

Papua New Guinea

Death on the River

Stories from the Sepik

Story and photographs by Michael McCoy



Vincent's uncle is dying. He lies on his side on his mattress under his mosquito net, his back to me. He is wearing a pair of brightly colored floral shorts and he appears skeletal, his skin stretched tightly over the contours of his bones. I think he may be dead already as I cannot see any movement of his breathing. Some of his relatives are gathered in the house – men, women and children – they sit, chew betelnut, smoke and gossip. They are waiting for his death but there are no overt signs of grief. When he dies they will mourn. The women will wail and moan with an eerie persistence, the men with quieter tears. But it will

not be the truly heartfelt grief that accompanies the untimely death. It will be the ritual mourning that this society requires for the death of the very old or the newborn. For the old have had their time and the newborn have not lived. It will be a mourning for its own sake.

I'd encountered this ritual mourning years previously in the Highlands of New Guinea when I had photographed, with some trepidation, the grieving that had followed the death of a newborn child. It was a cold afternoon and raining when the body of the baby, already two weeks dead, was wrapped in cloth and displayed in the center of a muddy field on a hillside. Literally hundreds of women



set up a discordant chorus of wails. I was standing behind a group of these women who, turning, noticed my presence. They all smiled widely and spontaneously before turning back to resume their lamentations.

Vincent has asked me here to photograph the old man with his relatives, images of the old man's last moments of life, images whose colors will soon stain and fade in the hot, humid climate of the Sepik lowlands.

Lifting the net and kneeling close to the old man, Vincent speaks loudly to him in their language. The old man stirs and I hear him utter a few words that I do not understand. Although the old man is his uncle, Vincent refers to him as his father,

his papa, for in Melanesian families, there is scant distinction between uncle and father, aunt and mother, cousin, brother and sister – all are equally close blood relatives. He helps the old man into a sitting position and supports him with an obvious affection and they pose there, Vincent grim and unsmiling, the old man's eyes rheumy and distant, focused elsewhere. By turn the relatives come, each assuming the same position in holding up the old man as they face the camera for the photograph.

There is something here that I find unpleasant, even distasteful. A feeling that my photographing the old man and his relatives in such a manner is demeaning to all of us here

in this house. This situation, to me, has no dignity – but should there be? Death with dignity is a subjective observation at best and in my case influenced by my own culture for I know it is only myself of those here who feels the way I do. To the others my presence is serendipitous; I know they appreciate my presence and my taking these photographs.

Throughout much of Melanesian society there are so often efforts made to deprive death of some of its finality. Bodies are kept and preserved, skulls enshrined. Across the river from Vincent's village, at Brukunawi, in the care of a chosen custodian, there is the decorated skull of one of the founders of that village, a man who had died more than fifty years previously. The skull is covered with clay formed into a semblance of life: nose, lips, shell eyes, all embellished with colored ochres in traditional patterns. Living flesh replaced by inanimate clays but in this way the dead person retains a tenuous though somewhat permanent physical presence among the living. Christian influences have now degraded such traditional practices to the extent that often the only physical bond the relatives may have with their recent dead is an image, a photograph taken in life. Poor substitute.

They help the old man settle back under his net. He speaks to Vincent in a surprisingly strong, though slurred voice. Vincent tells me he asks who I am, though the old man has known me for some years. Vincent answers him, I hear my name mentioned. The old man raises his arm, Vincent says he wants to shake hands with me. I hold his hand and he speaks in pidgin now but his words run together and I have to strain to catch them.

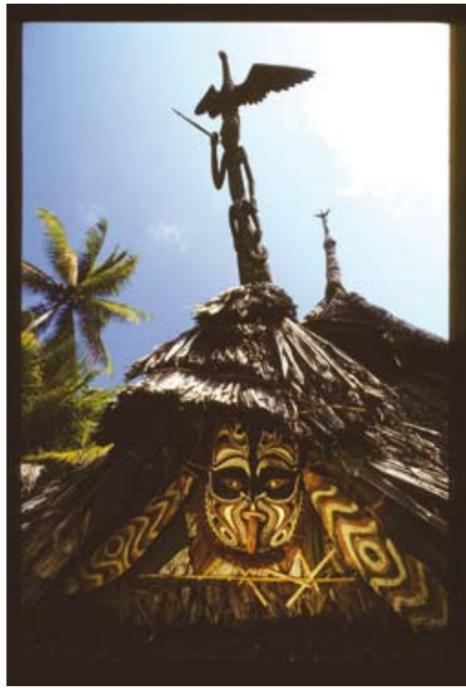
"You two are still young, but I'm

Torembai carver (page 8), and carver with skull (above), Sepik.

very old and now I'm going to die."

I get the impression he is offering an explanation for his condition, apologizing for his dying. At the end of his bed, pinned to the inside of the mosquito net, is a large poster of a smiling Jesus, a cliché Jesus with blue eyes, light brown hair, adorned in blue and lilac robes, the obligatory background of rolling green meadows, gamboling lambs and the inevitable shaft of celestial light. This Jesus' arms are outstretched, welcoming. I wonder if the picture is there for the comfort of the old man or the gathered relatives.

The old man is very old, he was born before the German missionaries and would-be colonizers came to the Sepik early last century. He picked up his German first name later in life I suppose; I don't know how he got it, I guess the missionaries baptized him in the long-ago days of his childhood. His name is Petrus, Petrus Isali. Good-bye old man I say to him in my thoughts.



Sepik house Tambaran.

Douglas has taken a liking to me. He squabbles with the other children for the privilege of carrying my tripod. No easy undertaking for him as the tripod is quite heavy and Douglas is only four or five years old. Douglas does not communicate with me by words. I talk to him and he tucks his chin into his chest, lowers his eyes – and



Canoes and locals on the Sepik River.

smiles. If there is magic in this world, it belongs to those uncomplicated smiles of childhood.

Douglas is Vincent's son, one of Vincent's many children. All children of the river, for the Sepik is everything to them, their whole world. Its muddy waters have nurtured their art and their gardens. Regulated their lives with its floods and ebbs, its rise and fall a measure of the passing of the seasons.

Death too, is not an infrequent visitor to the river, a reminder of the frailty of the human existence along its banks. Its presence is there in the swirls and eddies of the currents; in the malarial mosquitos that swarm in their millions with the coming of the rains. And death is in the red eyeshine of the crocodiles in the river at night.

Some years ago, Vincent and I were staying at Tambanum, a village in the middle Sepik. The people spoke to us in awed tones of an incident that had occurred the night before. A story that was both passionate and chilling in its implications. A canoe, traveling on the rain-swollen river, had hit a floating log and overturned. A man, his wife and their small daughter were thrown into the water and separately swept away into the darkness. The woman had been found alive that morning, huddled in the stands of wild sugarcane on the bank a little distance below the place where the canoe had capsized. The little girl, though she was not yet old enough to swim, was also alive. Frightened and cold, she was found upstream. She was adamant in her childish insistence that her father had brought her to the river's edge. The people knew of these things, they had happened before. They knew that it was the ghost of the father who had carried his daughter to safety. For his drowned body had been found several kilometres downriver.

Dawn, barely light when I go down to the river to piss. A thick mist shrouds the surface of the water, there is neither color nor horizon. Tethered canoes seemingly float on a monochromatic emptiness. There is a melancholy about the river, a primal quality and although the air is not cold, an involuntary shiver passes over me.

In the house, Roger and Jim are apparently still asleep. Vincent's wives have already left to tend their fish traps, their children are beginning to stir under their mosquito nets. On the window sill a large green frog calls, his cheerfulness a little discordant in the grayness of the morning. I find

frogs, particularly those that are large and green, immensely satisfying creatures. They have a rightness about them and I am envious of their complacency.

I like the lazy slowness of village mornings. Talking, drinking tea, procrastinating. Jim is anxious to be underway, canoeing up the river before the sun is too high but I am content to sit here for a while longer, sit in the doorway and drink more tea.

The mist begins to thin, terns wheel and swerve over the river. Felix is down by the canoes, slingshot ready. His attempts to shoot the birds are futile; they are wary and anticipate the trajectory of the hard clay balls and they



Children silhouette the setting sun on the Sepik River (above). Scarification initiation among the young men (below) signals entrance to manhood.



whirl away with an agile, easy grace.

Now the children have Vincent's tattered photoalbum out on the floor, adding the polaroid pictures I had taken of them the day before. There is a photograph of me and Vincent, I had taken it five years previously. In the heat of the afternoon we are sitting in the shade of a tree on the riverbank at Timbunke. Sweat stained and dirty,

drinking cold beer. Seeing the picture now, I remember how good the icy beer tasted on that hot afternoon. Under the picture Vincent has written: My Good Friend.

"Mike wantaim Papa", says Douglas, touching each of our images in turn.