-speaking population. To the south of Nekgini speakers, separated from them by a steep rise in the mountains, lie the villages of Dau (or N’dau) speakers (Lawrence 1964: 13). This language appears cognate with a large group known as ‘Rawa’ (Dalton 1992). To the east lie the territories of Ngaing speakers (Lawrence 1964, 1965; Hermann 1992; Kempf 1996).⁵ Coastal people adjacent to these territories speak a language related to Nekgini and Ngaing, called ‘Neko’ by Wurm (1981).

Fieldwork

On account of my initial contacts with Tom Yangoi, I was invited to stay in the Ngaing-speaking village of Maibang to conduct my research. I was unwilling to disappoint those who made the offer. However, I felt I would be better located elsewhere. We made something of a compromise, in that I remained with John Samiti, a younger brother of Tom, in Maibang for a couple of months while my own house was built in Reite. I made the journey between the two villages a couple of times during these months. They are separated by the Seng river, and the trip takes one steeply down for an hour, through gardens and deep forest on a path made wide by the passing of many feet. On the other side of the Seng river, the path ascends steeply again, almost brutally in that hot climate, before tipping over the top of the next ridge and down to where Reite Community School is situated at the place called Ambuling. Maibang children make light of the two hour walk to school each day, although their parents are less easy with the fording of the Seng, which is dangerous in spate. My guide on the first time I made the journey, Albert Samaik, warned repeatedly ‘*lukaut, ples wel!* [T.P.] (‘go carefully, it is slippery’). He was right to do so. The walking tracks in this land are not easily negotiated by a novice. Beyond the cleared school area, and again upon a ridge, lies the cluster of hamlets called Saruk, Ririnbung, and Yapong.

My initial arrival in the hamlets of Reite, along this route, was greeted with interest and even approval. I was told that if I wanted to know about kastom, I had arrived in the right place. They were proud to follow the ways of kastom, and took my arrival as an affirmation of their choice, whereas many of their neighbours (they meant Serieng people, Ngaing speakers, and coastal people) had given up kastom in favour of *misin* (T.P. missionisation) and *bisnis* (T.P. cash-cropping and trade store operation).

Reite people, under the direction of the Local Government Council's committee member in the village (*Komiti* [T.P.]), offered to build a house for me to live in, which I gratefully accepted. The house was a beautiful one, raised on posts with split bamboo covering palm floor-boards, and woven split bamboo for walls. The thatch was of sago leaf, sewn over batons into roof tiles. I had an open veranda to contemplate the view (something Reite people were always a bit dubious about; houses are to be hidden in, not looked out from), a small kitchen with a fire pit on the floor, and a larger room in which I placed my working area (table and chair). There were three other similar dwellings in the hamlet, placed around a plaza of red-brown earth. There was also a house dedicated to the men's cult, and an open meeting-house adjacent to this. From the house one could look down over an intersection of two small valleys, and see the huge rainforest trees that grew around the springs where there were pools used daily for washing and from which to fetch water. As with most things in Nekgini lands, this was reached by a steep path, almost lethally slippery after rain (I learned in the end to go barefoot and stick my big toe in the ground when taking each step), and was a haven of cool, clean, sparkling water, bubbling up and filling pools which then tipped their contents in little waterfalls over rounded boulders and away down a pebbly channel. These springs were one of the many spirit abodes (Holiting on Map 2), and full of magical shadows, bird-song, and the music of the stream.

It is important that I make clear certain aspects of the relationships I established with Reite people at this time. Their incorporation of a disassociated person (myself), managed with such skill on their part, was in part made possible by a negotiated position that began even prior to my arrival in this house. In all my dealings with Reite people at the start, I made it clear that there would be little financial reward for help, other than payment for materials, and that I was present among them as a student who was trained to write about their *kastom*. This established my work *itself* as something of interest to the community (*komuniti* [T.P.]) as they call themselves. People there, I now realise, were willing to incorporate me on potentially many grounds. This is their interest. I could, in other words, have appeared as someone with cash and consumables to ease my passage into people's favour. Yet this was not what I wanted, nor would it have served for long as a basis on which to make relationships with people. I was encouraged from the very start by leaders there to make our mutual interest in their *kastom* the basis for our relationship. The Reite *Komiti* was clear that he did not want me there on the basis of payment because of the trouble it would cause him.

I have no doubt that our expectations and understandings of the relationship were different. Webster (1982) discusses the necessary 'fiction' (rather than falsehood) involved in the position of an ethnographer in such a place, where he or she is made to feel like part of a community and therefore share understandings with the members of that community in a way that is rarely possible, while local people almost inevitably expect some access to the advantages the anthropologist patently has at his/her disposal, as a return. Webster describes this as an entry into

each other's 'culture', a description I am loath to follow. His point is well made none the less, in that there is a genuine struggle on both sides to make relationships of fundamental inequality into the basis of an exchange. On the Rai Coast, with its history of interpretations of the presence and origin of white people, this kind of misperception on both my part and that of Reite people was, I think, inevitable. I was always shocked when people I thought I knew well implied I knew all about ghosts, or how to procure a book containing the formulae which would bring Western goods, while I think for their part, some Reite people had hopes that my work was going to get them the recognition, and therefore the change in circumstances, they felt was due to them.

I have faced a number of public meetings over the years to respond to rumours and even open accusations that I am stealing knowledge, or making a business out of selling their stories. There has been frustration on the part of some that I have not made a significant change in their lives. The initial principle that I was there to write about *kastom*, in response to their own wishes, has helped at such times. The brilliance of Reite's *Komiti* in seeing the inevitability of dispute and jealousy if my presence was not continually handled with great sensitivity, has allowed the development of something totally unexpected by either of us. That is a conversation based upon the worth of what I am doing there and mutual interest in the project. While not everyone in Reite has become conversant in the aims and methods of anthropological analysis, the majority of Reite people remained happy with my promise to write a book such as this one, about their *kastom*, so that it would be available to their descendants and to the wider world.

I may say I also cooked six pigs, with accompanying quantities of rice and tinned fish, as presentations to 'the community' during my time there. These were payments for my house, for their care for my well-being at an important moment when my mother visited, for learning certain items of *kastom* and for their work on the objects for a collection I made for museums in England and Papua New Guinea. In a place where jealousy over material advantage is dangerous (it causes feuds and can result in deaths), my best recourse as a method of payment for their help and assistance was to present something the whole community could share in. This was fulfilled by mimicking ceremonial food distributions in which many people claimed a part. On the day after the last of these pigs had been cooked and distributed, Kiap came to my house with many other elders and presented me with a gourd lime container and cassowary bone lime spatula.⁶ Saying they would not accept any more pigs from me, as to do so would shame them, he outlined that now I could 'carry the mouth' of Reite people and speak for them. I was, in other words, part of the place.

The people in Reite hamlets were, then, extremely welcoming to outsiders. They were also very 'community minded', as were the Ngaing speakers with whom I also spent some time. As a legacy from the years of colonial rule, each community is charged by the local government council with the upkeep of its footpaths and roads, and with other work designated 'community work'. Bush material

houses and classrooms for the local Community School at Ambuling are built by community labour, for example, as are pit latrines for old people who cannot manage the work themselves. This work is organised by a representative of the local government council, and takes place regularly every Monday. All members of the community take part. My own house was built by community work, organised by the local government committee member, and on his own initiative my presence was said to be 'between' all the people of the community, not 'belonging' to any one household or group.

My research was enhanced by the enthusiasm of older members of the community, particularly those who had been ridiculed by outsiders during and after the years of Yali's influence, to show their knowledge of, and control over, *kastom*.

It could be said that there are factions (or at least different interpretations) relating to the importance of *kastom*. Initially, it was those who had a particular interest in *kastom* as a part of an authority still remaining from close association with Yali, who were most interested in my arrival. However, *kastom* has new meanings. There are those who value *kastom* without subscribing to either the authority, or logic, of Yali's followers. They say that 'real' or 'unbroken' *kastom* was encouraged by Yali. The distortions of some of his followers has given *kastom* itself a bad name. In any case, *kastom* is more worthy and valid for the stability and meaning it gives to community life than anything people have dreamed up on their own, they say.

Once I had been accepted and was settled in the village, I was snowed under by people wanting to tell me important myths, their history, and the practices associated with them. For a time, I abandoned any thought of learning Nekkini itself (as I was by this point fluent in Tok Pisin). I could hardly turn people from my door when they arrived keen to tell me things, on the grounds that I now wanted to learn their language rather than their *kastom*. My first months were devoted to recording and writing up the stream of stories that was presented to me. Eating local foods, habitually chewing betel nut, and knowing Reite *kastom* were all taken as evidence that I had become part of the place.

Other factors greatly increased my own sense of gaining understanding.⁷ I was included in many activities – gardening, ritual work, the male cult, exchanges, travels to Madang town to sell cash-crops – and also had many long and fascinating discussions with people who became my close friends through our work together. I was funded by the British Museum to make a collection of contemporary artefacts for them, and for the National Museum in Port Moresby, allowing me to witness and record the making of all important objects. I was further assisted in my understanding of musical and spiritual life by the presence of the ethnomusicologist Don Niles (then of the National Research Institute, Papua New Guinea), and his assistant Clement Gima for ten days in June 1995. Together we recorded music tapes, and my understanding of this was greatly enhanced by the intensive involvement with the male cult during that time. In all these activities, the theme of associating people into Reite, and thereby extending the knowledge and influence of that place itself, may be discerned.

In this book, as elsewhere, I refer to people from the villages in which I worked as ‘Nekgini-speaking people’. This I mean to stand as short-hand for ‘Nekgini-speaking people whom I know, and are happy for me to represent their opinions and perceptions as a coherent body of understanding’. Through working closely, and as mentioned above, comparing understanding and checking analytic moves with certain acknowledged masters of *kastom* in Reite, I have gained both insight and more importantly given them an interest in the text. Whether this means that the unavoidable impression of some of my prose – that a population full of personality looks rather homogeneous at times – is excusable, remains moot. All I can say is that Reite people themselves defer to certain authority figures. These people gain prominence through age, through oratorical skill, and most of all, through acknowledged completion of life-cycle and ritual practices covered by the term *kastom*. It is their advice that is solicited in what remain, due to the extraordinary history of Nekgini-speaking villages, the significant shaping practices in their highly valued social form; and it was they that told me to get on and write this down.

Some History: Government, Missions, and War

Although contact with Europeans began in Madang Province in 1871, Nekgini speakers had little knowledge of, or direct contact with, white people until after the Second World War. The early German traders, planters, and missionaries who arrived in Madang and travelled along the Rai Coast appear to have restricted their movements to the coastal plain in this area, although in the vicinity of Astrolabe Bay and south of Madang town, expeditions into the interior were made before the turn of the century and soon after (Lawrence 1964: 35, Reiner 1986: 105–9). Nevertheless, despite the lack of direct contact, it would be wrong to underplay the influence that the advent of steel tools (German axe-heads are still displayed proudly by old men in Reite), and certainly of pacification, on these populations. While steel was at first so scarce as to have little impact on the traditional small swidden gardens made by subcoastal people, its advent did intensify the movements of people for trade and exchange both amongst sub-coastal people (such as Nekgini and Ngaing, and Nekgini and Dau), and between coastal and subcoastal people. Trade brought marriage between these groups, evident today in the relations people maintain with kin across language divides. With the advent of a policy of pacification by the German (1885–1914), and then the Australian administrations (1921–42, 1946–75) on either side of the war, movement became easier, and the kind of fear that meant that hamlets stayed small and were often relocated, subsided.⁸ Pacification is referred to by Reite people in Tok Pisin as *gutaim* (good time). As an ongoing influence, steel did have the effect of increasing garden (and therefore family) sizes, which are today having an effect on the size of the population. The beginnings of migrant labour by Reite men during the 1930s also introduced Melanesian pidgin (Tok Pisin) to the area and this, more than anything else (in their accounts), resulted in more congenial relations with

neighbouring language groups, particularly those on the coast to the west, with whom Reite people began to intermarry.

It seems that the demands for labour made by missions and planters alike in the early years of the century did not affect Reite people. However in the 1930s, when the gold-mines at Wau and Bulolo in Morobe Province opened, some men left the village to work there. Some of the generation of men who are now, or would have been, great-grandfathers (most of whom died during the 1970's when influenza epidemics ran through the area), worked not only in the mines, but also on ships which plied between Rabaul and Madang. Some also went to work in plantations nearer to home on the Rai Coast. This small-scale, but significant labour migration continues to this day, although now it is centred upon the town of Madang.

Mission influence through the Rhenish (Lutheran) Mission began during the 1930s. In 1923, a Samoan pastor named Jerome expanded the missionary work that had been established in Astrolabe Bay in 1884 onto the Rai Coast with its first notable success. Eight assistant teachers (recruited from Siar and Graged [now named Kran-*ket*] islands in Madang harbour) were placed in the coastal villages between Lamtub (near the source of the Yakai river – see Map 2) and Saidor (Reiner 1986: 122–3). In 1932, a mission station was opened at Biliau which remains there to this day (*ibid.*: 155). By the 1930s mission workers began to appear in Nekgini hamlets according to people there. By all accounts, their arrival caused many changes. Native workers were more willing to use the fear of eternal damnation as a method of winning converts, and to stamp out native 'pagan' ritual, than the first white missionaries had been (Lawrence 1964: 55). Both, however, required local people to expose the ritual paraphernalia of the male cult to women, whereupon the mission workers burned the objects. They also burned other things, including magical charms used in hunting. This fact is frequently remembered with anger by Reite people.

The success of the mission workers in Reite was perhaps based on expectations (whether fostered by their teachers or not) that following Christian ritual would elevate the participants to the material conditions of the whites who, during the immediate pre-war years through patrols, and during the war itself, had impressed their power forcefully on local populations with their destructive technology. Old men in Reite also remember with wonder the arrival of American troops in Saidor during 1944, as some travelled there to work as labourers at this time. The rapid construction of large corrugated-iron warehouses, and the arrival of massive food supplies, were a revelation to those who saw them. Urangari, for example, remembered that they were given access to all the tinned meat they could eat, from a seemingly never diminishing pile.

When the adoption of Christian ways at home in the village did not bring such reward, people began to become resentful, especially since their loss of hunting magic was blamed for any hunger. This dissatisfaction, fuelled by the growing influence of Yali whose position was sanctioned by the Australian administration after the war (see Lawrence 1964 for the detail), encouraged Reite people to 'send the missions away' and reinstate traditional ritual practices. These included the

construction of male spirit cult houses and the paraphernalia of the cult during the 1950s. Thus on my arrival, I was informed that Reite people followed *kastom*.⁹

The male cult (*tambaran* [T.P.]) is today a significant and living part of Reite ceremonial life. For the outsider, its most obvious feature is its exclusivity and the secrecy which surrounds it. Although lacking any form of internal grading or progression, the difference between initiates (adult men) and non-initiates (women and children) is strictly observed. I was thus told repeatedly that although I could partake in the ceremonies of the male cult, I was not under any circumstances to reveal certain aspects of it to women or children. It was impressed upon me that children from Reite were even now at University, and I was therefore not to write about the *tambaran* in any way other than those forms of speech used in public contexts in Reite, lest Reite women read about it. I have tried to observe this restriction, and thus use the euphemisms common in Reite to talk about *tambaran*. This will become clear in the sections where *tambaran* becomes relevant to the argument.

On the administrative side, in 1932 a patrol station was established at Saidor (see Map 2). This became a Government substation in 1936 under the Australian Mandate Administration.¹⁰ From this time, patrols into Nekgini territory were made, giving these people their first view of white people, and their first direct experience of being 'administered'. They were required to relocate into centralised villages by the colonial officials, to bury their dead in a village graveyard instead of exposing them, and to provide labour for the maintenance of footpaths and for the construction and maintenance of a rest house for the patrol officer (a *haus kiap* [T.P.]). However, patrols occurred only annually, and did little to increase knowledge on the part of either side, of the other. They stopped altogether during the Second World War, and were not restarted until 1947.

Japanese troops landed in Madang in 1942 and moved along the Rai Coast seaboard during 1943 (Lawrence 1964: 49). Reite people remember the arrival of the Japanese, and their growing fear of them. Apparently at first the newcomers treated Reite people reasonably well, hiding from the advancing American troops who arrived at Saidor in early 1944. By all accounts, however, as they became more desperate and were cut off from supplies, they began to kill local people's livestock, and to take food from their gardens. Resistance was met with violence. Reite people tell of how they were turned out of their houses, and hid deep in the bush eating only wild roots while the Japanese ate from their gardens and lived in their houses. Patrol reports from the area in 1947 record that almost all seed yams had been consumed by the Japanese, leaving hardship on their departure (Bentinkt 1949/50).

On the other hand, there is an extraordinary tale told in Reite about a Japanese soldier who remained there after the war was over, and who gave his name to a child from Sarangama (Tera). This suggests that there were friendly enough relations between Reite people, and at least some Japanese troops despite their invasion, although this tale does have a tragic twist. Returning home to his house, a Sarangama man, it is told, found Tera eating a marsupial that he had left to dry

over his fire, and in a rage over the theft, the Sarangama man took up his bow and shot Tera, who is buried on Sarangama lands.

After the end of hostilities came a time when the administration attempted in earnest to develop the Rai Coast, encouraging agricultural projects such as the growing of ground-nuts to improve soil quality, and of rice cultivation for sale (McAlpine 1953/4). Their efforts were always hampered by the area's inaccessibility, however. After 1954, native local government councils were formed, and a school was opened in Saidor in 1955. These were the years of the rise to prominence of Yali, and the development of the administration was overshadowed in local people's perception by the anticipated developments that various forms of millenarian movement, figure-headed by Yali, were expected to produce. Yali banned the practice of magical killing (*poisin* [T.P.]), which by all accounts had been a more usual method of homicide than open warfare in this area. It is now said that *not* practising sorcery is *kastom* by some Reite villagers, meaning that it is a law introduced by Yali, of whom some people still speak as a kind of deity.¹¹

Yali's influence was positive in many ways. There is a feeling, shared by some in Reite, that he was put in a difficult position not only by the colonial government, but also by some of his followers. It is perhaps some of the latter, particularly unrealistic in their expectations, which brought his eventual downfall. The association with cargo cult has overshadowed the fact that he encouraged his followers to build houses raised on stilts, to separate pigs and other livestock from living quarters, and to dig pit latrines. He also encouraged cleanliness in villages, which to this day are kept beautifully well-swept and have flowers planted around them, as he recommended. Despite being blamed by the administration for much of the millenarian activity at this time, he did much to improve the quality of life in Rai Coast villages such as Reite. The question as to what the expectations of those who followed his recommendations (about village cleanliness and layout) were, must be left open.

In the final colonial patrol report (for 1969/70), Reite appeared as the only village in the area which had no income from coffee or copra production. This may be attributed to the influence of followers of Yali's movement, who held that involvement in business (with its meagre returns) could not possibly be the way that whites had gained their power. The patrol officer for this time wrote that the upcoming 'independence' meant the arrival of cargo in native perceptions (Dyer 1969/70), and stories told about this time by Reite people confirm that millenarian implications were attached to the end of the colonial administration.

Interestingly, real change in Reite people's living conditions, though still not enough to satisfy some expectations¹² did come after the departure of the Australian administration. During the 1980s, by dint of having a Reite man achieve the level of Minister in the provincial government of Madang,¹³ they were connected to the Saidor-Madang 'Highway' by a feeder road up into the foothills of the mountains. Reite was chosen as the site for the location of a medical aid post, and also as the site for the establishment of a local Catholic Church-administered 'Community school'.

From the early 1970s, some Reite people also began to plant coffee and cocoa, ignoring what had become a faction in the region which maintained that certain rituals (derived from, or offshoots of, Yali's influence) were the only way to bring development. Thus cash started to arrive in the village at the same time as the development of services on a modest scale.

Cash features in the subsistence regime of all Rai Coast people today. Interestingly, however, cash is still regarded with ambiguity, at least in Reite. It is perhaps too much like garden food, in that it is readily consumed by those possessing it, for people to feel confident that it is really the basis of generative productive relations (Leach n.d.[a]). It is earned through coffee, cocoa, and copra sales, or provided through small remittances from kin living and working in other places as school-teachers, businessmen, labourers, or politicians. Reite people generally have small plantations of coffee and cocoa, owned by individual households, the produce of which is laboriously carried to the coast, and then on by ship to Madang town where it yields a small cash addition to their subsistence agriculture. Cash is used to purchase rice and tinned fish from small local trade stores, and to buy second-hand clothing, steel tools, and kerosene from Madang town. These items have long been more or less essentials, rather than luxuries, for most Rai Coast people (see Lawrence 1964: 59). Cash is also required for the payment of school fees in the local government or church community schools, which are dotted along the coast and in the mountains behind. Another feature of life on the Rai Coast is the chewing of betel nut, which is almost an obsession with the inhabitants. In the months when betel nut is plentiful (May to September), it is sometimes transported as far as Madang for sale.

When I arrived in Reite in 1994, most households had steel tools, cooking pots and plates, and manufactured clothes. Some occasionally purchased kerosene, tinned fish and rice, while others had luxuries such as radios (and batteries to use them) although these kinds of items were rarely bought from individual income, but were received as gifts from kinsmen in paid employment, or as part of kin-based exchanges. Reite houses at this time were all constructed of local forest material, with floors raised on stilts, walls of platted bamboo, and roofs made from sago thatch. Corrugated-iron roofing material was reserved for the small trade stores which dot the area. Despite the presence of a road, very few vehicles ever attempt to follow it, and because of the rains it is little use for most of the year other than as a footpath to the coast.

Nekgini-speaking people subsist on a mixed swidden system, cultivating yams, indigenous taro varieties, Chinese taro, sweet potato, small quantities of sago, and other (native and introduced) vegetable crops. Coconuts and areca palm (betel nut) grow at these altitudes, although the former only slowly. There are, however, many coconut palms along the coast, the majority planted during the years of colonial administration when native, mission, and company plantations were all established there. Most of these plantations were in the care of local people in 1993, although there are some (Lagap and Nom plantations near Saidor government station, for

example) which are still run by expatriate workers and owned by large corporations. Coastal people are able to care for many more pigs than the people who live in the mountains, feeding their livestock on the flesh of dry coconuts.

Around Reite, pigs (both domestic and wild) are scarce, but marsupials and birds exist in the densely forested hills, and these are hunted to supplement the mainly vegetable diet. Nekgini speakers make regular trips to the coast to collect coconuts, often received in exchange for garden food, as coconuts are valued for their oil and flavour in cooking. Reite people also collect eels and crustaceans from the streams and rivers.

Above Reite lands, the first rise of the mountains proper is so steep that it is uninhabited. However higher still, at altitudes above 1,200 m, the mountains tend to level out again into a series of steep valleys and ridges with inhabitable land along them. At these altitudes, a number of ecological zones exist, rising from lower mid-montane forest, to grassland near the summits of the mountains (Kocher Schmidt 1991). People here practise mixed swidden agriculture and pig husbandry. They have no access to coconut, such an important item in the diet of the other Rai Coast dwellers, and cultivate temperate rather than tropical vegetables.

In terms of literature, the Rai Coast lies in between seaboard areas which have been the subject of intense ethnographic interest. These are the New Guinea Islands, and the Sepik river. It is the literature from these areas that I use most often for comparison and support in this book. Drawing selectively on ethnographies provides support for interpretation, and also throws Rai Coast ethnography into relief through contrast. I do draw on other work from further afield in Papua New Guinea where it seems appropriate theoretically or because of material similarities. Nowhere do I wish to imply however that there is some kind of culture area wherein interpretations from one place can be automatically transposed onto another. Similarities or differences of data and interpretation at times seem worth noting.

People

Reite people have a great interest in outsiders. This perhaps explains their willingness to accommodate the Japanese soldier, Tera. However, as with that tale, attracting and accommodating people does not mean one suspends judgement about what sort of people they are, or whether they behave in a manner appropriate to the kind of relationship one wants. There is nothing sentimental about this desire to accommodate others. Here, alongside some background information, I have told a story about my own transition from disassociated outsider arriving on a boat, to a person associated with a particular place and set of people. I have chosen to introduce the book in this way because one of the main concerns of the Rai Coast people whom I know lies in the appearance of wealth and power that a large population gives. Creating new persons is the object of their gardening, exchange, and spiritual activities. An apparently unattached person, such as Tera, or indeed

myself, is therefore welcomed as a kind of addition to the wealth of the hamlet or village in which they are (in local perception) enticed to reside.

I was always struck when Reite people used to question me as to the status of what they termed *trango man* [T.P.] (vagrants or dispossessed people). Having heard (from somewhere) that there were tramps, or people without land and family in other countries, they suggested that if this were really the case, could I not bring them over to Papua New Guinea, where they would be looked after (in the sense of given land, kin, and work)? I believe this 'charitable' offer came from their amazement that there were 'free' people somewhere, and the idea that if so, they could be incorporated into Reite to swell the population and therefore increase their prestige and appearance of wealth. My own welcome and acceptance may well have been based in part on a variation on this idea (and especially that white people might have relationships or knowledge of a powerful kind), and therefore should be snapped up if they appear wandering through one's lands with no other connections. Fred Damon writes of Massim societies in similar vein:

For all Massim societies the production of children is a principal activity, and the establishment of conditions to reproduce them is an important outcome of mortuary rites (1989: 7).

The theme of this book is how social life here is geared to the creation, and innovative incorporation, of people. In the next chapter I outline how this may be understood utilising recent anthropological work on kinship.

Notes

1. Luckily, I had been put in contact with Moses by mutual friends in England. He was my only contact in Madang at that stage.
2. Tok Pisin is the lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, and its second official language. I indicate Tok Pisin terms in the text by 'T.P.' after an italicised word.
3. 'Kiap' is a Tok Pisin word derived from the German 'kapitan'. It was used to refer to the colonial patrol officers. Siriman (Reite's Kiap) was given this name (by himself I suspect) as a vociferous local orator and prominent leader. He often declaims that he is *lokal kiap* (local government/official) because of his knowledge of *kastom*, and prominence in exchange; and also because he was prosecuted by the colonial government for involvement in the millenarian (cargo) movements which took Yali as their figurehead. Escaping unpunished, Kiap bases much of his authority on this apparent acceptance of his control over and use of *kastom*. Even Yali went to prison, as Kiap reminds people. How powerful must he be then, to have escaped?
4. The Nekkini-speaking population in 2001 is well over 1,000.
5. Yali came from the Ngaing-speaking village of Sor.
6. *Koro*. An accessory usually restricted to people who have done much for their hamlet group.
7. And see Gow (2001). Reite people probably felt that I had been told enough once I had publicly and obviously recorded their stories (*patuki*).
8. It is told by old people in Reite that before pacification, hamlets did not advertise their presence by planting coconuts and betel nut in large stands anywhere near dwellings for fear of attracting sorcerers and other hostile agents.

9. Although the population of one Reite hamlet, Marpungae, counted themselves as (Catholic) Christians and had a small church in their hamlet during the time of my stay in Reite. Reite people now generally agree that both *kastom* and church 'have a basis [in truth]' (*misin igat as, kastom igat as* [T.P.]).
10. For a fuller history, see Lawrence (1964: 34–61).
11. Other changes, and perhaps even the development of the significance of the term *kastom* as a whole may also be attributed to the influence of Yali, and his followers. *Kastom* whether traditional practice or innovative ritual, was said to be the power which would bring significant change to local circumstances (*kago* [T.P.]). Hence the short-hand definition of *kastom* already employed: 'correct practice'. It is a term which potentially covers *both* new and old, because of this emphasis on effect, through precedent.
12. There are those in Reite who today claim to be still awaiting 'full independence'.
13. Peter Atat Nombo.



Photograph 2 *The Palem. A Construction of Wood, Wealth, and Garden Food*