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Promised Land

Return to Ok Tedi

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When I first began research among the Yonggom people on the Ok Tedi River a decade ago, local histories were mapped onto the landscape, with places metonymically representing important experiences in a person's life. Walking through the rainforest, people would point out the places where they had killed a pig, camped or shared a meal. A trip through the forest was also an occasion to learn about deceased members of the community: where they had made a garden, which trees they had planted, where they were buried. These memories were closely linked to the places where the events transpired. After the death of a close relative or friend, people sometimes refused to leave the village and enter the forest where memories of the deceased continued to echo.

When I asked people to tell me stories about their lives the narratives were also spatially organized: where they were born, where they had lived, where they got married. It was difficult to record life histories, in part because of the lack of a well-developed narrative 'I', but also because events widely separated in time were presented sequentially when they occurred at the same place. People envisioned their lives as a series of movements across the landscape. Memories of the past were linked together like campsites along a trail, organized by physical proximity rather than chronological sequence.

For ten years I have worked with the Yonggom as an ethnographer interested in sorcery, magic and ritual, as an activist critical of the policies and practices of the Ok Tedi mine, as a consultant carrying out a social impact study and as an adviser to the law firm Slater & Gordon, which represented the people of the Ok Tedi and Fly rivers in their landmark lawsuit against BHP, majority shareholder and managing partner in the Ok Tedi mine. Recently I realized, while visiting the area in order to examine how changes in the natural landscape have affected Yonggom cosmology, that my work had come full circle.

Space and Time

Walking through the rainforest around Ok Tedi with a friend it is now difficult to locate places where we once shared a meal or went swimming. Where towering trees once stood there are only ghostly tree trunks, and the creeks have all been buried by sand. This transformation of the landscape not only produces spatial disorientation, it affects memories of the past. A young woman who remembered making sago as a teenager with my wife expressed her dismay that the sago swamp where they worked together was now dried up and filled with sand. The pollution from the Ok Tedi mine has caused memories once anchored by the landscape to lose their moorings.

In collecting life histories and listening to people talk this year, I observed a shift in how they represent their experience. The Yonggom increasingly organize their accounts of the past in chronological sequence. Some of these chronologies were whispered furtively to me (much the way I was once told magic words): the date the first missionaries arrived, the year the village was established, when production began at the mine. For the first time many people presented their life histories in chronological order. Other life histories began by referring to place, but shifted to a chronological framework starting with 1984, the year that a cyanide tap at the mine was left open overnight, killing thousands of fish, crocodiles, turtles and other marine animals—which the Yonggom gathered up and ate.



Sandbanks on the Ok Tedi River, 1996, photo Stuart Kirsch

As Andok Yang, a woman in her mid-fifties, told me: 'Before the mine, we had plenty of food. We inherited gardens along the river from our parents. Bananas and taro from the gardens fed our family. Game was plentiful and we ate wild pig, cassowary and cuscus meat. The river was clear and it was easy to catch fish and prawns. But by 1984 our lives had changed. The river became muddy and the fish and prawns died. At the same time, the sandbanks that later covered our gardens began to form. By 1986 the plants and trees along the river began to die. Their leaves turned yellow and fell off. Gradually the effects of the mine spread into the swamps where our sago palms grow and into the surrounding forest as well. The creeks filled with mud, killing the sago trees. The sand banks along the river grew higher. Today it is hard to find sago. There are no fish in the river and the turtles no longer come to lay their eggs. The animals have all gone away and we do not know where they are living. I worry about the future: will we continue to face these problems or will the mine clean up the river?'

This shift from spatial to temporal representation of experience is one of the conceptual consequences of the environmental degradation caused by the mine. It implies a fundamental change in how the Yonggom view their relationship with the natural world. For

the Yonggom the natural and social worlds once overlapped in their shared use of the landscape. With references to past events increasingly organized by abstract chronologies, Yonggom experience is becoming detached from the natural landscape. This separation of time and space places new emphasis on the ontological differences between people and nature.

Calendars and Maps

This recent interest in chronologies dovetails with the attention now paid to the coming millenium by Yonggom members of an evangelical Christian sect. Here chronologies take on an exaggerated significance and an arbitrary moment in time—the year 2000—has come to be seen as having efficacious power. The Yonggom have also tried to perpetuate their spatial understanding of the world by making maps which are invested with a kind of mystical or truth value. People showed me three different maps during my recent visit to the area.

The first was made by a Yonggom man from Kawangtet village in Irian Jaya. He has lived in one of the refugee camps along the border since 1984. On the upper half of a large sheet of paper he had drawn a map of West Papua, including the major rivers and cities, as well as the Yonggom villages along the Muyu River, a tributary of the Digul. Captions indicated several significant sacred sites in Yonggom territory, including the places where Jesus was crucified and later resurrected. Lines emanating from the Muyu River were drawn down the page, pointing to each of the continents in a map of the world, illustrating the Yonggom myth about the peopling of the earth. He explained that after Jesus was crucified all the nations of the world obtained their independence except for West Papua. Given their geographic centrality in the history of the world, it was wrong for them to still be living under Indonesian rule.

The second map was shown to me by a neighbour in Dome village. Yakopa Wopkim grew up in Yeremot village west of the border. Later she moved to Kombut village with her family, where she lived until she married Yomborom, who came from a village to the

east. He gave her parents ten cowrie shells, twelve lengths of nassa shells and some tobacco, and the couple moved to Dimin village. Their first daughter was born there, while their other children were born after the couple moved yet again, to Dome village on the Ok Tedi. Yomborom died after their last child was born and Yakopa married again several years later, at the time when 'everything along the river began to change'. Her second marriage proved difficult, as her new husband had another wife. He died several years later and she adopted a small girl to live with her. Today she finds it difficult to provide enough food for the two of them: 'Sometimes I am able to find enough sago and bananas to feed us, but other times I come back to the house with an empty string bag and we go to sleep hungry.'

As I was leaving the village Yakopa showed me a sketch map of the trails linking the different villages in which she has lived. Even though she does not know how to read, she considered the map important enough to carry in her string bag and share with me. I had spent the previous month collecting life histories from women, including Yakopa's stories. Showing me this map was another way of telling me who she was, complementing the narrative version of her biography. The map depicting the important places in her life might be compared to an album of photographs from one's childhood.

The last map illustrated the historical configuration of clan boundaries in the lower Ok Tedi and was made to support a claim in a case at the district land court. Each of these maps uses new technologies of cartography and writing while, at the same time, drawing on the old principle of the spatial ordering of past experience. The maps are both representative of and divorced from the natural world. In these new contexts the past becomes a valuable resource precisely because of its separation from the nature.

The Nature of Communication

Yonggom knowledge about the environment is structured by communication between society and the natural world. For them nature is an endless source of information; birds, for instance, communicate the

time of day by their calls and movements, the seasons by their appetite for ripening fruits and the weather patterns by their migrations during periods of drought. Birds can signal impending misfortune by appearing at the wrong place and time: an owl calling in the village at night means that someone may be attacked by a sorcerer. Other birds say their own names or speak in Yonggom language, like the large-tailed nightjar known as *on dokdok*, which calls out 'dokdok, dokdok, dokdok' or the bird the Yonggom call *on kam*, which calls out 'kwi, kwi, kwi' meaning 'like that, like that, do it like that'.

Other creatures also communicate with the Yonggom: cicadas crying out just before dusk tell people in the bush to hurry home. Meteorological events may also portend social opportunities or problems—for example, the luminous sunset known as *deparon*, named after a marsupial with golden fur, warns of death. The appearance of animals in dreams also provides insight into future possibilities. Catching a turtle in a dream means that a woman will soon marry into one's household. Pigs and cassowaries have inverse relationships with men and women in the dream world: a pig's appearance means that a man is coming to the village, whereas to dream of a woman visiting signals the opportunity to set a trap for cassowaries.

Such signs do more than communicate information about significant natural events, such as rising rivers or propitious times to plant. They also provide information of social significance: warnings, prophecies and opportunities. The laws governing nature are also seen to guide human affairs.

Communication between nature and the Yonggom works both ways. The Yonggom use magic spells to convey their intentions and desires to the natural world. A Yonggom spell for fishing addresses the fish directly:

<i>on yip, ku ne doberan ki</i>	you fish, I am waiting
<i>kirot, yaro minime!</i>	quickly, you must come!
<i>minip kop</i>	all of you come
<i>monbe, monbore</i>	shoot, I am shooting
<i>de ambioom wana</i>	and then [I am] going home

But what happens when there are no longer any fish in the river, no birds overhead and no game near by, as is the case along the Ok Tedi River today? The natural world has grown increasingly quiet and the conversations that the Yonggom once had with the creatures around them have ceased.

Yonggom ritual and myth is populated by birds, fish and other animals. But symbolism is only a powerful repository of meaning when the referents are familiar. With the loss of exposure to these animals in their natural habitat, the Yonggom myths and rituals are losing their capacity to communicate insights about the human condition and solve dilemmas that the people face. Under such circumstances myth degenerates to the level of amusing folktales and ritual becomes something that tricks people rather than enlightens them. Nature is the vocabulary of Yonggom myth, ritual and religion, but because of the environmental impact of the Ok Tedi mine, Yonggom ritual is in danger of becoming a dead language, understood by no-one.

From Productivity to Loss

In the past the Yonggom subsistence economy was based on their knowledge of the properties of a large number of plant and animal species. They traded with their neighbours, but were largely self-sufficient. As the Yonggom became more active participants in the world economic system, they began trading their labour as well as garden, forest and riverine products for commodities produced elsewhere. Yet until recently they were still largely reliant upon their natural resources for subsistence.

This dimension of the Yonggom relationship with the natural world has been transformed in two ways. First, they are haunted by fears of environmental collapse, their sense that the rules governing the natural environment are no longer in effect. In addition to the visible problems caused by the mine—the dead trees, the river dried up and full of mud, the disappearance of fish, birds and other animals—the Yonggom also talk about a variety of other changes that they perceive in the world around them. The sun has become hotter and burns their skin, the rainy season lasts longer, the stars

and the moon are no longer as bright in the night sky, the rains harm their gardens and the wind has become abrasive. The reliability of the natural environment is subject to question and they have lost their faith in its ability to sustain them.

The mine also creates new forms of risk.¹ The long-term effects of releasing heavy metals into an environmental system as complex as the Fly River are largely unknown. To assess the consequences of pollutants not visible to the naked eye, the Yonggom must rely on the judgement of the very scientists responsible for the problem. When personnel from the Ok Tedi mine tell the Yonggom that the water from the river is safe to drink and that the few remaining fish in their creeks may be consumed, they are effectively counselling them not to trust their own senses. The Yonggom do not understand how the various pollutants produced by the mine may be transported through the air, water and ground, and where the lines of safety can be drawn. Their perceptions of environmental disaster are closely linked to their difficulty in assessing potential dangers.

The second change is that their productivity is no longer directly linked to that of the physical environment. The largest source of income among the Yonggom is cash payments for the mine's impact on their river and forests. These payments will continue throughout the fifteen-year life span of the mine. The compensation they receive does not result from the use of their land and resources, but from the destruction of its productive capacity. Thus, their natural environment is no longer a site of productivity, but the reverse—a scene of loss. It no longer provides them with security, but instead confronts them with new, indecipherable risks.

Future Thoughts

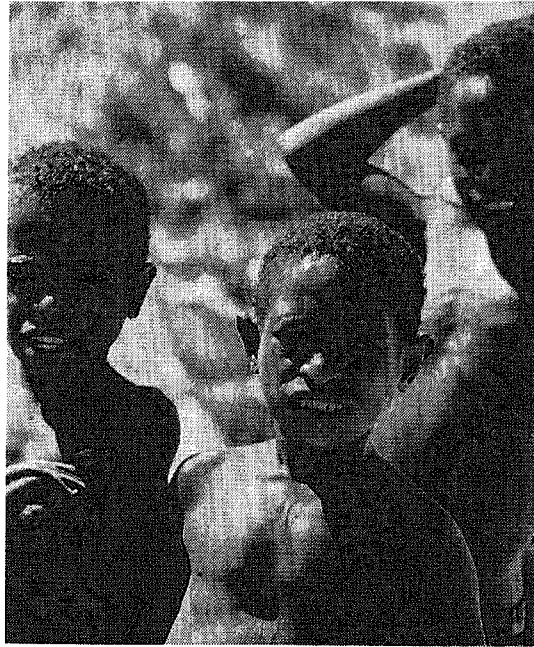
Environmental degradation is not the only force fuelling Yonggom alienation from the natural world. Urban migration, wage labour, Christianity and emerging national consciousness all contribute to the shift as well. These processes have parallels elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, including areas not affected by large-scale resource extraction projects. Nevertheless, the mine's impact on the Yonggom has clearly pushed them further and faster in this direction.

The out-of-court settlement of the lawsuit against BHP in June of this year achieved much of what was sought by the people of the Ok Tedi and Fly rivers. BHP and Ok Tedi Mining are legally obligated to implement a tailings containment program, to rehabilitate the impacted land and forest along the river and to compensate the peoples of the affected area. The deal still has some rough edges, however, as the final engineering studies are incomplete, raising questions about the economic feasibility of the plan to pipe tailings from the mine in the mountains to a lowland catchment area, as well as concerns about the potential for problems caused by acid rock mine drainage. In addition, negotiations on the implementation of the A\$38 million compensation package for the people of the lower Ok Tedi River, who have suffered the greatest impact on their environment, only began in earnest in late October 1996.

Nevertheless, many people hope that the settlement will be a model for other mining projects in Papua New Guinea, all of which currently dump their tailings and other waste material directly into nearby rivers or the sea. The combined threat of legal action, media scrutiny and public criticism could inaugurate a new era for mining projects in PNG and elsewhere, prompting commitment to higher levels of environmental protection and forcing multinational corporations to adhere to the same standards abroad as they do at home.

Despite their political and legal achievements, the Yonggom must still cope with the effects of the mine on their natural environment. As a result, they increasingly think about human experience in chronological and calendrical terms. They are contemplating the significance of the millennium; they are making maps with sacred, political, legal and self-representational agendas; they have set aside their magic spells and many of their rituals; unable to assess the risks produced by the mine, they have lost confidence in the laws governing the natural world; and they have seen their environment shift from a scene of productivity to one of loss.

What are the social costs of this movement away from the natural world? My friends talked to me about their concern for the fate of *aman dana*, the children of the future. In my field notes I scribbled comments about the generation in between, who reminded me of the 'lost boys' of *Peter Pan*—they have not been prepared for



Yonggom children, Ok Tedi, 1996, photo Stuart Kirsch

the life of their parents, nor have they been given the tools, most notably education, for successful integration into urban Papua New Guinea. Elders lament the fact that today's youth are growing up without knowing how to hunt and fish, to make string bags from tree bark or build houses without nails and sawn timber. The Yonggom have grown accustomed to eating rice and tinned mackerel and many young people resist the hard labour of gardening and making sago. But one day the mine will close, leaving them with a past to which they cannot return and an uncertain future.

NOTES

- 1 See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Sage, London, 1992).