

The Gebeanda: A Sacred Cave Ritual

Traditional Religion
among the Huli
of the Southern Highlands

Introduction

During the 1976-77 Christmas holidays I interviewed Walubu Wangiyu, a Gebeali, and this paper is the result of that interview. Although I shall do my best to present as much information as I can, I must admit that the description may be a little sketchy. It is possible that some things may have been forgotten or omitted because of lack of time, or because my informant did not want me or others to hear certain details or to have other knowledge of Huli ritual.

I have divided the testimony into three parts. They are first, the *gebeanda*, the place of worship; second, the *gebeali*, the person or persons involved in worshipping on behalf of the community; and third, the ceremony itself. I will write down the translated information as it is on the tape and then go through each of the three points I have mentioned and analyse them and define some of the meaning wherever possible.

The Testimony of Wangiyu

Gebeanda: The Sacred Cave

“This place is not like any other place for worshipping you can imagine. It is the most sacred place we Huli can ever think of from the beginning. There is no other worshipping place which I can think of as sacred as this. This idea of *gebeanda* being the most sacred has been passed on to us from the man whose name I am not allowed to mention. If I do mention his name something which is terribly dangerous can take place. That *gebeanda* is a very dangerous place.

Many things which are dangerous can take place if the laws of the *gebeanda* are not obeyed or carried out in the usual expected manner. No ordinary person is allowed to go in there or even near it. I have now broken one of the laws by even mentioning the name of the place for no reason. If you and I were now living back in my days, we would no doubt face something terribly dangerous. No domesticated animal could go in there. If a pig went in there that pig would be sacrificed to the owner of the place. If a dog went in, then the owner of the dog had to sacrifice a pig instead through a person whom I am going to talk about later. No child would go in there because every child would be told about how dangerous that place is.

“When looked at from outside the *gebeanda* is just like a bush area but there are many things inside. There are houses built in different shapes. These houses are built around the cave which is kept decorated with red paint and tree oil at all times. There are different kinds of plants inside. Some of these plants cannot be seen by ordinary people or at any other places. There are stones which are strange to us. One of the stones is quite different from the rest. This particular one has mouth, eyes, nose, almost like a face. When I say stones, don't think that they are stones like those we have around here. No. They are not like these. They are very different; they have smooth faces.

“The cave I mentioned is quite deep but no-one can tell how deep it is. None of the persons involved in worshipping would be allowed to go far into the cave, because no-one would know what the Person (man) living in the cave would be doing at that particular time. Whenever a person involved in worshipping went in there he would take a fire stick and burn a piece of meat on it. When the Person living in the cave smelled the meat He would know that the people want him for some reasons. So He would come out to discover what the people want Him for. He would come out in the form of wind. When He came out a very strong wind would be coming from the cave shaking the things around it. This would not be noticed by ordinary people outside the *gebeanda*. Once the wind blew and stopped, those men waiting would know that the Person is among them. Then the whole ritual process would be under way.

The Gebeali: Sacred Mediators

“*Gebeali* is the man or a group of men involved in acting as mediators between us the people and the One we worship there in the *gebeanda*. These men would not just go there whenever they wanted. They would go there at crucial times. When the leader set his food at the entrance of the sacred place, four items would accompany him. These items would be local oil, a set or sets of kina shells, red paint and a pig or pigs. These men would go there and worship on behalf of us, the people of this community. These men

would be there with those things whenever the community felt it was necessary. The reasons would be that the Person whom we worshipped may have been disappointed by any one of us for doing or saying things which may not be pleasing to Him. We also would worship Him to obtain protection against our enemies or to gain a blessing for our people and our environment. Those men (*gebeali*) were regarded as very important and were respected very highly by the whole community. If someone opposed or fought one of these men everyone in the whole community would be against that person and force him to pay two or three pigs to the *gebeali*.

“In a number of cases people were killed by the members of the community when they refused to pay the *gebeali*. One of the men killed was my cousin. We did that because we thought the *gebeali* might punish us for breaking one of the rules in worshipping. If he did that it would mean the destruction of our lives.

“For our sake the *gebeali* did not live the enjoyable life we were living. The freedom of his life was limited; he would not participate in certain activities of his life. He would not get involved in sexual intercourse for a certain period of time both before and after entering the sacred place. He would not eat certain types of food. He would not stay with certain people no matter how much he loved them. Those men suffered many deprivations of life just for our sake.

The Ceremony

“First of all clansmen would come together to discuss matters concerning the ceremony. Here they would decide who would be new *gebeali* and who would bring oil, kina shells, red paint and piglets and so on. They would build new huts and repair old ones if they were not thought to be in good condition, both around and inside the *gebeanda*. Once they felt the area was neat and tidy they would prepare for pig killings.

“Just a day or two before the pig killings, we men would sing and dance around the *gebeanda*. This would be the time when the new *gebeali* would be chosen and identified by the existing *gebeali*. On this day some piglets would be killed for the One we worship and His friends (spirits). These piglets would be eaten by the *gebeali*, and the One we worship and His friends alone. We would kill piglets for that Person before we had our own so that this Person could watch for any dangers while we were eating our pig meat. If we all ate the meat at the same time there would be no one to protect us from our enemies and jealous spirits around the place. In the morning the pig killings would take place. There would be two pig killings taking place on the same day. The meat from the smaller one would not be eaten by the ordinary people; no meat from this would be offered to other place spirits who have no relationship with the One for whom we have the ceremony. Anyone could take part in eating the meat

from the bigger pig killing (up to 200 pigs). While the bigger one took place on one day only, the smaller one would occur on several days.

“To conclude the ceremony these *gebealis* would paint themselves inside the *gebeanda* with a mixture of oil, red paint and charcoal from the fire. Then they would come out to sing and dance around the *gebeanda* and remind the Person to meet the demands we may have made. If there was no mistake in that ceremony, then we would begin to live a very successful life again until there was a need for another ceremony. If everyone cooperated and lived according to the rules of the *gebeanda* then the next ceremony may be held only twenty or thirty years later. For this reason we would be expected to live and do things which would be pleasing and acceptable to the One we worship. Those in authority would make sure no rule was broken by any member of the community; they would be watchful for the enemy who might come and spoil our relationship with the One we worship all the time.

Well, I will end my testimony here now.”

Comments on Wangiyu's Testimony

The *Gebeanda*

From Wangiyu's testimony regarding the *gebeanda* we understand that the *gebeanda* is the most sacred place long known to the Huli. There are many other objects or place spirits they used to worship but I have never heard them speak of any one of these being as powerful as the one they worshipped in the *gebeanda*. Nor have I heard of their places being considered as sacred as the *gebeanda*. It is quite obvious that the One they worshipped in the *gebeanda* was superior to other spirits they worshipped in the area. The Huli believed that the One in the *gebeanda* was the most feared and powerful One. They believed that this particular One had power over everything including the other place spirits they worshipped. The fear of this particular One was so great that everybody made sure that he lived according to the way he was expected to live.

There were laws set before the people to obey. These laws were more respected than the laws of our country or even the ten commandments, because whatever directions were contained in these laws were 'must' ones not 'shall' ones. Every single person would live by these laws. They were afraid that any of these laws might be broken accidentally. They believed that if some one broke any of these laws, that Person could destroy everything belonging to him or her, including his or her own life. In order to secure everything, they had to live by the law. Even if an animal broke one of the laws by going into the *gebeanda*, they had to sacrifice a pig to that Person lest He destroy crops or lives.

The Gebeali

The *gebeali* were a group of men who acted as mediators between the One they worshipped and the people themselves. These men were very highly respected and protected. The whole community would make sure that these men were not hurt by anyone, because they feared that the *gebealis* might retaliate and bring danger or destruction upon the community for breaking one of the rules while worshipping. Whenever one of the members of the community broke one of the laws, the whole community was responsible for fixing it, because they believed that the One they worshipped would not only punish the person who had broken the law but also the whole community. For this reason sometimes the people of the community would beat or even kill a person who continually broke the law, because they felt it was better to lose one single life than to lose many lives.

The *gebealis* would live a life that is quite different from ordinary life. They would not do or eat certain things for certain periods (3-4 weeks), both before entering the *gebeanda* and after being there. Because they would not know when there would be a need for them to go into the *gebeanda*, some *gebealis* would live like that all the time. When there was a need the *gebealis* would go into the *gebeanda* with a pig, oil, red paint and a set of kina shells to worship or to plead for the people.

When they entered the *gebeanda* they would sit in the huts outside the cave. While others were waiting one of them would go into the cave with a fire stick and burn a piece of meat on it; the fire would burn the meat and the smell of meat would reach the Person living there. After doing this the *gebeali* who had gone into the cave would come back and join the others outside and wait for that Person to come out. Whenever one of the *gebealis* went in he was not allowed to go far in because he would not know what the Person living inside was doing at that time. By going further into the cave, that Person might be interrupted while He was enjoying himself; and this would make Him angry and He might not accept the reasons for which they came.

As soon as the smell of the meat reached the Person inhabiting the cave, He would come out to see why the people wanted Him. He would come outside in the form of wind. When He came out the things around the cave would shake and a very strong wind would blow out from the cave. This movement would not be felt by the people outside the *gebeanda*. That Person would control this Himself. He would let those ones inside feel it just to show that he was among them; then they would present their reasons for coming to Him and offer Him the things they had taken in.

The Ceremony

When there was a need for a ceremony all the clansmen would come together to discuss a number of things. These things included who

would be a new *gebeali* and who would bring piglets, oil, kina shells and red paint. Everybody brought a pig or more to kill. Then a person or two would volunteer themselves as new *gebeali*. Because the people knew that in a number of cases *gebealis* risk their lives, they would not appoint anyone; they would leave the decision to the individual. After fixing these things they would prepare for pig killings. They would build new huts and repair old ones both around and within the *gebeanda*. When everything was ready, all the men would sing and dance around the *gebeanda*. At this time new *gebealis* would be identified so that they could see them and respect them as they did other *gebealis*.

Then the first lot of pig killing would take place. No meat from this killing could be eaten by the ordinary people or offered to other place spirits in the region. The meat from this had to be eaten only by the *gebealis* and the One they worship. In the morning the main pig killing took place. This time the One they worshipped would not eat this meat. He would watch for enemies and other jealous spirits around the place who might destroy the people and their belongings. Anyone could take part in eating the meat from the main pig killing.

After the pig killing was over the people would go home. The *gebealis* however, would remain in the *gebeanda* to continue on their pig killings. They would stay there for three to four days. On the last day those *gebealis* would decorate themselves with the mixture of oil and red paint and charcoal, come out from the *gebeanda* and sing and dance around it once again. It was believed that if everything in the ceremony was done perfectly they could expect to live a successful life for twenty to thirty years until the next ceremony.

They called for this ceremony when they felt that the One they worshipped was being insulted or disappointed by the whole community which had broken one of the important rules set before it. Then it was believed that once the ceremony was performed, whatever the people had done against the One they worshipped would be forgiven. Or they might perform it when they faced some dangers, such as if they knew that their enemies planned to attack them or if other natural disasters, such as frosts or dry-season might affect their food gardens. They also believed that once the ceremony was performed for the One they worshipped, they would be protected and defended. They also put on this ceremony for blessing. When they saw that their gardens, pigs and children grew healthy and well, they celebrated this ceremony for the One they worshipped so that their things could be blessed.