

The Festival of the Seventh Month

A New Year Type Festival
of the Gari-Speaking People,
Solomon Is.

Introduction

The Gari-speaking people of the Solomon Islands are a cultural linguistic group of a greater Guadalcanal society living on the western side of the island. The estimated 6,000 Gari-speaking people constitute the largest linguistic group among the 17 Austronesian groups in Guadalcanal. In 1975, the total population was estimated to be 46,686.¹ Many features of social organization, mythology, oral traditions, religious ideology and ritual present among the Gari are also common to other Guadalcanal societies. Linguistic differences and quasi-territorial boundaries are the primary factors justifying the division of Guadalcanal people into cultural-linguistic groups.

The social organization of the Gari people is based upon a moiety system of four matrilineal clans: Lakuili, Kakau, Gaubata and Kidipale. These four clans are also common to other parts of Guadalcanal, as well as Savo, Russell and Nggela islands to the north of Guadalcanal. However, the moiety system of clan organization evident among the Gari is not present in all areas where these clans are found. Among the Gari there is one clan (Lakuili) in the Eagle moiety, and three clans (Kakau, Gaubata and Kidipale) in the Falcon moiety.

Each of these four clans have their own founding and ancestral spirits which are venerated by their respective clan members and descendants. Shrines of the founding and ancestral spirits have been built on land owned by the clan and sub-clan groups which function not only as places of sacrifice and worship, but also as efficient registers of title to land and its use by descent group members.

As observed for most Melanesian societies, primal religion was not seen as a distinct aspect of everyday life for the Gari, but was

an integral part of man and his relationship with the total world around him. At the end of the last century, Codrington suggested strongly that the religious belief of the Melanesian people "was dominated by their understanding of the existence of a supernatural power or influence, and their rituals were directed to obtaining this power for their own interests and total human welfare."² Hogbin asserts from his own research among the Kaoka people in the early 1930's that "Guadalcanal religion is founded on a belief in spirits possessed of a special power, *nanama*, that can be exerted for the benefit of the living. This has no ultimate source and is simply one of the regular attributes of supernatural beings ..."³

The primal religious beliefs and practices of the Gari were also founded on this belief in the existence of a supernatural power outside of man that was controlled by spirit-beings. If man was to succeed in controlling the various environmental, economic and political forces at work within his cosmos it was essential for him to obtain this power. Therefore, among the Gari people, religious ideology focused on the veneration and concern for spirit-beings—both cultural deities and ancestral spirits—who were believed capable of influencing all human affairs and activities either by dispensing or withholding the supernatural power from the living. Most religious rituals took place at the clan and sub-clan shrines, involving only a limited number of senior male kinsmen of each group offering sacrifice to their respective spirit-beings. It was not common for women or non-kinsmen to be involved in religious ritual.

During my own research among the Gari in 1975, I heard of one striking example of socio-religious activity which involved women and members of all the Gari clans as well as kinsmen of non-Gari clans from outside the district. The following account describes a socio-religious festival called *Na Sai Na Vitu*, or *The Assembly of the Seventh Month* which was last held about 1908-1910. My informants were three old men who witnessed the events which took place. Since recording their information all three informants have died and I have been unable to find any other person who can authoritatively verify or complement the material given here.⁴ I am conscious of the inadequacy of my information obtained from the "missionized" memories of three old men, and of the absence of a lot of anthropological data which is necessary to interpret and clarify the ritual and symbolism expressed in this festival.

NA SAI NA VITU: The Festival of the Seventh Month

Location

This festival took place at the coastal village of Avisi, south of

Wanderer Bay on the west coast of Guadalcanal. It began each year towards the end of the seventh month, reckoned according to the traditional Gari calendar, and thus corresponded approximately to the months of February/March. Months were counted according to the number of stones illuminated by the first rays of the morning sun rising above the hill behind Avisi and striking a line of pre-arranged stones on the beach. In the first month only one stone was illuminated by the rising sun, in the second month—two, and so on. A count was kept of the passing months according to both the number of stones illuminated as well as the cyclic phases of the moon. At the beginning of the first quarter of the seventh month the big-men of Avisi sent word out to all the big-men of villages and leaders of clan groups within the Gari district and beyond to come and take part in Na Sai Na Vitu. When all the invited groups had assembled the ceremonies began.

Rites of Purification

The initial rituals were ones of cleansing and purification. Both men and women took branches from the cordyline shrub and methodically swept clean the whole of the Avisi village, starting from the bush side of the village and finishing up down on the beach. Here all the sweepings and branches were thrown into the sea with the command to leave the shore and return to Avisikiki and Abu'abu, the mythical homeland for wandering evil spirits located somewhere over the western horizon.

The men returned to the village and cut palm fronds from the coconut trees which they used as beaters and then proceeded through the whole of the village a second time, beating the ground, doorways and posts of houses with the intention of driving out from the village any further evil spirits still lurking about.

The rites of competition

With the village now thoroughly cleansed of the influence of evil spirits, platforms piled high with yams were erected in lines along the beachfront in front of the temporary quarters for the visiting men from other villages. I have no information as to whether the yams were supplied by the visiting groups themselves or were provided by the Avisi people. That evening each men's house group—representing a village—competed against each other trying to steal yams from one another's platforms while at the same time defending their own platform. The group which amassed the greatest pile of yams gained the acclaim of the crowd.

The rite of self-accusation

The next event involved all the men and women of Avisi plus those who had come from other villages and districts. With the village now believed free of evil spirits, two long lines formed in front of the

village, men on one side and women on the other. In a special chant called *Na Gu Oie*, first the men and then the women accused themselves in general terms of breaches of customary law in respect of the other sex. It was considered particularly important to confess any transgression of the strict code of social behaviour demanded between classificatory brothers and sisters. If such wrongs were not revealed at this stage of the festival harm would befall an individual or his close kin group.

Cursing of Foes

On a given morning after this 'chapter of faults', the bigmen of each village and descent group participating in *Na Sai Na Vitu*, left the village as a group and climbed the hill behind *Avisi* and cut long sticks from a type of softwood tree known locally as *koqaporo*. These sticks were cut with a special stone axe known as the *banisa*, reserved each year for this occasion. The axe was passed from hand to hand, each man cutting one long stick, and as the last blow of the axe severed the branch from the tree, the man would call out the name of an enemy from some distant part of Guadalcanal, Savo, Russell or Nggela in the expressed hope that as this branch was being lopped from the tree, so the enemy's head would fall in battle. After each man had cut himself a stick and cursed a distant foe, the group descended from the hill to the coast.

As each man left the crest of the hill he let out a mighty yell known as *Na Gu Dedei*, a victory yell over all his enemies who were now cursed to fall in battle. As the group made their way down the hill towards the village they chewed betel nut and spat a spray of juice into the air calling upon their ancestral spirits to give them strength in battle and bring death to their enemies. On arriving in the village the men carried their sticks through the village to the beach where they were piled in heaps.

Construction of Canoe

On the following day the big men of the various groups gathered stems from the spider-lily plant and holding them aloft danced through the village. A man would carry as many stems of this plant as he had children, each plant being considered a protective symbol for one of his children. All the big men would gather on the beach where they had piled the sticks collected on the previous day, strip the bark from the sticks and then with the fibre, sticks and spider-lily stems, they would weave a large ornamental double-ended canoe called the *qao*. While making this imitation canoe, the men sat together in pairs, back to back, tying and weaving behind their backs, assisting each other with the knots. As each knot was pulled tight, the two men took turns to curse a mutual enemy for, as the knot was tightened, so might someone loop a vine around their enemy's neck

and strangle him. And so the weaving and the cursing continued until the great ornamental canoe was finished.

Invocation

When it was completed, all the surrounding area was carefully brushed clean of rubbish and left-over materials, with particular care taken to sweep the sand clean of every foot-print. Only then would the bigman of the Kidipale clan come forward and call upon the spirit *Masobaga* to come and take his place in the canoe. *Masobaga* was a founding spirit of the Kidipale clan venerated as a creator and provider of food and a protector of crops. It is said that the call would be repeated many times until a distant rattling of sticks could be heard along with the sudden howling of dogs and shrieking of parrots in the trees overhead. These were interpreted by those present as a response by *Masobaga* to the call of his people and that he had come to take his place in the great canoe. Thus the canoe with the spirit *Masobaga* in it were left over-night on the beach and the crowds returned to Avisi.

Ritual competition

That evening, two further minor events took place. One of these was a race known as the *alemule*, run between two outcrops of rock along the beach over a distance of approximately a mile and a half. Anyone was allowed to compete, including the women, and the men decorated themselves as if for battle carrying spears, clubs and shields. The winner received no special prize apart from a vociferous approval and acclaim of the spectators. The second event demonstrated further hostility and aggression of participants towards enemies. Men gathered around a large *vutu* tree (*Barringtonia Spinosa*) at a place called Papalilo and pelted it with stones until, allegedly, there was not a leaf or seed pod left on the branches.

Vigil and Celebration

On the following morning, all the people of Avisi returned to the beach and the large ornamental canoe constructed the day before to look for footprints of deceased kin who had come to visit *Magobaga* during the night. Footprints with distinguishing features such as missing toes and other physical deformities were allegedly recognized and identified with well known people of the past. The canoe was then further decorated with flowers and vines with an imitation bonito pole and fishing lure trailing over the back. When all was ready, the canoe was hoisted shoulder high and carried along the beach to a large rock formation jutting out into the sea known as *Vatu'amasu* which literally means 'rock-of-plenty'. As they travelled both carriers and crowd devoured food prepared the night before. The procession ended at the rock, *Vatu'amasu*. On points each side

of the rock women stretched out long *tapa* cloths into the sea, allegedly to guide the spirit Masobaga back into the canoe and the place on the rock where the canoe was to be positioned. In a state of great excitement the crowd on the shore hurled stones at the canoe and its carriers, and it was said that neither canoe nor carriers were ever known to be struck by these stones as they were now under the protection of Masobaga.

Obscenity Display

When an affirmative response had been given from the crowd to a query from the carriers as to whether or not the canoe was lying straight and true on top of Vatu'amasu, the concluding phase of *Na Sai Na Vitu* began. Men and women—regardless of the presence of classificatory brothers and sisters and close kin of the opposite sex—began to shout obscenities and make suggestive sexual gestures at one another. Once the crowd had exhausted themselves of this form of behaviour which in normal circumstances was strictly forbidden and punishable by the imposition of heavy compensation payments, they returned in groups to Avisi and began to disperse to their home villages. And so concluded *Na Sai Na Vitu*.

Observations

Na Sai Na Vitu demonstrated an important social feature of primal religious systems which is often overlooked in Melanesian religious studies.

Melanesians—like their European, African, Asian and American counterparts—also have need to constantly affirm their social identity and dependence upon a spirit world in a cosmos where their own future welfare and success is held in a precarious balance. In the form of ritual and festival a break is made with the past and a new release of power is sought; society is renewed. Within a regular cycle of events humans become conscious of their own weakness and limitations, evil spirits appear to dominate and frustrate his own efforts, crops begin to fail, enemies gain in numbers and strength, the future looks uncertain and man feels insecure and threatened. These feelings and experiences contribute to the view that humans are not self-sufficient, but always dependent upon the supernatural power, *mana*, from their cultural deities and ancestral spirits. Life therefore needs a periodic renewal, a break must be made with the past and a new beginning established. For the Gari people, I propose, this renewal of human social identity and relationship with the world of ancestral spirits took place in the seventh month of every year.

A break with the past is vividly portrayed in the initial cleansing rituals of Avisi and the expulsion of all harmful spirits

which had accumulated in the village over the past year. Relationships between individuals and their ancestral spirits are restored and strengthened once more in the people's public admission of their transgressions of customary law which originally came from the ancestors.

In mythology, Masobaga is a cultural deity concerned with providing food and protecting crops and was the spirit who forbade all the birds and flying foxes to eat the ripened crops of the people living in the Avisi area. Although Masobaga is acknowledged as one of the founding spirits of the Kidipale clan, he was also concerned with the crops of people, regardless of clan or moiety association. At the planting of yams regular invocations were made to Masobaga and offerings of food were also left on the rock, Vatu'amasu, throughout the year to ensure a bountiful harvest of yams.

Yams, *uvi*, were the traditional staple diet of the Gari. *Uvi* is also the old Gari word for 'year'. Yams were always planted in the first month which corresponds to August. Allowing for a certain amount of flexibility between the two calendar systems, the first harvest of yams could be ready for harvesting in time for *Na Sai Na Vitu* and the festival grew around the 'first fruits' from the yam gardens. Alternatively, the yams used in the festival could have been the last from the old crop before the new harvest began. Unfortunately I do not have sufficient information about the significance of the yams used in the festival. Nor do I have any information concerning the symbolism of the large imitation canoe woven for the occasion. The Gari people were not seafarers, nor could I find any association in mythology between the sea and the spirit Masobaga.

The amount of cursing and aggression displayed throughout the festival indicate the ever-present fear of enemies the Gari lived with in a pre-colonial era. Supernatural power and sympathetic magic are used against hostile groups and enemy warriors. Oral traditions clearly reflect the reality of inter-village warfare and raids between neighbouring groups.

The conclusion to *Na Sai Na Vitu* when both men and women exchanged sexual insults is a common phenomenon reported from other societies in similar socio-religious festivals.⁵ Normal time and events and the norm of social behaviour are suspended during a period of transition from the old to the new, or from the sacred to the secular. A ritual which starts with formality is likely to end in the form of orgy or masquerade. So before the Gari people return to their normal activities and traditional social code of behaviour and respect after the events of *Na Sai Na Vitu*, their social behaviour is symbolically reversed in this mock display of sexual aggression, obscenities and insults. Both sacralization, or the separation of the sacred dimension of time and events from the secular and desacralization, or return to the secular dimension, has now been completed.

Conclusion

As I have already mentioned, *Na Sai Na Vitu* was last held at Avisi in 1908-1910. It was abandoned by the people in the face of strong opposition from both Catholic and Anglican missionaries. I have often wondered to what extent those early Christian missionaries of Guadalcanal understood the meaning of the various rituals associated with this festival and whether or not they would do the same today. In the liturgical calendar the seventh month of the Gari people would have corresponded approximately to the season of Lent and Easter. This is the great festival of the Christian religion. During the period of Lent, Christians attempt to make a complete break with the past in a spirit of renewal and conversion. Reconciliation and cleansing of sin are dominating themes during this liturgical season of preparation for new life in the Risen Christ. Man's relationship with God is renewed in Christ. The question I often ask myself is whether or not some aspects of *Na Sai Na Vitu* could have been used to provide a cultural background for the celebration of Easter among the Gari people.