

# The Malangan Cult of New Ireland

## Introduction

The word *malangan* originated far back in the cultural history of our people and was passed on to successive generations through cultic festivals and oral traditions. It is therefore almost impossible to trace the word down to its original meaning in many of our New Ireland dialects. Here in Tabar, however, one of the original *malangan* areas, people have apparently used the cultic word *malanga* in a very old Tabar dialect. It means, "spirit ... or belonging to the spirit world". This word is used in reference particularly to the famous *malangan* art of New Ireland which is expressed in the fish, reptile, bird and ancestral spirit images that a *malangan* artist produces in wood carvings, and so on.

Among the Mandaks of Central New Ireland, the word *malangan* means the highest and most sacred expression of figurative art. The word is also used to refer to young initiates as the favoured ones those who are graced with human and spiritual attractiveness. Perhaps this is because initiates are always decorated smartly. Hence, a very physically attractive and beautiful girl is sometimes referred to as "*e malangan*". In this sense it means superbly beautiful and extremely pleasing to look at.

If we draw a line somewhere through the centre of New Ireland, East to West coast, the section of the province North-West is the *malangan* region. Seven language groups occupy this *malangan* area. These are, in the West, the Mandar speakers, who live on the Tabar island group; on New Ireland mainland, the Mandaks, the Notsis, the Kuats, the Naliks, the Karas, and finally, the Tigaks. The traditional songs and the dances of these groups of people have a marked similarity. The other groups of people, speaking six different but related dialects, live in the South-Eastern section of New Ireland. They have another tradition, namely, Malangan Tumbuan. Again, their songs and dances are very similar but different from the way people sing and dance in the *malangan* area. However, the cultic traditions of the groups are similar. I shall

deal with the topic of this essay under three sections, namely: Initiatory Malangan; Mortuary Malangan; Analysis And Interpretation of the Malangan Tradition.

## Initiatory Malangan

This type of *malangan* involves three stages:

- the Separating Period
- the Shedding Period
- the Public Presentation of Youths

We can classify initiatory *malangan* into two separate types, *sisi malangan* and *unda malangan*. In these two rites, the three stages are clearly observable.

### The Sisi Malangan rite

In the first, the *sisi malangan*, the young boys are cleansed from impurities and are given new “powers” to resist sickness which may follow from contact with a woman—and more specifically with the vaginal matter or fluid during sexual intercourse. Fifty years ago most of the boys had to go through the *sisi malangan*. It was believed that if a boy did not go through this *malangan* he would not be considered a member of the male sex and would slowly lose vitality during sexual intercourse with a girl or a woman and could die of the *zuli* sickness.

### The Separation Period

The maternal “uncles” and “fathers” decide whether the young boys are ready to go through this initiation or not. The boys should have entered the pre-pubertal stage, or be already in it; they are, however, still considered children.

Interestingly, this initiation takes place in the life or lives of young boys before they change physically and psychologically and begin to take on a new kind of interest in girls and women. The boys are picked and then led into seclusion by some elderly relative to a special house built for the initiates. There, the boys first undergo a period of strict discipline and an instruction and training designed to enable them to meet and live through the stresses and responsibilities of adult life. At some time in the middle of this period, the boys are circumcized. The fore-skin of their penises is cut by male relatives of their father’s clan or moiety.

About two weeks or so before circumcision is performed, a skilful *malangan* artist goes to the forest with men, to select and cut out the right piece of a Sabon or Sabau tree and bring it home solemnly and ceremoniously. The men decorate themselves and sing the special songs for the particular *malangan* which the artist is planning to make. Every *malangan* has its own songs. The artist

must make his relatives' *malangan*. It is strictly forbidden under pain of death for the *malangan* artist to produce a *malangan* pattern and design that belongs to another clan unless it has previously been legally settled and bought out from the clan who owns it.

As the men enter the hamlet or village with the log for the *malangan* they sing and dance the *malangan* entry dance called *buro*, a solemn and stately dance. The women meet them with presents, tobacco leaves for smoking and *mis* (traditional New Ireland money). The *mis* are for the owner of the *malangan*; the tobacco is for the men in the *buro* dance. They dance on to the *antein*, the men's area of the hamlet-community, where there is a house for boys and men to live in, also called *antein*.

At the entrance of the *antein* (traditionally, the place is fenced all around with stones), an elderly man meets the dancers with the *malangan* and says, for instance, as he throws a handful of betelnut at a time to the dancers, "*Mana bua Kasolik*", "*Mana bua Kasobo*". This is a ceremony for showing recognition, respect and for inviting this particular *malangan* to enter the *antein*. Then the man says, "You may come in", so the dancers sing and dance as they enter the *antein*. Somewhere in the middle of the *antein* in front of the door of the men's house, the same man or another man, repeats the same ceremony. As the singing and dancing cease, the men are still standing with the *malangan*; all their *bilas* (decoration, target branches, etc.) are piled together in one heap. The men now bring tobacco leaves for the dancers and more *mis* are again given to the owner of the *malangan*.

After this is done, all the tobacco is shared and the handing over ceremony commences. It goes like this, "*Karake, Langiro, kamiru beruberuni*", that is, *Karake* and *Langiro* come and take away these *malangan* decorations. This really means the *malangan* is now yours. Then the last legitimate owner of the *malangan*, who has guarded it for his clan, tells everyone how and when he got it. e.g. "I procured it at the time of my circumcision". Then he closes by giving a command, "later on sometime when you make this *malangan*, tell the people you got it from me during this *malangan* festival". The new guardians and owners, *Karake* and *Langiro*, collect carefully all the *malangan* decorations (*bilas*) and dispose of them in a *ples tambu* (a sacred place where only the waste materials of *malangan* are disposed of).

In the mean time, the *mumus* of pigs, *kaukau*, taro, yams, sago are prepared. The *malangan* log is taken into a special *malangan* work-hut in which the *malangan* artist is going to spend some several weeks to carve and make the *malangan* that he has already ceremoniously given to *Karake* and *Langiro*. The original owner in this case was *Selevit*. By the way, after this time *Selevit*, in some later *malangan* festival, can only make *malangan* from the one he has given to *Karake* and *Langiro*. Everyone waits until the *mumus* are ready, then they eat and depart.

From now until the time of passing out of the young initiates into the adult society, when the final big *malangan* feast is going to be celebrated and the finished *malangan* is installed in a special *malangan* exhibition hut, a number of pig feasts are held to mark the different stages of the artist's work on the *malangan*.

There is a *kaikai pik* (pig feast) when the *malangan* log is cut, measured out and brought home, as I have described above; there is another *kaikai pik* (usually two, three or four pigs) after the artist has marked out on the log the figures of the *malangan* that he is going to carve out; another *kaikai pik* when the artist actually begins carving; one after he has finished all the carving work; and yet another to begin painting the *malangan* which of course is the last stage of work. He cannot start painting the *malangan* unless the final day of the *malangan* feast has been marked.

### **The Shedding Period**

Before sunrise on the day after the painting work of the *malangan* had been completed, an elderly man or two lead the young initiate boys who have just undergone the initiation/circumcision ceremonies and rites, to a private, quiet place to be ritually "washed" and "confirmed". They stand in salt water on the reefs and the old man wets the boys by dipping a red *tanget* branch in salt water. This is the other ritual part of the second stage of the initiatory *malangan* that the boys began when their penises were circumcised. This is followed by a waiting period of two or three weeks for the boys' wounds to heal.

The ritual "washing" is to cleanse the boys of any "impurities" from evil spirits (*masalais*), weakness like laziness or cowardice, and to strengthen the lads so they do not fall sick once they re-enter the community and begin to live as adults and not as mere children any more. This also means they will not get sick and die from sexual intercourse with women. After the ritual washing has been performed, the boys are led back to the *antein*. These boys are called *kazau* in the Mandar dialect. Once the *kazaus* are in their *malangan* house, they know that their period of initiation is coming to an end. They are excited and wonder what kind of man each of them is going to become.

### **Public Presentation of Youths**

The *kazaus* are decorated on the head with *silulu* feathers (a black bird like the bird of paradise in structure) and with white, yellow and red traditional paint on the body, legs, arms and face. They are really smartly clad. They are now psychologically and physically tuned, vibrating with excitement and vim for their big day of public presentation or exhibition, after which they will be accepted and treated as adult men of their clans. In the meantime the *malangan*, all completely painted the day before, is placed in the house of

exhibition built for it, while the lads are being decorated. Then the *garamuts* begin to roll out the message of the big day to the people.

By now, the *antein* is filled with men; the *kazaus* are brought to the assembly part of the *antein*. Then the bigman (*orong*) of the clans of the boys announces proudly that his nephew or perhaps son has successfully completed his period of initiation, and the *malangan* that was given to him perhaps by an uncle or father (at the time of his own initiation long ago) he now gives to his nephew *Karake*; and he insists that later, when giving it over to a relative, the boys are to tell everyone clearly that they got it from him on such an occasion. Then the relatives come up to the boys and give them *mis* as a mark of tribute to compensate for the inconveniences of pain and loss of blood at circumcision and for abstinences during the time of initiation. The celebration continues, traditional dances are performed by different groups, with further paying of the artist and the *malangan* house-builders for the work. A big *kaikai* or feast closes the celebration.

### The Unda Malangan Rite

The second initiation *malangan* is called *unda* in Mandar dialect. This *malangan* is done only to first born children, either male or female. Often a childless married couple who have adopted children from some relatives make an *unda malangan* for the first child they adopt. The child who has gone through this *malangan* is called *unda*. Everyone respects him or her, because normally he or she is the nephew, niece or son/daughter of a wealthy clan leader and spokesman who is or was a clan leader.

The young child is placed in what is called *an'uli*, a house for initiating a child who is to be a leader in his clan. He is only perhaps a few months old. He is not allowed to wander around everywhere when he grows up with other children. He is not a common or ordinary child. He is going to be a sacred person, a powerful charismatic leader, a bigman indeed (*e.orong unda*). The relatives only allow him to play around close by the *an'uli* with some children of relatives. They also do not allow other people to see him. Only his mother, and sometimes his aunts (his father's sisters) are allowed to feed the boy. Otherwise only his father, maternal uncles and older brothers attend to the needs of the boy. He stays in seclusion this way until he reaches the age of seven or eight years old. After this it is time to make a *malangan* festival in which he will be the central figure.

The *malangan* follows the same procedure I have described above. I will, however, add a number of things that make this ritual different from the other initiation rite. The *malangan* exhibition hut is erected somewhere in the *antein* where everyone will be able to see the young *unda* (bigman) sitting on a stool or seat made in the *malangan* house where one or more *malangan* are exhibited for the

community to see. The people on the day of *malangan* festival assemble around the *malangan* house which is completely fenced with bombom, (dry coconut leaves); the people are not yet able to see the *unda* nor the *malangan*.

Inside the *malangan* house, the *unda* is being decorated and vested with traditional power symbols for his official bigman position in society. On his head he wears the long feathers of the sacred bird, *e zilulu*, strung around his neck and hanging in front is a *capkep*, the New Ireland Symbol of *unda*. The sacred power of the *malangan* in which he is made *unda*, and with which he has become identified (it is his *malangan* now) is signified by a woven bush-cord hung around the neck, like a deacon's stole. The forehead, the breast and the back around the shoulder blades are painted with yellow paint, mixed with lime and *kavavar* (a ginger-like plant). He has lime on his face and yellow and red-ochre paints around his body and legs and arms. He is holding with both hands what is believed to be the head of the *malangan*.

The people in the *malangan* house (*an'uli*) are singing the *malangan* song, *buro*. Nearby a platform is erected with slaughtered pigs of the *malangan* stacked up on it. Standing over the pigs on the platform, the father, or uncle who is also an *unda*, proudly tells everyone, who made him an *unda*, how many *mis* and pigs were spent and used in the process of making him an *unda* and rightful owner of *malangan* in his clan; and now that his son and relatives have given so many *mis* and pigs and food to him, and because he is their eldest boy, he now makes him *unda* of his clan. It is now time for the new *unda* to make his public appearance.

Every one is seated on the ground. No one is to be head higher than the *unda* when he walks ceremoniously and solemnly out of the *an'uli* to go to the platform of ceremony and public speech (no one, except another *unda* can stand on the ceremonial *malangan* platform over the pigs). The elders who are to lead the young *unda* out of the *an'uli*, rush out from the *an'uli*, breaking through the wall of bomboms; one stands at the entrance dancing the *buro* dance, the other glides in front of the platform. He leaps off the ground, lands on both feet, swings around, faces the crowd, glides back to the entrance of the *an'uli*, makes hissing sounds with his tongue, and teeth, swings around again to face the people and stands dancing in front of the other elder. The elderly relative who once fed the young *unda* goes in front of the *an'uli* with a food basket filled with scraped coconut, throws a handful of this scraped coconut to the entrance of the *an'uli* and says, Um—um— "*U aramang u*", i.e. "Here is food, son, come out now." Then the crowd begin to clap their hands and as the young *unda* walks slowly and solemnly out of the *an'uli* the bombom wall is torn down. The *unda* is accompanied with an elder relative who walks in front of him. Further on, in front of two *uli* masters of ceremony, the mother of

the *unda* walks backwards while facing the *unda* and throwing handfuls of scraped coconut to get the *unda* right up the *malangan* platform.

The young *unda* comes up to the platform, climbs up, helped by the *uli* masters of ceremony, sticks the *uli malangan* power symbol he holds in his hand into a bamboo, cut and decorated for the purpose, and then sits down.

The *buro* singing and dance ceases when the new *unda* has taken his seat. The clapping also stops. The young boy is now an *unda*, a sacred person, a clan leader. When the young *unda* is seated on the *uli*-platform, the crowd rises and people begin now to move everywhere, some to prepare food, some to see the *malangan* on exhibition, others to prepare for the day's dances.

In the afternoon, some time after the dances of the day are over, they begin the sharing of pigs and food. The cutting up of pigs for sharing commences only after an elderly *unda* has danced around the food and pigs while delivering a speech about the ritual that has just taken place.

## Mortuary Malangan

Although the two initiation *malangan* I have described were big events in traditional culture here in New Ireland, they were never as big and extensive (i.e. involving as large a circle of relatives) as the *malangan* festivals that were and still are celebrated for the final festive commemoration of deceased relatives. Again, since the procedures of making a *malangan* are the same, I do not have to repeat the details. In brief, every kind of *malangan* festival follows this sequence of events:—Preparing pigs for the *malangan*; making gardens; getting dances ready; the artist's preparation of the *malangan*; a number of small pig-feasts; the big *malangan* festival; exhibition of the *malangan*; dances; speech by the *unda*, and the communal eating and dealing out of food.

If, for example, three related clans make a *malangan* to finalize their obligation to dead relatives, there would be three different kinds of *malangan* made (i.e. separate wood carvings). The number of *malangan* carvings depends on how many clans or *malangan* owners are involved in the festival. However, it seems from what a number of people explained to me, that the number of spirit faces or figures corresponds to the number of these deceased being commemorated. I hope it is clear by now, that after this *malangan* is celebrated in honour of certain deceased clan members, no other *malangan* festival of the kind will be made for them. Obligations, and debts are settled during this time, reconciliation also is often made, and new obligations and debts created.

# Analysis and Interpretation of the Malangan Tradition

To analyse and interpret the *malangan* tradition, I shall deal with it under four headings:—Art, Religion (or Cult), Social Political, Economic.

## Art

I need not go into any lengthy explanation to prove that the New Ireland spirit-mask, the *malangan* carvings and the *buoro* melodies and dances which all belong to the *malangan* tradition are artistic expressions ... that is self-evident. Altogether, it is undoubtedly a very unique kind of art of which we in New Ireland have every reason to be proud. But it is not just ordinary art. It is sacred art expressing the deepest and basic substance of man, *life* (or soul) and *religion* (man's relationship to a salutary creative presence which is able to influence man's life one way or the other).

## Religion

The New Ireland *malangan* tradition is, as I have just pointed out, a cult and indeed the core of our traditional religion of New Ireland (i.e. of the Central-North-West of the province). The *malangan* is heavy with rituals and rubrics (norms to be adhered to) where-ever it is made. For instance, during one or other of the communal meals or feasts no one is allowed to sit on anything in the *antein* where a *malangan* is being made. All simply sit on the sand or bare ground. Nothing can be thrown from one person to another; it should be given properly. No one should treat the *malangan* disrespectfully for it is the *living presence* of ancestral spirits; nor should anyone walk through or over the sacred place of disposal of *malangan* waste materials. Whoever violates these laws is risking all kinds of evil, such as big ulcers, sickness and death, if nothing is done in time to repel the spirit's punishment.

## Political Aspects

Every human society has some kind of politics in its structure. Traditional New Ireland society is no exception to this. We used to have a fine system of government here which we might call social communalism. Every clan in the village was a political unit governed by the *unda* and elders like chief warrior, rain-maker, etc. There was often rivalry between clans, self-centredness often dominated events like the *malangan* festival, but the common good of the clan was undoubtedly the heart and goal of traditional politics. The elders and *unda* knew that they owned things not only for themselves but for children and relatives. Indeed there was no place for a selfish man or woman in traditional society.



## Economic Concerns

The *malangan* festival was a product of a subsistent economy. During the *malangan* festival people settled their old debts, exchanged gifts of food and *mis* and made new investments. People invested their work, food, *mis* and pig reciprocally; "I help you now so that you will help me later when I and my clan group make a *malangan*". Everyone had plenty to eat. Some individuals became temporarily rich quite quickly. But a bigman or a richman was expected to make a *malangan* festival so that he would spend and use the surplus of valuables he had accumulated. In short, it was an economy that sought equilibrium between communities and individuals.

## Conclusion

In the past, the *malangan* festival was everything. People believed in it, worshipped in it continually and spent all they had in it. Today it is different.

The *malangan* bulwark and structure is crumbling down before the forces and onslaught of the foreign western culture which is, by and large, more individualistic, materialistic and work-centred, than traditional cultures.

The older people still believe in the *malangan* cult. Often, in some areas of central New Ireland especially, we still find people making the *malangan* festival, but they often admit that it is not the same as it was in the past, say, sixty, seventy years ago and more. The young people do not take the celebration seriously as a cult or belief system. I feel that the *malangan* as a cult is going to fade from the consciousness of our young people as year by year the old *malangan* masters pass away to where our ancestors are. It is quite evident even now that many young people are not seriously involved. No one can blame them. Inevitable changes have taken place and are still taking place in and around us at such an incredible speed that we are just being carried away with them. Nothing we can do will help to re-establish a community alive with *malangan* beliefs and the spirits of our ancestors.