

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE MALAGAN *CURVUNAVUNGA* FROM TABAR, NEW IRELAND PROVINCE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

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ABSTRACT

A type of malagan sculpture previously used for peace-making is described and placed within its current cultural context on Tabar, New Ireland.

KEYWORDS: Papua New Guinea, New Ireland, Tabar, malagan, art, peace-maker.

INTRODUCTION

Malagan traditions of New Ireland first came to notice of the outside world through the work of Richard Parkinson in the late 19th century (Meyer and Parkinson 1895; Parkinson 1907). Parkinson, followed by Krämer (1925), Peekel (1910, 1926-7, 1928, 1929, 1931, 1932) and Walden (Walden and Nevermann 1940) developed the rudiments of the western understanding of malagan: that it is a series of rites accompanied by an outstanding art tradition concerned with honouring and maintaining the memory of the dead. Powdermaker (1931a, 1931b, 1932, 1933), Groves (1934, 1934-5, 1936, 1936-7) and then Bühler (1933) extended descriptive knowledge with detailed studies at the village level, but it was not until Lewis's work in 1953-4 (Lewis 1969) that the social contextual meaning of malagan was explicated. More recently Brouwer (1980), Heintze (1969), and Kuchler (1985, 1987) gave detailed analysis of malagan symbolism in three locations on mainland New Ireland. Most recently Lincoln (1987) edited a body of work by Bodrogi, Clay, Heintze, Gunn, Lincoln, and Wagner that covered aspects of some of the still active malagan traditions in New Ireland.

Despite this relatively intensive documentation, there is no record of those items of malagan sculpture which were used by antagonistic clans at major peace ceremonies. This paper documents the last of these old *Curvunavunga* peace-making malagans on Tabar, the traditional home of malagan. The

original function of the malagan type is described, followed by a discussion of the subsequent use of the *Curvunavunga* sculpture found at the Obun village site.

DISCUSSION

In June 1982, on behalf of the National Museum of Papua New Guinea, the author purchased the last known remaining example of a *Curvunavunga* malagan on Tabar from Daniel Kariets of Vutigamgam clan (*matabu*) at Manggavur village, southern Tatau Island. It is now registered with the National Museum of Papua New Guinea as 82.50.7.1.

The four metre horizontal hardwood *Curvunavunga* malagan sculpture was in a badly weathered condition, but still resting on its support posts on Tirodan clan land in the centre of the old village site of Obun, 2 km east of Manggavur (Plate 1). Obun was last occupied before the Second World War, then abandoned when the inhabitants moved to Manggavur.

Although four people were able to give the author information about the *Curvunavunga* type malagan, only two locations for this malagan type were recorded and the example under discussion was the only one sighted. Around Mapua and southern Tatau Island (central in the Tabar Group) informants referred to the malagan type as *Curwunawunga* or *Curwunawungga*. In central and southern Big Tabar it was referred to variously as *Surwunawunga*, *Suruniwunawungga* or *Suruwiwunawungga*. These glosses reflect

dialect variants based upon *cur-* = reproducing or cloning malagan (lit. bed, from which many spring); and *vunavunga* = ridge-pole of a house. At Tatau village, north Tatau Island, the *Curvunavunga* type of malagan was remembered as *Watirewong* by Lomlom, now an old man over 70 years old. Other associations for this name were not known by Lomlom or any other informants.

On the basis of data provided in 1982 by informants at Manggavur village and 1983-4 at Wang village, it seems that the *Curvunavunga* malagan type was used in two phases: initially as a peace malagan, and later as a woman's malagan used to mark the completion of the initiation of young adult women into "big-woman" status.

Up until the end of 1884 Tabar was perceived as hostile to all foreigners and the inhabitants were apparently at war with the people of mainland New Ireland (Romilly 1886:42) as well as with one another. Shortly after the German annexation of New Ireland in 1884, the warships "Elisabeth", "Albatros", "Hyane", and "Marie" made the Imperial German Government's presence known in the area (see Sack and Clark 1979) and the people of Tabar were persuaded to cease fighting.

As a peace-making malagan the *Curvunavunga* assumed a significance above all other malagan types. From oral traditions recorded from Lapan Landavak at Wang village, south-

ern Big Tabar, I understand that after initial peace negotiations had taken place the necessary gardens prepared and pigs were located and counted, then the *Curvunavunga* malagan sculpture was made by sculptors commissioned by both sides. Upon completion of the sculpture, the malagan ceremony for the *Curvunavunga* was jointly operated by the two disputing clans. During the ceremony, each clan exchanged a number of lengths of *re* shell discs in order to "buy the war-dead" of the opposing clan. Both sides then brought out the heads of all those who had been killed and placed them on top of the *Curvunavunga*. This action was termed "*vavunga kita pi a mu koa ni rivirua*" [this one is to finish for all time the heads of all those killed in the fighting].

After the peace was made the *Curvunavunga* malagans remained in village centres until they disintegrated or were sold to foreigners. If sold, the support posts would be left in the ground. One immense old fig tree near Datava village on Big Tabar Island still has a pair of posts amongst its roots, firmly planted in the ground. Local people said that these support posts were placed in the ground and consolidated by using strong magic associated with *koravar* (*Zingiber* sp.) and lime. This consolidation had the effect of placing a taboo on the posts so that the relics would remain as evidence of the reconciliation for future generations.



Plate 1. A horizontal *Curvunavunga* malagan sculpture from Tabar, four metres long, hardwood.

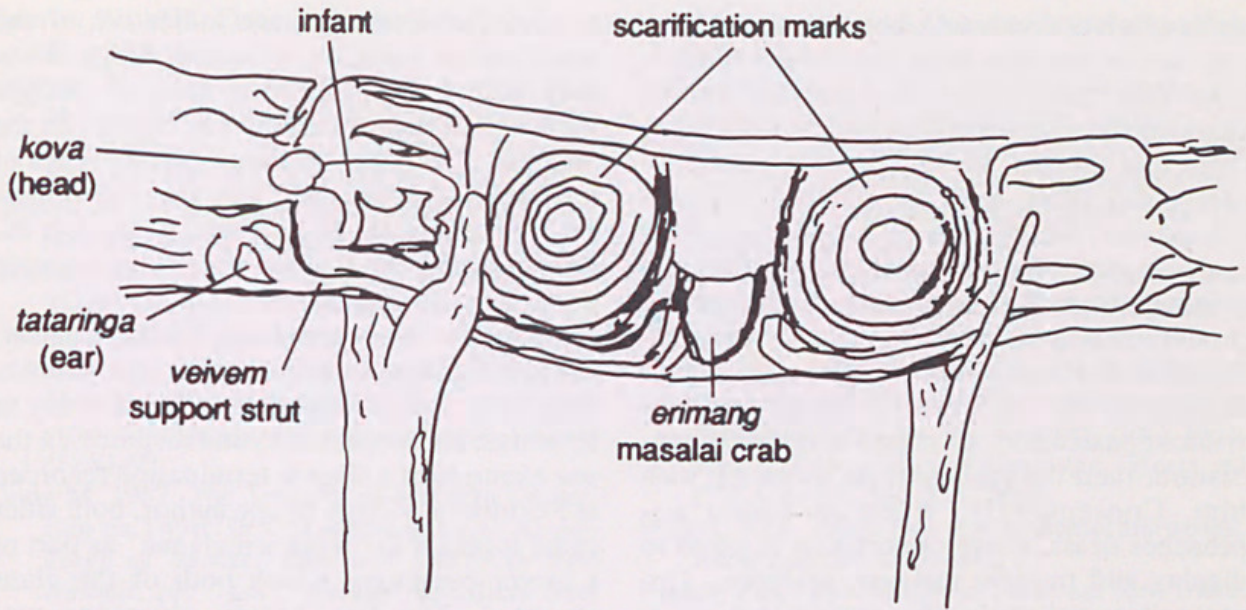


Fig. 1. Reconstructed sketch of *Curvunavunga*.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF THE OBUN *CURVUNAVUNGA*

Those malagans which remained in the village centres became subject to the processes of transfer of ownership which affect all property on Tabar. Traditions of inheritance for the *Curvunavunga* were quite different to those for normal malagans on Tabar, for the *Curvunavunga* appear to have been permanent fixtures in village centres. Normal malagan sculpture is ephemeral, for it is made according to inherited prescription which changes owners at a malagan ceremony held in graveyards. An example of the sculpture is made and displayed at the ceremony as part of the change of ownership of normal malagans, and is rarely reused (see Gunn 1987:78-83). Malagan sculpture is today either thrown into the *vunotung* "cold house" part of the graveyard after use, or else wrapped in pandanus spathe and kept in the roof of the men's house to be sold to a passing foreigner.

According to oral traditions recorded from Daniel Kariets at Manggavur, the *Curvunavunga* was owned by the first born woman of each generation and passed from one woman owner to the next (Appendix 1). The first-born girl of the next generation was confined for a period in a separate building inside the men's house area in the graveyard. She resided with 10 to 20 other children, both male and female, who were undergoing a period of seclusion (*davan*) prior to the end of puberty, a process which made them into potential community leaders. Confinement of young women has

been reported elsewhere in the literature from other parts of New Ireland. Krämer (1925:27) noted a very similar system in the Madak language area, where the confinement house was called *eandavan*. Parkinson (1907:272) reported the practice from south-western New Ireland, and Bell's report (1936) on *dafal* from the Tanga Group indicates the geographic spread of this custom. Reports of the confinement of young men as well as women on Tabar was recorded from two unrelated informants and suggests a Tabar variation on the practices found elsewhere.

When a girl who was to inherit the *Curvunavunga* malagan was about to "come out", she was escorted to the centre of the village and placed on a platform underneath the big malagan. She would then be given a piece of taro to hold in her hand and her father's classificatory sisters would come and eat from the taro. Those who ate the taro would then drape the initiate with *re* (strings of shell discs). After this section of the ceremony was completed, the shell lengths would then be draped over the malagan above her.

Following the initiation, women of the father's clan would "play" with the initiate's mother's brothers. A similar "play" between clans during initiation is still carried out today in the *beriber* cycle of ceremonies for a first-born child. In one such "play" witnessed by the author in Monun village, north Simberi Island, a large group of singing women from the child's clan climbed over the entrance into the men's house enclosure and graveyard where the men were solemnly feasting, picked

up handfuls of food and rubbed it into the faces and hair of the men from the child's father's clan. This "play" culminated with the women flogging the men with twigs and then throwing them into the sea. *Beriber* women's ceremonies today often have an attached malagan component, where there is a need to hand a malagan onto the next generation before the original owner dies. Ownership of the rights to produce malagan sculpture can only be transferred to the next generation through public display of the sculpture. If the owner dies without passing on his rights to the next generation, then the malagans he owns die with him. Consequently, when an owner approaches death, every opportunity is taken to display and transfer malagan sculpture. Opportunities include *beriber* ceremonies, a person returning home from a long absence and malagan ceremonies held by distant kinsmen.

According to the oral traditions received by the current owner of the *Curvunavunga*, the images on the malagan found at Obun (Fig. 1) are of two women lying opposed, their genitalia joined by the crab *erimang*. In this context *erimang* is one of a group of ancestral concepts called *tadar* (or variously *tandar*, *tandaro*, *tendar*) on Tabar. *Tadar* are spirit images linked to clans and strongly associated with land ownership. *Tadar* concepts will be discussed in a later paper. The author recorded a further example of *Erimang* on Tabar as *Erimang Porpor Merik*, a *tadar* crab belonging to Betet clan. This *tadar* is located close to the sea in a creek to the north near Maragat village on the north west part of Tatau Island. *Porpor merik* literally means "red flower" and is a reference to the red decoration or hair on the crab's chest. It is not known whether Betet or any related clan had a connection with the malagan, the clans, or with the land involved with the *Curvunavunga* under discussion.

An infant (sex now indeterminate) lies on the breast of the woman to the left, but due to the deteriorated condition of the carving it was not possible to determine whether a similar infant lay on the other woman's breast. Another example of *Curvunavunga* which was burnt in earlier times was described by an informant from Wang village, southern Big Tabar Island, as featuring a woman giving birth.

According to a Daniel Kariets the concentric circles surrounding the women's navels

on the *Curvunavunga* are indicative of the scarification traditions of earlier times, when each woman had her own personal design. *Veivem* side rails found top and bottom on the malagan also occur on many current types of malagan sculpture, and often are said to indicate the spears previously used to support the dead in the *bo*, the chair on which corpses were previously displayed.

Although the antecedents of the *Curvunavunga* malagan traditions are not known, smaller malagan types are still used today to terminate clan separations and disputes. In the one example of a dispute termination recorded at Pekinberiu village by the author, both sides came together to "work a malagan" as part of a larger ceremony which both of the clans operated. The conciliatory ceremony was termed *vedega* "looking at one another", and for this ceremony *kupkup ci malaga* "fountain of malagan" sculptures was used. *Kupkup ci malaga* are a quick-to-work type of malagan and are generally small figure sculptures, although other styles can also have this classification. Two malagan sculptures, together with *re* shell disc strings and pigs, were exchanged between the two big-men. The final action of *vedega* culminated with the two big-men each holding one end of a piece of pandanus, a ritual master *minguc* then cut the pandanus in two with a knife, signifying that "the argument was broken".

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APPENDIX 1

Although the mechanism for the establishment of the original ownership of the Obun *Curvunavunga* is not clear, the malagan is understood by the current owner to have been passed to the first-born daughter for four generations. However, the pattern of ownership gives more exceptions than the norm. Maso, the first owner in the second generation, had no children, so she passed it to her sister Melul. Melul had three children, two boys and a third

born girl, who unfortunately was born deaf mute and did not marry. So the *Curvunavunga* was passed out of the clan to Lagase, the first born son, to pass to his first daughter when she came of age. But Lagase fathered two sons and no daughters, so the pattern was again interrupted when he was forced to pass it out of the clan to his eldest son, Daniel Kariets. Kariets had intended to pass the ownership of this *Curvunavunga* to his eldest daughter, Matse in Katobi clan, but decided it would be better kept in the National Museum.

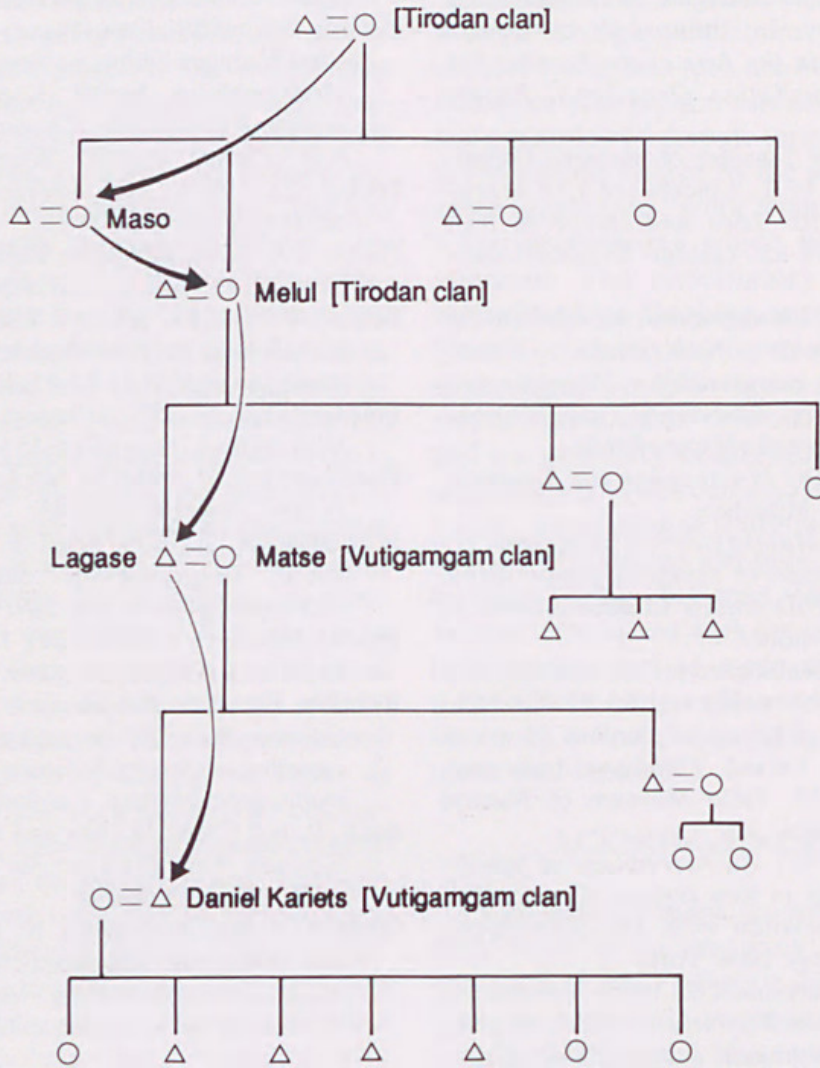


Fig. 2 Ownership history of the Obun *Curvunavunga*



Gunn, Michael. 1990. "A brief note on the Malagan Curvunavunga from Tabar, New Ireland province, Papua New Guinea." *The Beagle : Records of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory* 7(2), 83–88.

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