

Tambu— Traditional Sacred Wealth

Introduction

In the Tolai modern world *tambu*,¹ shell-money, the traditional wealth, is used for many purposes. As a medium of exchange, *tambu* is used in exchange for goods, property or a piece of land, and as the Tolai standard bride-price. Among Tolais in the villages and Rabaul markets *tambu* is found side by side with the national currency of Kina and Toea when selling and purchasing. In the village or market *tambu* is used to buy fish, eggs, bananas, vegetables, taros, peanuts, betel-nuts and its supplements of lime and mustard. In business transactions *tambu* is used to purchase cash crops such as cocoa and copra which are then managed and re-sold using Kina and Toea. Piglets raised for either consumption or sale can be obtained with shell-money. *Tambu* is the medium of exchange in acquisition of subsistence farming or cash-cropping. In obtaining a wife or adopting a child *tambu* is always used.

In the socio-economic field, *tambu* acts as a means of fostering peace, harmony and order in the community. In upholding traditional moral codes in society, the *tambu* is an essential factor. To establish new relationships, restore older ones or mend broken ones, shell-money is the necessary means. *Tambu* instigates economic support and cooperation as well as inter-clan political activities.

The Link Between *Tambu* and *Lo* and *Lotu*

In treating this precious wealth I am inclined to narrow it to its fundamental aspect, a core which I believe concerns *lo* and *lotu*. There is no specific and distinct dichotomy between traditional laws (*Lo*) and religious worship (*Lotu*) in the Tolai culture (which involves the way these people relate to their environment). The Pidgin term *lo*, for law, refers strictly to customs and traditions,² while the other

Pidgin term *lotu*, meaning 'religious worship', implies veneration and honour of spirits.

Tambu is very closely attached to both *lo* and *lotu*, for religious experiences are always linked with social activities where food and *tambu* are exchanged. *Tambu* has the central position and in such activities the community must abide by the tribal laws. For example, an offender who has committed a crime of adultery or theft, or caused severe conflicts and much argumentation, is required to compensate with shell-money. A peaceful relationship has been broken and has to be restored. *Tambu* payment is the means of re-establishing good terms with those offended. If there is no compensation, the relationship remains broken and the door is left open for revenge, *balbali*, which can be executed in many ways such as sorcery, magic, cold blooded murder or retaliation in kind (an eye for an eye). In the first three forms *tambu* is needed to implement or accomplish the task through the use of experts in divination. These men are in close contact with spirits who will be invoked on behalf of the offended party.

A common example which reveals the relationship between *tambu*, *lo* and *lotu* is the Tolai marriage, in particular in its Catholic form. After the bride price (*varkukul*) has been paid, the couple go to the Church for their marriage to be blessed. We refer to this Church marriage as a *varbean*, which normally occurs in the morning. The traditional marriage is known as the *vartulai*, the escorting and bringing of the wife to her new husband's home. This takes place in the evening or at night.

During the ceremony of the *vartulai*, there is another ritual involving the exchange of food and shell-money by relatives in both clans of the partners. In the ritual, the *tambu* establishes new relationships for economic co-operation and moral support in political affairs for any activities, singsings, business endeavours or traditional feasting that will arise later in the village. *Tambu* draws these people together and establishes greater respect in the use of words and actions by each party. The Pidgin term *tambu*, I think, expresses this very well. In the Gunantuna tongue we call it *maku*, which means 'brother-in-law'. It breaks down interclan tensions and draws both sides closer. The *lotu* aspect of *tambu* happens in the Church with the priest or catechist. The *lo* aspect happens afterwards in the village. What I will discuss later falls under *lo* and *lotu* implemented by *tambu*.

Origin of *Tambu*

There is no common myth that treats the origin of *tambu* among the Tolai. Traditionally it was held sacred and sought after by the ancestors. This idea has been handed down from the older

generations up to the present generations. However, there is a common speculation about the origin of *tambu*. A people known as the Gunantuna from the main island of New Ireland, which is called Laur, and from some of the smaller islands like Anir and Siar, landed on the Duke of York Islands. Some of them landed on the south coasts of the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain. The people of Laur used the shell-money, *apela*, as their wealth. When the Gunantuna were moving across the waters to their new destination they possibly found the *tambu* shell and selected it to be more valuable than any other type of shell. They began using it extensively to distinguish themselves from the people they had left at Laur, and from the Sulka people they found on the South Coast of the Peninsula, and who used a different shell as their wealth.

***Tambu* and Its Sacredness**

Tambu is considered very sacred and seen as a means of contacting the spirit world. It is more or less identified with ancestral spirits but not identical with them. Every single ritual and rite that is connected with traditional dancers, sorcery, magic for dances, healing of the sick, making of rain, love magic and divination always involves *tambu*. That is why *tambu* is referred to at times as the 'true traditional religion'³ of the Tolai people. The famous *tubuan* dance of the Tolais is a classical example that epitomizes how the people revere the *tubuan* or mask-dance by a particular male dancer. This mask is identified with ancestral spirits especially by the elders of the clan. Perhaps it appears to youngsters as a symbol but to the chiefs and elders the *tubuan* is the reality of the ancestors. It can demand *tambu* and food from the people. It has to be adorned with *tambu* whenever and wherever it appears for dancing and visiting. As long as the *tambu* continues to prevail among the Tolai, Christianity will never become a way of life for the people.

There is a case of a youth of about seventeen years of age who had to suffer the consequences of mishandling *tambu*. An old man died in the village and after his burial a *minamai* was to be carried out. Four older men were being appointed to prepare the shell-money for allocation. The youth, a relative of the dead man, was to help in getting *tambu* ready. The young man without awaiting orders from the older men proceeded immediately with the unwrapping and loosening of the fathoms of shell-money from the rill frame. As an energetic youth he found the quickest and easiest possible way to do the job. Earlier than expected the work was finished and the young man was found riding his push-bike.

Between four and seven the ceremony had taken place; the relatives were left in the house of the dead and the youngster was among them. While they were discussing something the boy

suddenly spoke. He was still the same person but used three different peoples' voices and said things beyond his comprehension and only expected of older men. The three people or voices called their names. Two were those of long deceased relatives and the other was the one recently buried. The boy was possessed and the persons or spirits speaking in him were expressing their anger and disappointment over the way *tambu* had been handled without respect and reverence. The boy dashed out of the room and the people inside could not grab him. They chased after him and when they finally caught up with him he was a quarter of a mile away from the house, lying down unconscious. When he regained his senses he denied remembering the three persons or any of the things he had said. I do not know how much truth this story has, but it illustrates local beliefs about the right ways of treating *tambu*. As a consequence of his misdeed the boy was punished by the spirits of his ancestors.

This incident demonstrates the place and connection *tambu* has with the dead spirits. People feel and experience the sacredness or the presence of power in *tambu* and when solemnly dealing with *tambu* they attribute this power to the spirits of their ancestors.

Desire for *Tambu* Wealth

The Tolai, traditionally speaking, craved and desired to become rich. This was evident from the type of motivation and methods used to acquire property. In the first place, the object of his desire was his native treasure, *tambu*. For the Tolai then, so long as the traditional mentality prevails, the aim in life is to accumulate greater amounts of *tambu*. The real chief⁴ is not the man who has been appointed by the government but the one who possesses the greatest wealth of *tambu*. He is in a position to buy as many wives as he can. He can terrorize other people, he can rob and rape and poison and kill with impunity. However, he can also show himself a generous host, by giving greater feasts and dances and presenting the participants with lavish gifts.

Great wealth of shell-money marked a fellow a 'big shot' not only in this life but even after death in the ancestral world. As he was a powerful man, having done harm to many people, so after death his spirit would be feared even more. It would take a great number of big feasts in his honour to prevent him from doing harm to others.

The conquest and means of accumulating *tambu* are among the top priorities of a typical Tolai in the village. He worries about his family and how to get food and money, but he is more concerned about traditional wealth. *Tambu* is the point of life, something very precious, a means of survival. People go on long journeys by boat or plane to the Nakanai area or to the south coast of West New Britain

just to get *tambu* which they purchase with national currency. A Tolai can have a lot of money in the bank, but if he has very little or no *tambu*, he has, traditionally speaking no place in society. He simply cannot meet the different social and feast obligations because these are dependent on extensive *tambu* usage.

Fear of Death

An elderly man or woman can fear death because he or she has very little or no shell-money. Fear sets in because of uncertainty. A student who has studied his homework well does not fear his exams because he already has a fair idea of what the exams will include. Someone who has not studied for the exams is scared because he does not know what lies ahead. It could mean failure, losing a job or becoming a drop-out. Likewise the aged person. If he has not accumulated sufficient *tambu* or has none at all, he has great fear since he does not know what will happen to him when he dies. Nor does he know what will happen to his clan relatives after he has been buried.

One religious dimension of *tambu* in the face of death is that *tambu* provides a sure guarantee of proper relationships with the ancestral spirits. When a man dies he suspects that the ancestral spirits will not accept him easily into their kingdom in their world. He also knows that for some reason or another he has broken the *lo* by not accumulating shell-money for distribution after his death. His surviving relatives will suffer the consequence of this by being bombarded with evil talk and unkind sarcastic remarks from neighbouring clans. Fear sets in because he knows that he has not accumulated shell-money, and that the turmoil and misfortune which will come upon his relatives after his death will have been caused by him.

The strength of this belief is illustrated by an incident which I recall of people discussing two corpses left in the open to rot, torn to pieces and devoured by dogs, instead of being buried with the proper rites. The obvious reasons given for this situation were that neither the dead persons nor their relatives had prepared any *tambu* for the celebration following their burial. Here we see *tambu* being more valuable than human beings or the *lo* for human society.

The *Varvamamvai*

Varvamamvai is the ceremony of distribution of *tambu* belonging to the dead. This traditionally happened to those who worked hard, did their "homework" by law and faced death in a calm and peaceful manner. Depending on how traditionally rich, notorious and faithful a man has been in attending different festivities with his *tambu*, his

shell-money distribution can be an ordinary or a major occasion. A formal and bigger celebration is marked by what we call a *leo* or a *butubut*. This is a large wall of bamboos, about the height of tall bamboos. The bamboos are placed in position vertically and horizontally and on these are tied numerous rills of *tambu*. Other decorations are also put on top of these *tambu*. Apart from the bamboo wall there is also a small hut built specially to house the *garamut* drums. When the distribution of shell-money starts, drummers beat out a rhythm code which relates the life of the recent dead and those of his ancestors.⁵

A religious experience is involved when the close relatives of the dead man, and especially his successor as head of the clan, begin to weep bitterly. It is a solemn moment of mixed feelings of sorrow and joy. Long dead relatives are remembered and are sometimes called by their names. For the living clansmen, this occasion is also one of fame and prestige, as it gives a boost to the name of the clan. As the celebration continues, the relatives, especially the office bearers or organizers, really feel the presence of their ancestors among them helping them and participating with them. The event requires considerable planning and preparation and involves all forms of decorum. Some celebrations take place before the old person actually dies.

The Kikutu

The term *kikutu* refers to the termination of a period of thinking about a recent dead relative. It involves another solemn celebration. There is a scene in the film *My Brother Wartovo* which demonstrates this. The house of the dead, while being burnt down, is surrounded by a number of *dukduk* and *tubuan* dancers. When the house is in embers an elder, a very close relative of the recent dead, approaches the masked dancers with shell-money. He then whips the dancers before handing over the shell-money. This handing over of the wealth is known as a *kubika* or payment for services and in this case, for dancing the dancing *tubuans* and *dukduks*. In the same scene, some elderly women cry and talk simultaneously in front of the dancer. This is another example where people feel the sacredness of the spirits when *tambu* is involved.

The film also shows the house of the prominent character, Wartovo, and how *tambu* is hung in the house. It is located in a special section of the house, normally the centre, and serves to guard the house. In European-type homes, there are special rooms where it is stored. Children are not allowed to play in that room or disturb the peace of the wealth. It is kept in honour, reverence and remembrance of those long passed.

The *Iniat* Society

Iniat is the famous Tolai secret male society, also known as the *pepenalom*. In the *taraiu* or secret place where the rites and rituals are performed, young men and boys are initiated into the society. The initiation into the *iniat* Society is implemented by *tambu*. For the recruits to learn and be educated in the *taraiu*, their parents and relatives must pay amounts of *tambu* to the sponsors and those in charge of the *taraiu*. The boys and men have to stay in confinement and seclusion from parents and relatives for some days before the ceremony of public declaration. During this confinement food of all sorts is brought to them and their sponsors. Women and girls prepare the food but men bring it to the *taraiu*; all females, under strong edict, are not allowed to approach or see the secret place. In the *taraiu* the new members learn a number of things. As members of the *pepenalom*, some become specialists as supervisors of dances or composing songs, as traditional doctors, as herbalists and as specialists in curing all persons attacked by spirits. Some become weather controllers and others become skillful in killing people, either by physical force or by using words with special powers capable of taking life.

The ritual seclusion involves a transition period from boyhood and adolescence to manhood or adulthood. The members are taught to face life as mature men with a deep sense of responsibility for the communal activities of adult life.

While in the *taraiu* the recruits also learn all the stories of the deceased ancestors (*tubuan*). The clan structure, the trading systems, *tambu* manipulations and all the inter-clan relations are explained to them. Having been initiated, they possess the necessary knowledge for life as well-informed members in society.

The Tolais regard the *tubuan* dances of the *taraiu* as powerful and sacred, a scene when the ancestral spirits are present and closely identified with the dancers. During the initiation rites the youngsters are categorized into one *iniat* Society or *pepenalom* to which they belong; they assume a *tubuan* name and think of themselves as being in line with their ancestors. For instance, the name of the *tubuan* that my clan follows is *Iakaia*, which is the name of one of our female ancestors. The whole of the *iniat* Society is implemented and based on *tambu*. When a big feast is held as in a big dancing, the different *tubuans* and *dukduks* perform dances. Because they have the *tambu* available at home the older relatives sing, beat the kundus and sometimes shout out words. They are excited, happy and feel the presence of their deads' spirits close by; when the masked men are dancing they are felt to be identified with spirits. The *tambu* and the *tubuan* dances together create a feeling of sacredness and the presence of super beings.

It is worth mentioning here that the initiation ceremony coincides with the reviving of the *tubuans*. We refer to this revival as

the *tubuan i telek*: hatching from the egg. The period of hatching is called a *tem na tumtu buan*—or the time for the masks to hatch. Every *tubuan* is supposed to have a stone called a *palavat*, with a certain amount of shell-money. The *palavat* is essential and enriches the clan.

A Balabagaguan or Pait Nagit

The *balabagaguan* refers to one of the most extravagant ceremonies. It involves extensive exchanges of food, bananas, taros, yams, sweet potatoes, pitpit, singapu, pigs, fish, fowl and many other foodstuffs supplemented by huge sums of shell-money. Thousands of people participate in this inter-clan transaction of food and exchange of shell-money. For me this is the most outstanding occasion where almost all the members of the various clans, men and women and even children participate in the various activities. The ancestors have always performed the ceremonies and the *baluai* the very same way so, on these solemn occasions, they are also commemorated. A *baluai*, which may last for days or even weeks, refers to the beating of *garamuts* that can be heard for miles to tell people that a particular clan is feasting and celebrating *tambu*.

Many different kinds of dancers appear at this *balabagaguan*. Each dance has its own performers, decorations, rhythms, chants, words and tune. They tell different stories often relating the present to the past and referring in most cases to the ancestors. The distributors give food and shell-money to the congregation and spectators. When the clan members organizing the feast hear the words or stories of the dancers in the singing, they cry, hug each other and call out the names of their ancestors. They talk profusely about them and stand still for a short period to show reverence and to honour them. They feel the presence and sacredness of the spirits close to them. This is a moment of great solemnity and respect, a religious experience. *Tambu* is absolutely indispensable for this ceremony or in any others that I have mentioned. For, without *tambu*, there is no ceremony, and no revelation or recognition of the presence of the sacred.

The Tenabui

People seek power for two general purposes: either to destroy or to help. *Tenabui* is the term used for specialized roles of communication with the spirit world in the use of such power. The *tenabui* is initiated by a specialist in a particular field through a ceremony in the *taraiu*. Individuals claim the powers of *tenabui* either through inheritance from father or maternal uncle or by

acquiring them with *tambu* and confirming them in the *taraiu* of the *iniat* Society. Such an individual is the co-ordinator or mediator between the world of the living and the world of the spirits.

Tenabui falls into two main categories, namely, the *tenaagagar* and the *tenadarar*, the former term referring to the specialists in the field of magic, sorcery and murder. These, in turn, have two titles: the *tenataring*, (sorcerer or *poisen man*) and the *tenavarvardodoko* (murderer). The term, *tenadavar*, refers to the traditional doctors, the herbalist and the weather controller or rainmaker.

To remove sickness or to gain some form of security against future mishaps, the client approaches the specialist, the *tenadavar*. To provide rain for the crops or to induce good weather for an open celebration it is necessary to see the *tenabakut*. The right amount of *tambu* is essential if it is to be effective. Rituals and rites performed by the specialists however, sometimes do not work. The reason often given is that the right amount of *tambu* is not provided. For every rite and ritual there is a standard price known to everybody. As a result, the spirits are not pleased with a lesser amount and thus cannot fully do the service. We could say these specialists use their titles to gain wealth and *tambu*. However, in the case of healing the sick, the payment is always made after the patient has been treated. Sometimes those who pay the right price expect their patient to get well and he does. Some consciously pay only a portion and when their patient does not recover they conclude that the standard amount of *tambu* was not paid and caused the sickness to continue. Here again we see the significance of *tambu* in invoking the spirits.

An apprentice in traditional medicine may want to know more herbs for his profession. He too goes to the *tenadavar* with *tambu* and presents his request. In most cases these two people are closely related. The specialist does not reveal anything directly to his apprentice but refers him to the expert who taught him in the first place. In cases where the expert has died, the expert who has died gives the apprentice the revelation when he is asleep at night. Thus, the apprentice has a religious experience through the spirit of an ancestor. This is possible for him because he has paid shell-money. In such circumstances where shell-money is being used, the spiritual world is as real as the human world. To the people who participate actively, the spiritual world is a reality of life.

The Tena Agagar

Unlike previous examples I have mentioned, this religious experience is a more violent one. If a young person dies and his relatives suspect that his life has been terminated by murder, sorcery or magic, they go to a specialist to discover the cause. They

will normally go to one who is closely related to them but if there is none, then they travel by car or boat to a distant village. This is known as a *tambu i vartul*, i.e., the shell-money sends them on a journey because they are concerned about their relative. *Tambu* is needed to pay for the investigation and for the eventual payback if you are to have results. We call this type of revenge a *komkom* and it can take months before the guilty person actually dies. Before he dies he admits to some people that he in fact fully or partially killed the other person in the first place.

The *komkom* can assume the form of *komkom na didim* where a whole clan, starting with the actual killer, is wiped out one by one. This process cannot stop once it starts unless they put a strong halt to it. They can either go with *tambu* to the avenging party and tell them to stop the *komkom*, or they look for a different *tenaagargar* who applies stronger measures to counteract that of the hired *tenaagargar*. If they have a large amount of *tambu* they can achieve this, but if they do not have enough, it is unfortunate—their relative should not have started the killing in the first place.

After receiving the request and shell-money, the *tenaagagar* prepares for this mission. He manipulates the spirits to help him accomplish this task. In the form of a dog, a pig and especially the bird, *minigula* (or eagle) the specialist travels long distances to hunt down the killer. We call the taking of animal or bird form a *vapetep*. When the relatives of the dead see the different signs confirming the search for their enemy, they are pleased and happy that their prayer or request has been heard through the *tenaagagar* to whom they have given a quantity of *tambu*. The spirits are now moving to avenge and destroy the offender. This process sometimes takes a long time before the business of revenge is concluded. Sometimes it is rapid and the person that people suspect soon dies. This is a religious experience too, but an evil one. This procedure serves to preserve and maintain the law which states that one should not kill another person without first reporting to the higher authority that this person has committed a crime. In this particular experience, shell-money is paid to the expert and he, through several rites and rituals, manipulates his servants to accomplish the mission for him on behalf of the relatives.

Tambu: Cultural or Commercial

Before the Church, the government administration and the business world influenced my people, the spirit world was a prevailing reality. The Tolai was scared of death, of illness, of bad spells. His foremost worry was physical survival. For protection, security, well-being, and a happy living against the different forces of nature including thunder, lightning or rain and against his human environment of

sorcery, illness and death, he turned to both the ancestral and bad spirits. For his garden to gain fertility and increase its yield or for an expedition to the bush for game, or to the sea for fish, he had to comply with the spirits first. Even though some missionaries were already here talking about God, the Tolai still preferred his own ancestral spirits.

Throughout this paper, I have understood culture as a way a people relates to its environment. In the Tolai culture, to have a religious experience and feel the presence of the sacred whether for good or for ill, one requires *tambu*. Shell-money is the surest guarantee for such an experience. I suppose that today experiencing the sacred in some of the events that I have described is not so rigorous and as formal as it used to be. In the *iniat* Society, the *tubuan* and *dukduk* dances are not as strict and sacred as they used to be. Nowadays they are mainly used for ceremonial purposes. Some of its pagan norms, rituals and allurements are no longer strictly observed. For such dances to be arranged and performed, however, *tambu* usage and payment still continues to be important.

Culturally, *tambu* is the surest guarantee for contacting the ancestral spirits. It is used in rituals, dancing ceremonies, inter-clan celebrations, performance of magical rites and sorcery, weather controlling, exorcism of bad spirits and healing of sickness. Where rites and rituals are involved *tambu* prevails.

For establishing new human relations on an inter-clan basis, *tambu* is crucial. This is so in relation to the bride-price, although I think the term 'bride-price' to describe the use of *tambu* for wives among Tolais is misleading. Bride-price when seen in a wider context, yields a concept with a more commercial connotation. The Tolai terminology for bride-price is *varkukul* or *tambu na varkukul*—thus indicating that shell-money is used for a wife. The use of *tambu* in connection with bride-price however, implies establishing new relationships with in-laws, or new norms of respect and support which have to be observed as a result of the new relationship. Our society is matrilineal, and the marriage partners must never come from the same maternal line. When the husband dies the widow and children always go back to the mother's clan. I think this is one reason for the use of the term *varkukul* with *tambu* for wives.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to describe and analyze what *tambu* means and what its features are in my society. I must admit that I am somewhat handicapped since I have not been initiated into the *iniat* or *pepenalom* and so am not able to describe what goes on during the period of confinement. The ritual is very complicated and in

order for an outsider to understand and describe it fully, he has to know our language fluently and live with the people. Perhaps, when he has lived with us long enough and observed the different activities, ceremonies and cultural festivities involved, he can enter the mentality of the Tolai people with their great honour and respect for *tambu*. *Tambu* is the true traditional religion of the Tolais and as long as it continues to prevail in our society, I do not think Christianity will ever be a pure way of life for our people. There will always be a mixture of both ways of life in the society.