

A history of Huli society and settlement in the Tari region

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SUMMARY

The Huli community of the Tari region has been profoundly influenced through contact with the wider world since the 1930s. However, the trajectories of change and the basic structural properties of Huli society need to be understood within the context of much longer-term histories of transformation. This paper briefly reviews evidence drawn from a range of disciplines for the history of Huli settlement in the Tari region, and the nature of changes in Huli society both before and after contact with the colonial government.

Introduction

Available historical evidence suggests that the Huli people and their ancestors have been settled in the Tari region of Southern Highlands Province for hundreds and possibly thousands of years. This evidence is drawn from archaeology, palaeo-ecology, anthropology, linguistics and oral history. In contrast with many other areas of the New Guinea highlands, for which there is strong evidence for relatively recent and wholesale population displacement and resettlement due to warfare, mass migration and epidemics, the Tari region appears to have experienced a steady growth in population, accompanied by periodic expansion of Huli-speaking communities to adjacent areas. This paper briefly sets out some of the evidence for long-term Huli settlement in the Tari region, and for the history of transformations in Huli society. The colonial encounter and the incorporation of the Huli within the independent state of Papua New Guinea have had momentous consequences for Huli people, but need to be understood within the context of longer trends in population increase and expansion and in the evolution of the basic structures of Huli society.

To a degree that is exceptional by comparison with most other Melanesian societies, Huli society is grounded in the

landscape of the Tari region. An elaborate mythological cycle details the creation of the landscape by ancestral spirits. The origins of the larger features, such as mountains, rivers and lakes, are all recalled, as are the details of the creation or emergence of local elements of the landscape, such as small streams, particular stands of trees or shrubs, and individual rocky features. Huli understanding of their landscape extends beneath the ground to a complex web of subterranean features, 'roots' of the earth (*dindi pongone*), which guarantee the supply of fertile substance to the surface world (1-3). Many of the rituals practised by the Huli before the advent of Christianity served to link human activity in the surface world with that of spirits in the underworld. The density of connections between Huli myth and language and the surrounding landscape of the Tari region suggests a deep history of local Huli presence.

Huli origins

Linguistically, Huli-speakers are related most closely to communities to their east and north – the Engan Family languages (including Enga, Mendi, Wiru, Sau, Kewa and Ipili) that derive, together with Huli, from a common putative language known to linguists as 'proto-Engan' (4,5). Estimates of the antiquity of separation of individual modern languages from ancestral languages are notoriously inaccurate, but the degree of diversification

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among the different languages of the Engan Family indicates that Huli probably emerged as a distinct language at least several thousand years ago.

Although archaeological excavations elsewhere in Papua New Guinea have demonstrated that humans first entered the highlands as early as 26,000 years before the present (BP) (6), there have been no excavations in the Tari region of deep cave deposits that might provide direct proof for the antiquity of human presence. There is the tantalizing but as yet undated possibility of early human activity in the Tari region in the form of an archaic style of rock art. Deep within the long chamber of the cave of Kalate Egeanda, on the margins of Haeapugua Swamp, there is a series of finger-fluting impressions on the chamber walls – parallel sets of linear gouges made in soft montmilch that has since hardened. Elsewhere in the world, in southern France and southern Australia, similar ‘finger fluting’ art is presumed to date to 20,000 BP or earlier (7). Other possible evidence for early activity includes the discovery of stone artefacts such as a flaked tanged blade at Haeapugua, a class of artefact generally thought not to have been produced after about 6000 BP (8).

The archaeological and palaeo-ecological evidence for human exploitation and settlement of the Tari region is more readily dated, though it does not necessarily confirm the presence of people who were already ethnically distinct as Huli. In his detailed reconstruction of the palaeo-ecological history of the Tari Basin, Simon Haberle (9) proposes that humans were responsible for forest clearance on the basin floor as early as 21,000 years before the present. A change in climatic conditions at about 5200 BP appears to have been accompanied by a further increase in human activity in the vicinity of Haeapugua Swamp, but the first evidence for substantial clearance of forest away from the swamps dates to about 3200 BP. Subsequent increases in population and in the intensification of agricultural production are marked by a rise in *Casuarina* tree pollen at about 900 BP, and a dramatic increase in soil erosion after 240 BP (about 1660 AD). The significance of these events is explored further below. The earliest

direct evidence for human presence at Tari derives from drainage ditches on the margins of Haeapugua Swamp, where the first phase of garden activity appears after 3000 BP (8), corresponding broadly to the increase in dryland clearance and with an increase of sediments being deposited into the swamps after 3200 BP.

In summary, we can assume that humans were present in the Tari landscape from at least 21,000 BP, though their settlements probably took the form of temporary or transient hunting or pandanus collection camps until climatic conditions improved after 15,000 BP. Continuities in the form and function of drainage ditches at Haeapugua suggest that Huli ancestors, or people closely related to them, had settled permanently in the Tari region from at least 3000 BP.

Today, Huli-speaking communities are located over a wide and unbroken territory, which extends from the Pajaka Plateau in the north to the Lebani, Mogoropugua and Koroba basins in the west, the Komo Basin in the south, and the Margarima Valley and the Paundaka area in the east (see Allen and Vail, Figure 1 (10)). Huli people locate the geographic centre of their region in the south of the central Tari Basin, around the former ritual site of Bebenite (now the location of Dauli Teachers College). A Huli sense of cartography revolves around this ‘true Huli’ (*Huli ore*) point. To the north and east lie the lands of the *Obena* (Enga, Ipili, Mendi), to the south are the *Dugube* (Papuan Plateau communities), and to the west are the *Duna* (11). The history of Huli settlement, insofar as it can be traced back in time, is one of expansion from the Tari Basin towards these outlying areas.

Approximately 80,000 people speak the Huli language. Although Huli people voice a sense of ethnic identity unusual in so large a community, reflecting a common language and shared cultural values and practices, most Huli people resident in the borderlands adjacent to other language groups are bilingual or even trilingual. Huli language is intelligible throughout Huli territory, although two distinct dialects have been identified by missionary linguist Gabriel Lomas (12): a western dialect

in the Pureni, Koroba, Mogoropugua and Yaluba areas and an eastern dialect spoken in those areas east of the Tagali River, but also in the Komo and Paijaka areas. Differences between the two dialects are slight, and appear to reflect the influence of contact with different neighbouring languages to the west and east.

Adoption of sweet potato

The engines of agricultural production that have fuelled the outward expansion of the Huli are the highly fertile alluvial and colluvial plains of the central Tari Basin and the rich margins of the large peaty swamps such as Haeapugua, and Dalipugua in the Koroba Basin (13,14). While these zones are likely to have been amongst the first areas exploited agriculturally, probably in the form of mixed gardens dominated by taro, sugarcane and bananas, they were much more intensively gardened after the arrival in the New Guinea highlands of the South American crop, sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), an event which current evidence places during the 17th century. The significantly higher productivity of this new crop staple, together with its tolerance of poorer, drier soils, and its value as prime fodder for domesticated pigs, is thought to have made possible an 'Ipomoean' revolution in agricultural intensification across the valleys of the Central Highlands of New Guinea and, consequently, a dramatic increase in population (15,16).

There are several lines of evidence for a post-sweet potato increase in population in the Tari region. The significant increase in soil erosion registered in swamp deposits at Haeapugua after about 1660 AD indicates extensive clearance of forest, much of it in poor soil environments such as the Paijaka Plateau. The remarkable depth, internal consistency and coherence of Huli oral history also provide us with an unusual degree of access to the dynamism of post-sweet potato Huli society. At Haeapugua, the centre of the swamp was systematically drained for the first time in the second half of the 19th century, to provide a vast new area for the production of sweet potato (17). Much of this new area under sweet potato was surplus to human consumption requirements, and was grown to support an increase in local pig herds. Access

to the richest environments, such as the Haeapugua swamp margins, became increasingly contested. A long history of stability in parish boundaries and land ownership at Haeapugua was disrupted by a series of wars starting in about the 1830s, in which the large Tani clan, together with other clans of the Yari phratry, expanded its holdings at the expense of neighbouring clans. Members of clans such as Bogorali, Tambaruma and Poro were dispersed and forced into exile in distant valleys. Within Tani parish, land holdings then fragmented into successively smaller blocks as the population continued to increase (8).

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, this pattern of expansion, often aggressive in character, was repeated across the population centres in the central Tari and Haeapugua basins, resulting in the movements of large numbers of people to more marginal valleys, such as Komo, Margarima and Benalia. Small Huli populations were apparently present at all of these locations well before the adoption of sweet potato, but these pioneer settlements were massively augmented and consolidated only from the nineteenth century. In particular, poor soil environments, such as the Paijaka Plateau, and higher altitude settlements, such as the Lebani Valley, were first densely settled with sweet potato as the primary staple, exploiting the new crop's greater tolerance of higher altitudes and poorer soils. The communities of these settlements along the margins of the Huli territory still draw a distinction between original settler clans and other, post-sweet potato immigrant clans, whose members recall their genealogical links to, and recall their historical origins in, the central Tari or Haeapugua basins.

Huli social organization allows for considerable flexibility in the movement of people, which has historically facilitated the redistribution of the population across the landscape to accommodate increases in population pressure. A cognatic system of residence allows individuals to claim rights to land through connections to both male and female ancestors, and many individuals (the majority of them men) maintain rights to land and to residence in more than one parish, or clan territory (1,18). Consequently, a

community resident in any given parish will often be composed of large numbers of non-agnatic cognates (*yamuwini*), that is, people whose right to reside in the parish is claimed through links to female ancestors of the *tene* (the original or founding clan of the parish), as well as those *tene* residents whose rights derive from agnatic ties (to male ancestors of the founding clan only). Over time, disputes about land under this complex system of rights has generated a remarkable depth to Huli genealogies, which can extend beyond 20 generations and which provide an exceptional framework for the reconstruction of recent Huli history.

In addition to the changes in the demography and distribution of the Huli population associated with the adoption of sweet potato, there were significant changes in the nature and structure of Huli society. Previously, Huli society appears to have been dominated by hereditary leaders, headmen (*agali haguene*) who were the eldest sons of eldest sons in the senior lineage of a clan or subclan. These individuals were both religious and secular leaders, coordinating fertility rituals on behalf of their group and exercising a degree of control over the group's land. In a process that may already have been underway, but that was certainly hastened by the adoption of sweet potato and the increase in pig production, the various functions of these leaders came to be dispersed amongst a wider group of individuals (almost all of them men). In addition to the *agali haguene*, who retained a role that was increasingly symbolic, individuals could now aspire to a range of different positions, as wealthy men (*agali homogo*) or women (*wali homogo*), fight leaders (*wai biaga*), orators (*bi laga*) or mediators (*dombenali*).

This shift from ascribed to achieved forms of leadership was reflected in changes in the nature of Huli religion and exchange practices. Ritual had previously been dominated by the hereditary headmen and by a small core of ritual experts (*gebeali*), also drawn from specific lineages in certain clans. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, these roles were assumed by a larger number of ritual performers engaged in new ceremonies. New rituals, such as the *tege pulu*, often involved

spells and other practices imported from neighbouring groups and reworked to meet Huli needs. Where attendance at ritual performances had previously been restricted to very limited categories of people – consisting almost entirely of men – these new rituals were open to the general public, including women, and incorporated a novel element of inter-group competition involving the ceremonial exchange and slaughter of pigs. Pigs seem to have been transacted and consumed in increasing numbers in both ritual and secular contexts. On the basis of oral historical accounts, inflation was evident in the payments made for brides and for compensation after warfare, a process that has continued to the present. The proliferation of conflicts over land and increasing contact and trade with neighbouring communities further augmented the overall volume of transactions involving pigs (and, in a feedback cycle, the demand for more pigs and thus further pressure on land).

One source of impetus for these new rituals and for the increasing use of pigs in ceremonies was the Huli perception of an accelerating decline in the fertility of the land and also in the physical and moral constitution of Huli people. A general belief in the decline of land and society had always been fundamental to Huli conceptions of their universe, but it assumed a new significance in the period immediately before and during the first colonial encounters in the 1930s. A series of epidemics, of which the most devastating was perhaps the dysentery epidemic of 1945, and successive famines induced by combinations of too much or too little rain, ravaged the Tari population around the beginning of the 20th century (19). Just as they responded to individual sicknesses, the Huli response to this 'universal' illness took the form of ritual experimentation (2).

On the grandest scale, these new rituals reflected Huli beliefs in an earth-renewing event described as the 'time of darkness' (*mbingi*), a renewal of the 'earth's skin' which had the potential either to eradicate all life or to usher in a new era of fertility and plenty (3). The original form of this time of darkness was almost certainly the massive eruption of the Long Island volcano off the north coast of mainland New Guinea in 1665. A huge plume

of fine volcanic ash spread from Long Island as far west as the Tari Basin and blocked, or significantly reduced, the sun's light for a number of days (20). The ash that fell out of the cloud to lightly cover the Tari landscape almost certainly provided mineral nutrients to plants, including sweet potato and other food crops, that resulted in noticeable increases in yields after the event and a reversal, if temporarily, of the decline in the fertility of the land. Huli attempts to provoke another time of darkness have taken several forms, including the ritual sacrifice of pigs and bloodletting from young boys (the *bayabaya* ritual) described by Glasse (19) and, more recently, the construction of the Damene Cultural Centre at Tari Station (2) and the ready acceptance of apocalyptic visions of Christian revivalist movements (21,22).

Colonial period

Although the Huli had long maintained an extensive regional network of trading contacts, and Huli traders travelled for long distances in all directions beyond the last Huli settlements, the first recorded contact between Huli people and Europeans took place in November 1934, when two mining prospectors, Jack and Tom Fox, passed through Huli territory from west to east. Their passage resulted in a series of bloody clashes in which approximately 50 Huli were killed, and many others were injured, as they sought to prevent the entry to their parish lands of the miners, who were widely regarded as malevolent spirits of the dead (23).

Only months later, two Territory of Papua patrol officers, Jack Hides and Jim O'Malley, travelled across the eastern portion of Huli territory (24). Regular patrolling of the Tari region from the newly established patrol post at Lake Kutubu continued during the late 1930s, and the large Hagen-Sepik patrol set up a base camp at Hoyabia in the Tari Basin during May-June 1938 (25), but no permanent colonial outpost was established before the Second World War. The war interrupted patrolling and there were only sporadic contacts between ANGAU administration patrols and the Tari Basin during the 1940s. It was during this period that an epidemic of severe dysentery spread west into the Tari area and killed an unknown number of people.

After an abortive attempt to establish a patrol post in the Tari Basin in 1951, government patrol officers returned in 1952 and constructed the first permanent post at Lumulumu (later Tari Station) in the Central Tari Basin. Over the next decade the government gradually extended its zone of control outwards from this point, setting up a network of smaller police posts in order to eliminate tribal warfare by imprisoning fight leaders. Warriors from a battle in the Haeapugua Basin that was interrupted by patrol officers were used as prison labour to build the first airstrip at Tari Station. Government officers also embarked on an ambitious program of road-building throughout the Tari region from 1953, requiring local residents to work on sections of road within their parishes. Full administrative control over the Tari region was finally declared in 1961.

From missionaries to mining

Missionaries from a range of different Christian denominations closely followed the arrival of the colonial administration. By 1956, the Unevangelized Fields Mission (now the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea), the Catholic Church, the Methodist Overseas Mission (now the Uniting Church) and the Seventh Day Adventists had all established themselves in and around Tari Station. As the surrounding regions were brought under government control, these missions quickly set up posts throughout Huli territory, where they provided much of the infrastructure and personnel for education and health services.

Few opportunities for wage employment existed within the Tari region, and Huli men began to leave their territory in large numbers to work on the Highlands Labour Scheme, a government-administered program that recruited labour for coastal and island plantations. With the establishment of the Local Government Council at Tari in 1964, and of the Provincial Government for Southern Highlands Province in 1980, Huli were quickly drawn into new political processes. However, the lack of reliable road access to the local centres of Mendi and Mount Hagen hampered most efforts at economic development in the Tari region until the completion in 1981 of an all-weather extension of the Highlands

Highway from Mendi to Tari by the Australian Army. Tari's distance from major markets has continued to restrict local economic development, although smallholder coffee, introduced as early as 1961, has periodically provided benefits to a wide cross-section of the community. More localized forms of development have included cattle projects and tourism.

A more radical, but not necessarily more beneficial, form of development has recently emerged in the form of large-scale mineral resource projects. Huli workers had been employed at the distant Ok Tedi mine in neighbouring Western Province and were familiar with at least some of the operations of the mining, oil and gas exploration ventures which were initiated closer to home during the 1980s. Shortly after the mining corporation CRA began exploration for alluvial gold at Mt Kare in 1986, a gold rush ensued which involved thousands of Huli, as well as other Papua New Guineans (26,27). A boom-time logic of consumption resulted in few long-term benefits and substantial negative impacts amongst local communities. More orderly but no less contentious subsequent projects where Huli have contested land ownership include the Hides Gasfield in the Hanimu Valley and, further afield but still of interest to Huli claimants, the Kutubu Petroleum Project to the southeast and the Porgera Gold Mine to the north.

A collapse in law and order has accompanied the minerals boom in the Tari region, as in many other parts of Papua New Guinea. Under the threat of government retaliation, clan wars were temporarily suspended from about 1960 but their underlying causes had not been forgotten. By the mid-1980s, clan warfare had re-emerged throughout the Tari region and, by 1991, home-made shotguns and factory-made combat rifles had been introduced to Huli battles. Wars and the banditry that has accompanied the breakdown of law and order have periodically closed the Highlands Highway and occasionally forced the closure of Tari Station. These uncertain conditions have been further exacerbated by failures at the provincial government level that have resulted in the frequent delay or suspension of basic

government services and supplies to Tari. Few Huli would contemplate a return to the past, but the nature and pace of change over the past half-century have done little to promote a sense of security or certainty about the future.

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