

A Female Initiation Rite in the Neigrie Area

Introduction

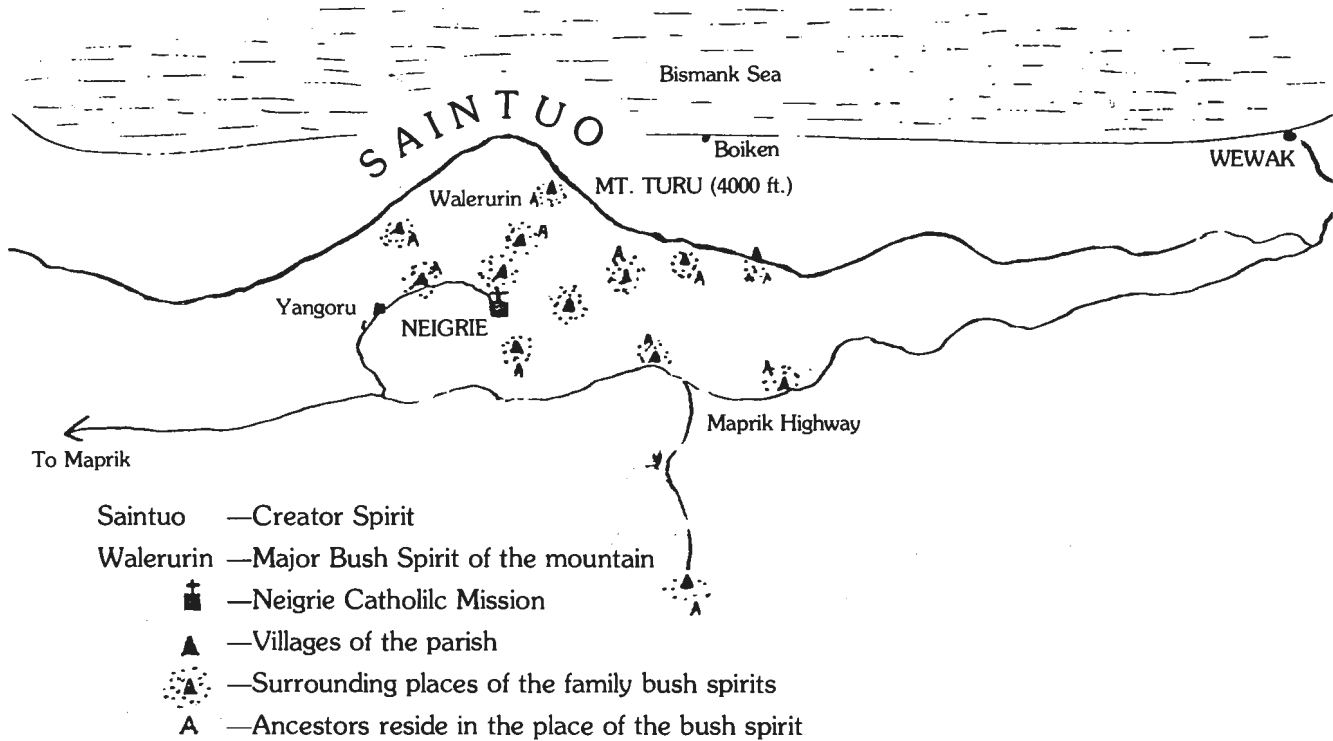
The Neigrie area is 60 miles south-west of Wewak in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. The mission station of Neigrie is situated in the foothills of Mt. Turu, scene of the 1971 Cargo Cult. This station is the centre of a Catholic parish, containing some 23 villages and 3,000 people. The people belong to the coastal Boiken language group and speak the Yangoru dialect, with some variations.

This paper written from the point of view of a sympathetic observer, a missionary to the people of Neigrie, describes the rite of passage of the young girls reaching puberty. It also attempts to discover a religious dimension in its heavily socio-economic function.

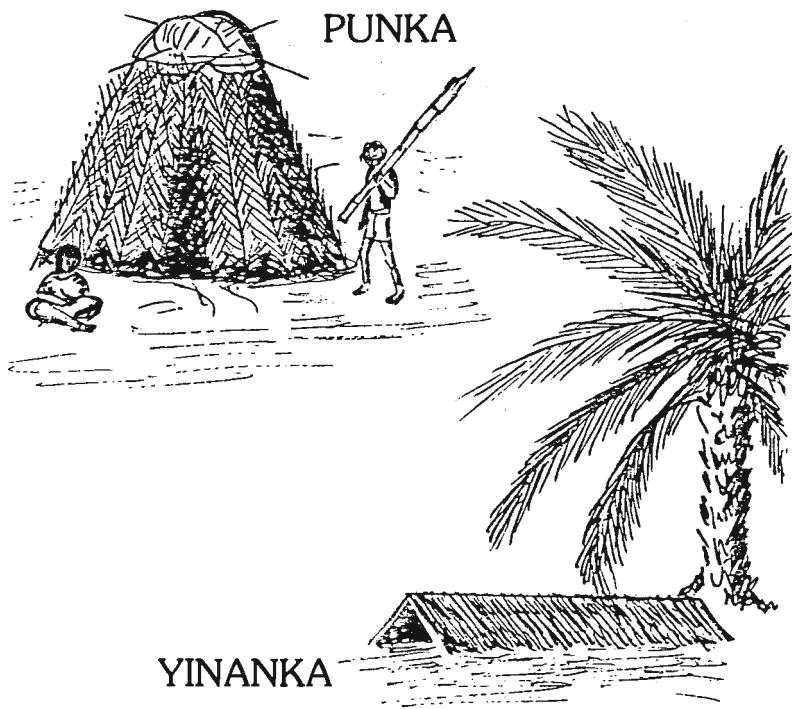
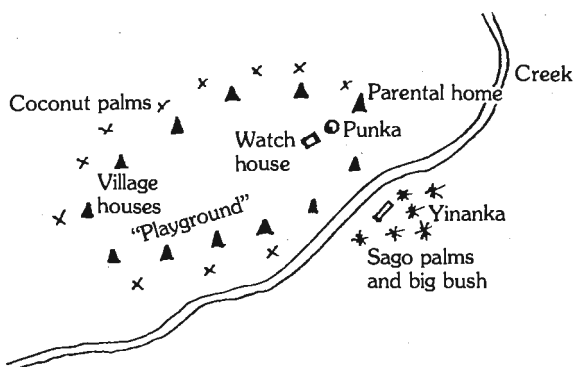
There is a history of Catholic contact in the area. When the mission station became established after World War II evangelism was intensified and conversions made. The acceptance of Christianity at that time meant the giving up of a number of the traditional practices, among them the Telekhrie—the singsing for the girl having her first menstrual period (*sikmun*). It was prohibited by the missionaries, allegedly because of the violence done to the girls.

Today, with the changed attitudes of missionaries towards traditional practices and the government's thrust for cultural revival, the practice is becoming common again, although it has undergone some changes. Many of the details of the ceremony have been revived, but the reasons for them are no longer clear. The reasoning given is often: "We do not know why we must do this custom. We are doing it because the Ancestors did it this way." The effectiveness of doing certain actions and the dire consequences of breaking ancestral laws are considered reason enough for performing the rites.

COSMOLOGY OF THE NEIGRIE AREA



PLAN OF AREA OF RITE



Origin Myth of Telekhrie

The practice of money-exchanging and singing at the time of a girl's first *sik mun* first began a long time ago in the era of the ancestors.¹ There were two sisters, Leritagwa who was childless and Tirauntagwa, who had a son Wurin and a daughter Rariwai. Leritagwa the Childless, jealous of the fertility of her sister, stole the two children, hid them in the bush and began to sing and dance in happiness for her new-found motherhood. Many people sang and danced for Leritagwa's two new children. Tirauntagwa, discovering the loss of her children, and hearing the noise of the singing, lit a *bombom* (torch of dried coconut leaves) and went to find them. A fight ensued between the two women but soon they were reconciled by an exchange of money.

In other words the childless woman (as a pre-pubertal girl is childless) now had two children of her own (as the girl becomes able to have children of her own after her first menstruation). This transformation was sealed by an exchange of money. The custom of celebrating the Telekhrie is derived from the story of this event.

Period of Separation

The first step in the Rite of Passage is a time of separation from the rest of the community. According to the law of the ancestors this begins in the early morning, as soon as the girls discover that their first menstrual flow has begun. It is important that this should begin before the family have eaten food, smoked or chewed betel nut since all of these are prohibited activities for the parents during the first day of the period, and for the following days for the girl till the time of the ceremony. This prohibition (called *tambu*) applies for a full 24 hours to the parents regardless of where the girl is located. The girl maintains a total fast from the time her period begins until the ceremonial breaking of the fast some four or five days later.

When a girl's first period actually begins later on in the day, she is severely reprimanded by her parents when she informs them. They accuse her of not telling them earlier when it actually happened; now trouble will come from their having broken the food, betel nut and smoking *tambu*. They believe that blindness and early senility may occur as a result.

Punka—the menstrual house

The girl's brothers, maternal uncles or father's cousins build the *punka*, a cone-like structure in the public village clearing. (Henceforth during all her subsequent menstrual periods, she will sleep for the three days in a house at the edge of the village). The *punka* is a frail temporary structure used during the week of

ceremonial activities. Coconut leaves are fastened to posts with a roof peak area covered by limbum bark (from tree resembling the coconut) and large wild taro leaves. It is *tambu* for a man to go inside the *punka* after the girl has entered it. If he does, death or senility are expected to occur. Many relations gather to watch the building of the *punka* and the "watch-house" of the parents.

The "watch-house" is a temporary hut constructed very close to the opening of the *punka*. The parents watch over their daughter during the time of her separation, which may last five days and nights. They protect her from enemies who might be jealous of the parents' wealth. The enemy would conceal a piece of bark or ginger in the ground for the girl to walk over. He would work poison on it and thus cause the girl to be sick.² He would then beat his breast and say happily: "Now she will die!" So the parents stay close by to prevent this harm.

The menstrual blood is considered dangerous, and contact with it is believed to cause harm both to man and to his food gardens. Therefore, from the moment the girl enters the *punka*, she is forbidden to leave it for the garden or to enter her parents' house. If she breaks this *tambu*, the family may become blind, their legs grow heavy and the food in the gardens will be of a very poor quality. Prohibitions of eating from the same plate as the parents, stepping over the string bags (*bilums*) of other people, or smoking the same pipe as their parents are enforced from this time.

Cutting the hair

While the two huts are being built, the girl goes off to the creek to wash, accompanied by a female relative. On returning to the village clearing, the relative shaves off the girl's hair. The girl gathers it into a little bundle and takes it into the *punka* with her, to be burnt with the *punka* after the completion of the ritual. This hair is considered to be bad, belonging to her former stage, and must be discarded to mark the new situation of the girl. She no longer is a child and is now subject to all the prohibitions relating to women, e.g. the scraping of copra for cooking purposes is *tambu* because it involves straddling a small stool, which could bring the food and blood into contact. When the young girl's hair grows again, it is "good hair" and marks re-entry into normal life. Until it grows again, she is prohibited from entering the parental household.

The Washings

The girl is given a public washing each day of the five days' separation. She stands outside the entrance of the *punka*, dressed only in a skirt. The father or elder brother capsizes water over her from a length of bamboo. In order to prevent the girl's "dirt" from going into the ground and thereby making her vulnerable to enemies using it to poison her, she is made to stand on a large wild taro leaf.

The washing is done publicly so all can see that she does not cheat by drinking the water and thus break the *tambu*.

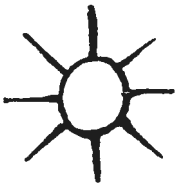
Threshold

Having been separated from the community by being hidden in the *punka* for four or five days, the girl enters the threshold period of her new life.

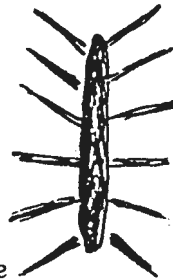
Skin cutting

The practice of cutting a pattern on the upper arms, above the breasts and on the stomach had been prohibited years ago but is being revived today, with the exception of the cuttings on the stomach. The purpose of the practice is to strengthen the girl by trial. Later the scars would show interested males that she had reached puberty and was therefore 'available', that is, marriageable. Two markings are used, a centipede and the sun. Informants insisted that there is no special significance in these two marks; they are "just decoration", not the mark of a *pisin* (totemic group) or spirit. While she is being cut by a razor blade, the girl is not allowed to cry out; if she does, she will not become a strong woman. A bigman or the girl's aunt does the cutting and receives an amount of money up to 10 Kina. This occurs on the second day of the girl's residence in the *punka*.

MARKS OF THE SKIN-CUTTING



Sun



Centipede

Food *tambu*

For five days the girl remains in the menstrual hut; she fasts during this time from all food and water (though some families allow water). She must do this without complaining and without cheating. If she breaks the *tambu*, it is believed she will be lazy, her garden will never produce good food, and she will not look after her children well, her skin will be slack and pale; in short, she will become a completely

undesirable housewife and mother. If she keeps the rules, she becomes strong, a good worker and also gains the status of "woman". The parents are also under the food *tambu* but fast only on the first day and night. Hence, it is important they be told early in the day, so the fast can begin at the proper time.

Singsing *Telek* or *Telekhrie*

On the second day, if the girl is a first-born or last-born daughter, the people begin singing. Groups stand on hilltops, raise their arms above their heads with hands clasped and sing the *telek* songs. The time is both sad and happy; sad because the girl is now available for marriage which will take her away from home, and happy because she is now a woman.

This song is about the girl leaving her brother and sister-in-law, feeling sorry at the parting and her sad situation. The leaving is the implied departure for marriage later to another village for as soon as the girl has her first period, she is eligible for marriage, and the whole ceremony is geared to that future event.

Sengi nomoh fentaha yi,
Manugri hanjah saliraha yia.
Fentaha yiani perenka humpiku
Saliraha yiani nankuka huanje

I leave my beautiful red-bird
brother and go,

My yellow-bird sister-in-law
I've left and come.

I leave and go and don't find
shade with the other people
under the palms;

I've left and gone like the flying
fox in the sago-palm leaf.

Because it is a sad time, people think of any sad songs to sing. These may include a lament for a dead husband, a fight with another person, a broken marriage. They sing across from hilltop to hilltop at night. Men beat the *garamuts* (large wooden slit-drums) calling out to the family lines to warn them to prepare their money for the payment. A family bigman (a man with special powers and therefore status and wealth) is engaged to work a little secret incantation over some vines and ginger in order to entice the families into giving money. This spell falls on the paying families. The bigman calls on the creator Spirit, Saintuo³ to influence them. The *garamuts* also call out to the father of the girl's prospective husband who has been marked for her when she was still a child. He comes to see how she behaves during the time of trial and to see what amount of money is paid, for later he will have to double that amount for his

son's "bride price." The singing goes on each day and night till the climactic ceremony on the final day.

Heating the stones

On the fourth afternoon, at the time of the daily washing, a piece of *limbum* bark is folded up into a basket, and certain types of leaves are placed in it. Stones are heated in a fire and then placed in the basket. As water is poured in the combination of steam and the cooking leaves give off a beautiful sweet-smelling aroma. Saintuo and the Ancestors smell it and are pleased and their blessing ensures good fortune for the girl and her community in the future.

Secrets

The "secrets" which are rules of conduct and taboos, such as who one can marry, are not learned for the first time in the *punka*. These are learned during the girl's childhood. She has very little to say at the time of her first *sik mun*. The maternal uncles, parents and family have total control. Some teachings are given to the girl, especially in relation to the actual ceremony, e.g., if her "*tok pilai man*" (joke-man)⁴ comes to taunt her with cries of "I'm hungry", or tricks her into eating, or tries to tell her to leave the *punka*, then some woman will come and warn the girl not to take any notice, but to stay inside the *punka* and not break the *tambu*.

Further teachings include what the girl must do on the actual day of the ceremony, how to sit, how to place her hands, when to go back into the *punka* and particularly the *tambu* about blood. When the wrong people come into contact with a woman's menstrual blood, they are thought to pay the penalty of really old age, blindness, forgetting the ways of the Ancestors, losing their intellectual clarity or becoming senile. Gardens can also be spoiled if a menstruating woman enters them. If a woman chews betel nut while she is having her monthly period, then the time of the period will be lengthened from the normal three days to a much longer time:

The initial period is distinguished from the normal monthly one; in the local language the first period is called *narin*, while a different term, *pairan*, is used for the normal period, during which the woman secludes herself for three days and is prohibited from cooking, gardening or any manual work. No uninitiated girl is allowed any contact with the menstruating girl, and must stay apart during the ceremony; if she comes too close to the uninitiated the blood can cause a premature initial menstruation. The *Telekhrie* is sometimes referred to as "buying the blood" of the girl, the local interpretation which means paying for the blood or paying money at the time of the passing of blood.

The ceremony

The socio-economic aspect of the whole rite is seen most clearly in

the actual ceremony of the fifth day when the girl "comes out" and breaks her fast. In the morning the people from other villages begin gathering in the girl's village. Her brothers (including cousins called family brothers) have brought the money that unknown to them has been enticed out of them by the spell of the bigman. They come to place their money on a piece of limbum bark in the sight of all the people. The parents also give money. The mother's brothers are to receive the payment of money and rings.⁵ The money is gathered and held for the money exchange at the end of the ritual.

Wild taro leaves are placed on the ground outside the *punka* and the girl emerges looking pale and emaciated after her fast. The leaves protect her not only from the possibility of *poisen* but also from being bitten by insects which may cause her to become sick.

The girl is then given another washing from water stored in long bamboo containers. She washes herself with a couple of leaves and returns to the hut to put on a dry skirt. On coming outside again, she is seated on limbum bark and must hold her hands with palms upwards to prevent them from touching the ground. Female relatives come and decorate her with rings, necklaces and other decorations, which she must return. Seated thus, she is given some of the money to hold for a short time to signify that her brothers are giving it to their relatives. Later she gives the money to her *kandre* (maternal uncle).

The girl's aunt sits on the ground facing her and is handed three small bamboo containers of water. The first one she pours into the girl's mouth to drink. She then wipes the girl's tongue with leaves and rinses her mouth with the second container of water. The girl is allowed to drink from the third container of water without touching the bamboo. (The woman who cooked the food for the breaking of the fast later receives a money payment.)

The fast is broken by consumption of a token soup, cooked by a female relative. Pieces of taro or yam, newly cooked, are then placed on the ends of three sticks. The woman takes the sticks and passes the food over the girl's head and under her arms from back to front. The motion over the head is to show that everybody in the clan will benefit from this girl's coming of age and to ward off evil. The motion under the arms signifies the receiving of strength to her arms. The girl may then take a small bite of the food. If she eats a large amount she will be ridiculed for being greedy and having no strength to fast. The sticks are then stuck into the roof of the hut and left there until the house is demolished.

Saintuo and the ancestors (*tumbunas*) see this food, see the sun on it and the wind moving it, and know that the girl will be strong. This is a mark, like the aroma of the steamed leaves, made for the higher beings to observe and be assured that the rites are being carried out according to law, and therefore these beings are expected to fulfil their part of the relationship by dispensing material and social blessings.

During the ceremony the singing continues with songs that call upon Saintuo and the *tumbunas* to come, observe and give the girl strength. The songs of the adults are serious ones addressed to Saintuo and the *tumbunas* while those of the children are merely playful songs without serious meaning.

The girl returns to her *punka* and her part in the ceremony is completed. Finally the people settle down to the real business—the money exchange.

The money exchange

The function of the whole process was described by an informant as follows:

“It is like being a member of the Coffee Society (part of the S.P.C.A., Sepik Producers Co-Operative Association, a large New Guinean owned co-operative). To become a member, you have to pay membership dues. If you do not pay the price and receive a membership card, you are not permitted to sell your coffee. Similarly, the girl is like the membership card: her brothers give money to their maternal uncles thus becoming economic members of the family group with the right to engage in all other financial exchanges.”

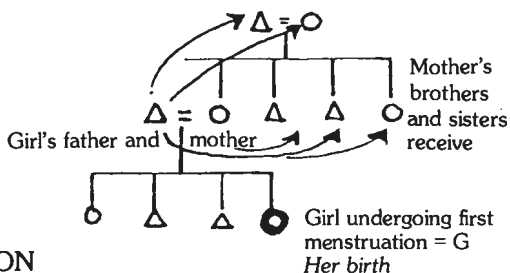
The brothers also gain status through this exchange; they too grow up socially. They will receive double the payment they make during a *telekhrie* at the time of the girl's marriage when the bride price is given by the new husband and his family. (The mother also shares in the bride-price for her trouble in rearing the girl). The idea of repaying debts is involved in the money exchange. When the girl was small she received many gifts from her family. Now it is time to repay those gifts. The amounts of money exchanged vary from 200 kina to almost 1000 kina.

A line of *noks* (ribs of the sections of the coconut or sago palm frond) are stuck into the ground and each stick is named as the mark of one of the people receiving money and rings. Much haggling goes on as the *kandre* decide that there is not enough money appearing, or that the rings are too small. Angry shouting is a normal part of the money exchange.

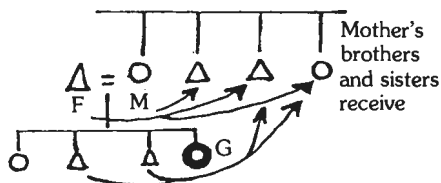
When all the money has been placed near the sticks it is gathered up and distributed, names and amounts being recorded. This socio-economic aspect of the *telekhrie* seems to be the most important part in the minds of the people. When asked what part of the whole process was most important, the honouring of Saintuo and the *Tumbunas* or the money exchange, the reply was that both parts were equally important. But in any normal discussions, talk always centred around the money exchange, and only a lot of probing revealed that there was a deeper religious dimension.

MONEY EXCHANGES IN FIVE RITES OF PASSAGE

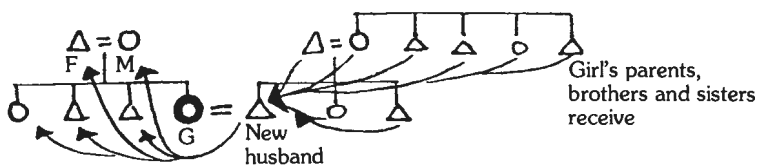
BIRTH



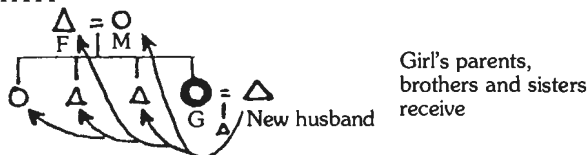
FIRST MENSTRUATION



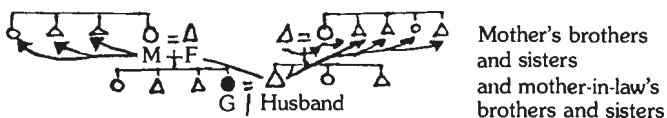
MARRIAGE



GIVING BIRTH



DEATH



The singsing to entice people to give presents

On the morning of the day of the ceremony, an amusing singsing occurs. A group of women from another village stand in a cluster and begin to sing to the rest of the people: "Come on Kaspar; give us that nice shirt you have on!" or "I want that skirt you are wearing, Maria" and "You women are selfish people. At the last *telekhrie* in our village we gave you many gifts. Now it is your turn to give us some, so hand them over!" A second group of women from the host village sing in a group at the opposite end of the village clearing, and return the joking abuse.

The men sit around telling the visiting women to ask the host villagers for cartons of beer, cartons of tinned fish, bags of rice, and so on. The whole ceremony is carried on in a manner of joking abuse. Food and gifts are then heaped in the clearing and distributed to the visitors. Real abuse follows if the presents are not considered up to the standard of the previous gifts. This ceremony had disappeared for years and has only been reintroduced in the last year or so.

The Pitpit

On the day following the ceremony, a female relative of the girl prepares some small lengths of *pitpit* (wild sugar cane) and grass and gives it to the girl who removes the skin of the pitpit. The following day, the seventh, her father and brothers break up the menstrual hut and burn it with the bad hair, the *limbum* bark she slept on and the food pieces attached to sticks. The women gather in the creek where a small *mumu* (hot rocks method of cooking food under the ground in a hole) is prepared by the parents. Inedible leaves are cooked. This seems to be a distractor from the water rite which is carried on at the same time.

During the water rite groups sit facing each other in the water. The girl is handed the pitpit and grass and throws it into the centre of the creek. Both groups of women make a dive for it. The one who retrieves it shouts out a triumphant chant and all join in. This is carried on until the supply is finished.

The meaning is not clear. The girl does not actually handle the pitpit, but makes a gesture of throwing it into the creek. A small girl does the action for her. This means she is not yet fully cleansed.

Another small rite occurs at this time. An image of a baby—a doll if obtainable or a kitten—is decorated with a new piece of material, its face painted. It is placed in a small doll's house also decorated with paint. These are hidden in the bush. The purpose is not clear, but the decorating of a baby figure is connected with the new-found ability of the girl to bear children. These ceremonies mark the period of finishing the girl's time of trial.

Trial by beating and stinging nettles

The missions and government outlawed the beatings traditionally given to the girl. These were meant to strengthen her for womanhood if she could pass through the trial without crying out or weeping. The custom is being brought back now, but is kept hidden from "outside" people such as government officials and white visitors.

For three weeks after the *telekhrie*, the girl remains on food *tambu*: she is not permitted to eat meat, chew *buai* (betel nut) or drink cold water in her parents' house.

At the end of these three weeks, the girl's *kandre* build a house of trial—a long, low structure lined inside with *salat*, a stinging nettle. This hut is called the *yinanka*. It is about three metres long and waist high. The *salat* causes swellings on the skin and is extremely painful; it is used as a counter irritant in traditional medicinal practices. The floor and roof area of the *yinanka* are completely covered with the prickly leaf. The girl is required to crawl through this painful structure without cry or complaint, thereby gaining strength for womanhood.

On emerging from the *yinanka* the girl is carried on the back of a male relative through the centre of two lines of people holding sticks and stinging nettles. As she is carried through, she and the man bearing her are beaten. Even if blood is drawn, the girl is not permitted to cry out or weep. If she does, she will be a weakling. Afterwards, the man and the girl go to the creek to wash.

A variation on this type of beating is that the girl is lifted bodily onto the arms of four couples and is tossed into the air again and again, her body being turned so that she falls onto the waiting arms face down, then on her back. Afterwards, all wash their hands and arms, to prevent sickness from having been in contact with the menstruating girl.

One other rite is observed towards the end of the trial period. A small hole in the sand by the creek is prepared by one of the woman. Water and 50 toea are placed in the hole with some ginger. A female relative straddles the hole after having washed. The girl crawls under her, puts her mouth to the little pool of water, thus ending the *tambu* on drinking cold water and also eating meat. It is believed that Saintuo and the *tumbuna* see all this and know that the girl has come to the end of her time of penance. The penance has given the girl the strength to carry heavy bilums of food and firewood. The girl washes again. The woman who dug the hole received the money in the hole.

The following week the girl has her second menstrual period (her first *pairan*) and fasts for one day from all food and keeps the *buai*, smoking and meat *tambu*. From there on at all her following periods she does not fast, but only keeps the *tambu*. It is said that if someone feels a nerve jump in the upper arm where the skin cutting

is done, then on the following day, a young girl will have her *narin*.

Having been separated from the community for five days, and having passed through all the trials of initiation, the girl has left the threshold stage, and now enjoys her new situation as a woman in adult society.

The New Situation

After having been initiated, the girl is no longer considered a child. She enters the new situation of adulthood having gained a new respect and is treated as an equal. She is now allowed to plant taro, look after family members and give food gifts to special friends. As a child she could play. Now, as a young woman, she must work, listen to and respond to other places when they call out for help in certain activities such as planting a new food garden. She is now allowed to approach the *punka* of other young girls.

Her new position of respect means that children are not allowed to swear at her. Because a large amount of money has been paid out for her she cannot be treated lightly any more. It is similar to having a child, giving a pig or being initiated in the *Haus Tambaran* (Male Spirit House of initiation for boys). A man who pays out a considerable amount of money gains the name of big man and youngsters are not allowed to annoy him. Only another big man, one's peer, can do so. As with the man, so with the initiated woman. She has gained a higher status and a changed role in the community. The new hair growing on her head signifies that she now has begun adulthood. The girls show a new dignity in their manner.

The new situation means more freedom for the girls. Their interest in the young men means a new social life at dances, singing and movies, where they feel they are free of parental control. They like to *taun* (travel around). Their thoughts turn towards their future marriage. Soon the girl goes off to another village to "try" marriage. If it becomes permanent, she loses the right of ownership of the trees, breadfruit, betel nut, coconut, sago, pawpaw, and other goods to which she once had free access. If she makes a return visit to her home village after her marriage, she must ask permission to take fruit from any of the trees. She must also become known to the *masalai* (bush spirit) of her new family, or she will become sick when visiting its special place in the bush. So her new situation opens for her a whole new way of life and, in a functional way, almost a new religion: "Your *masalai* shall be my *masalai* and your people shall become my people." It is no wonder that many of the young brides often run home to mother in the early days of their marriages. The cutting off of the old way of life with its known and cherished ways and the entering into a strange new context can be traumatic. If the girl has married in her own village the break is not so severe.

The Revival

The government and the missions are now telling the people that they must bring back the good customs of the *tumbunas*. Young children must not be ignorant of the culture of their forefathers. This changed attitude is causing confusion among some of the people. The revival of the *telekhrie*, however, is spreading. It seems to be a convenient way of maintaining the relationships essential to the structure of the society.

It is said that if a person tries to initiate a new work, e.g. a garden, a *telekhrie* and so on, they will fail if they try to do it by their own strength. The venture will be successful only if one follows the "law of before".

Certain changes have occurred over the period of years when the *telekhrie* was prohibited. Since the revival, ordinary Government currency of kina and toea, cartons of beer, and other store goods are included in the money exchange alongside the traditional ring and cane money.⁶ Previously, according to an informant, the *telekhrie* was not as important for the money exchange as for the honouring of the spirit world and gaining their approval. But since the missions prohibited the "worship of false gods" the people did as they were told. As a result the money is the most important part.

The Religious Dimension

There is a deep religious dimension to the *Telekhrie*, but it seems to be hidden because first, it is so taken for granted by the people, and second, because only an elite few, the bigmen, have access to communication with the spirit world of Saintuo, the Creator Being, and the ancestors.

The attitude of the people towards the religious aspects seems to be low key. It is not obligatory to perform all the rites of the *telekhrie*. Their omission will not bring down the wrath of the ancestors. Neither, however, will it bring a blessing.

The spirits that are asked for help are the local creator spirit Saintuo and the family ancestors. There are no dealings with the family *masalais* at all. Any contact with them at this time might bring sickness to the girl. The family ancestors are asked to watch over the *punka* and help the girl to "win her time" (pass all the trials successfully). The sweet-smelling leaves heated with hot rocks attract the blessing of Saintuo and the ancestors. The bigman who tries to influence the money-givers calls upon Saintuo and the *tumbunas*.

However, their attitude seems to be slightly belligerent; they attempt to manipulate those of the other world to help them. Their approach is: "You listen Saintuo! We have performed these rites according to the Ancestral Law. We have done all things well. Now

you *must* look after our concerns. You *must* influence the thinking of these men so they will bring plenty of money. You *must* protect the girl from danger. You *must* bring good fortune to us.”

In trying to explain the religious dimension of the *telekhrie*, an informant likened it to his concept of the Catholic Mass: “At Mass you give honour to God. The *telekhrie* is the same; it is like prayer. In the Mass the Catechist starts the singing and then everyone follows. Likewise in the *telekhrie* one person starts the singing, then all the others join in. The bigman contacts Saintuo and the *tumbunas*, just as the Catechist contacts God. The ordinary people are not able to do this. They do not know the secret ways of doing it. You pray to God to ask him for things; likewise in the *telekhrie* you ask Saintuo for things. Actually, Saintuo and God are one and the same. The people always knew Saintuo who made everything in the area, including the ceremony of *telekhrie*, but they were not clear that he was really God the Father. Now the missionaries have cleared their thinking, and now they know who Saintuo really is.”

As part of a hymn composed by a Neigrie man says: “Jisas ti Saintuore nen”—Jesus is Saintuo’s child.