

# BEL KOL CEREMONY OF THE YANGORU

NAOMI FAIK-SIMET

*This is a historical event for me as I look forward to reconcile with my in-law and his children, as they are my sister's children. I have to do this to be free from it... blood is thicker than water.*

—Joseph Rhumbuku Faik<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Peace ceremonies are known locally as *bel kol* ceremonies, with the Tok Pisin term “bel kol” literally meaning “belly cold”; this describes a tense situation that is cooled down with some payment for the purpose of making peace. These ceremonies are important forms of Papua New Guinea’s intangible cultural heritage that promote social cohesion and unity among disputing families and groups through the use of traditional knowledge—that is, heritage that has been passed down through generations and has been the key element used in solving issues between opposing groups.

This paper discusses how peace and reconciliation ceremonies are undertaken in Yangoru, East Sepik Province, in Papua New Guinea and gives an account of a ceremony that took place in Kwaghuie Village on 23 December 2013. It describes the processes involved and further portrays the challenges and successes of such a ceremony in promoting peace in the community.

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1. Joseph Faik, personal interview with author, 22 December 2013, Tuomilik Hamlet, Kwaghuie Village, Yangoru, East Sepik Province.

## SETTING

Yangoru is located in the Prince Alexander Range, situated in the foothills of Mount Turu. People there speak the Yangoru dialect of the Boiken language. It is a society known for its highly socio-political beliefs and traditions. According to ethnographic accounts by Gesch<sup>2</sup> and Roscoe,<sup>3</sup> the Yangoru Boiken have a long history of contact with the outside world. The first visitors were Divine Word Missionaries who came in 1912 and were later followed by many similar evangelizing tours that saw the establishment of a permanent mission presence in 1948. By the 1930s, labor recruiters and administrative patrols had begun to appear. These contacts had significant effects on Yangoru ritual and cultural life.

Due to its long history of contact with the Western world, many of its traditions have been affected as a result of the decline in some ritual practices, such as the separate male and female initiation ceremonies. Mortuary and peace ceremonies, however, are still being practiced today. In spite of the changes that have occurred in this region, the people are deeply rooted in their belief systems and strive to maintain their traditional ways of doing things, which has kept their culture alive for generations.

## CONFLICT SITUATION

On Thursday, 9 November 2011, Allan Naemon, age 38, was murdered in Kwaghuie Village in the Yangoru area by Jacob Faik, who was in his mid-thirties and was Allan's close maternal relative. Allan was the son of Jacob's paternal aunt. This event was devastating for both families. It was described as the worst incident to have ever happened in the history of Kwaghuie. After the murder, all the houses and property belonging to the Faik family were destroyed and burnt down (Figure ①). Being the daughter of the head of the Faik family, Joseph Faik, we were directly affected by this situation. Jacob is the son of my father's deceased elder brother and was, therefore, held responsible for the offense caused by his nephew. This tense situation continued to affect the lives of others and the community at large. It also resulted in the displacement of families. This became an ongoing problem in the community as the deceased's relatives

2. Patrick F. Gesch, "Initiative and Initiation. A Cargo Cult-type Movement in the Sepik against Its Background in Traditional Village Religion," *Studia Instituti Anthropos* 33 (St. Augustin, Germany: Anthropos-Institut, 1985).

3. Paul B. Roscoe, "In the Shadow of the Tambaran: Female Initiation among the Ndu of the Sepik Basin," In *Gender Rituals*, ed. Nancy C. Lutkehaus and Paul B. Roscoe (New York: Routledge, 1995): 55 – 81.

demanded some form of compensation from the family of the accused in order to have the situation resolved and restore any peace in the community.



## PEACE PROCESS

Over one-and-a-half years after the incident, community leaders decided to have peace talks with the family of the victim to resolve the matter. These talks started in June 2013 and continued through to November of the same year. The advice of village elders was sought as to how the peace ceremony should be undertaken. Usually, only men with traditional knowledge are qualified to be mediators at such ceremonies. They are the people who will deliver the *palpal* (a Tok Pisin term that means peace) to the grieving family. A special kind of language is used during the ceremony that must be learned by the mediator over many years. Today, younger male leaders such as village ward councilors are learning the processes of holding peace talks from the elders.

Given the highly socio-political status of the Yangoru people, whose land and belief system are passed down through the patrilineal line, women are seldom given the opportunity to be mediators. However, in some situations, women were used as *palpal*. The term “palpal” is derived from a plant (also known as *balbal* in Tok Pisin) that is also

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① Remnants of the destroyed Tuomilik Hamlet, the residence of the Faik family. © Naomi Faik-Simet

used as a symbol of peace in Yangoru. This was used in the ceremony held in Kwaghuie Village in December 2013.

## ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE

As in many conflict situations, the process of obtaining knowledge for peace is quite challenging. In this instance, the Naemon family (the family of the deceased) of the Mereghombi clan demanded a sum of PGK 65,000 payment in compensation from the Faik family of the Nemenduon clan. This payment was to be made before any peace could be reached by both parties.

The knowledgeable elders whose advice was sought on how to carry out the peace process included Pieri Nahula from Baimuru Village (Figure ②), Johnny Sausengu from Simbomie Village, and Joseph Yehilemo from Karapia Village (Figure ③). These men were not from Kwaghuie Village and remained neutral throughout the discussions. This is usually the case when deciding who should be involved as mediators. It gets complicated when peace mediators are selected from the same village where the problem exists. It was decided finally that given the time frame in which the incident had occurred (over two years prior), the Faik family would host the bel kol ceremony and not compensate the grieving family, as the person who committed the offense was being held in custody. To pay compensation would be in contempt of the court proceedings. This had to be agreed upon by the Naemon family, who finally accepted the decision and paved the way for the bel kol ceremony to take place.



② Pieri Nahula (*left*), a peace mediator, provided advice on the peace process. This meeting took place in Tuomilik Hamlet. © Naomi Faik-Simet

③ Another peace mediator, Joseph Yehilemo, and wife, Julie Yehilemo, in Karapia Village. © Naomi Faik-Simet

## PEACE ELEMENTS

Prior to the ceremony, the Faik family, led by Joseph Faik, was tasked to organize contributions in the form of money to give as palpal to the grieving family. The money had to be accompanied by traditional money known as *kol*. A key feature and symbol of peace is this *kol*, which must be included in any ceremony in Yangoru. The value of the *kol* ranges between PGK 1,000 and 5,000 per item. It is a valuable possession to many families in Yangoru that can also be used for bride price (payment for a bride) and initiation or death ceremonies. Many have successfully used this form of traditional item to resolve conflicts at the village level. This practice has been going on for generations and proves to be the essence of any peace ceremony.

The *kol* used for the ceremony was priced at PGK 4,000 and was made possible by cash contributions from other family and clan members (Figure 4). Careful instructions were issued by the elderly men that only a particular *kol* accepted by the head of the grieving family could be purchased. This had to be followed to avoid the embarrassment of the grieving family rejecting the *kol* during the ceremony. This has happened in many peace ceremonies in the past, so purchasing the *kol* had to be done with the consent of the head of the victim's family. In this case, Peter Naemon, the father of the deceased, accepted the *kol* before its purchase. Having accomplished this, a date was set for other cash contributions to come forth from members of the village community.



4 Yangoru traditional money, known as *kol*. © Naomi Faik-Simet

## THE TRADITIONAL WAY OF COMMUNICATING MESSAGES

Messages to notify others in the village about the date for contributions were sent out by beating a wooden slit-drum, known in Tok Pisin as *garamut*. This distinctive system of communication is still maintained in Yangoru. Because it can be heard over long distances, it enables the coded messages about ceremonies to be conveyed to a much wider community, enabling the maximum participation from all families concerned (Figure 5). Upon receiving these messages, families gathered at the house of the accused's family to begin the contribution process (Figure 6).



5 Sending coded messages through the *garamut*. © Naomi Faik-Simet



In such a situation, families gain support from kinship and clan relations, which extend to include their in-laws. Other concerned members of the community also participate through their contributions. A record of the contributions is usually kept by the head of the family to enable future assistance to those who have contributed (Figure 7). Contributions are seen as creating reciprocal relations through which one becomes indebted to others who may require assistance when organizing their own ceremonies. In total, the Faik family collected PGK 14,797 by Sunday, 22 December 2013. Having accomplished this, the family was then ready to undertake the peace ceremony.



6 Family members gather for the contribution process in Tuomilik Hamlet. © Naomi Faik-Simet

7 Joseph Faik keeping a record of the contributions. © Naomi Faik-Simet

## SOME CHALLENGES

Just a few days before the staging of the ceremony, the village councilor announced to the community that the Member of Parliament (MP) for the Yangoru–Sausia Electorate would be present to officiate the ceremony. This then raised concerns of the local people to better plan the ceremony. The councilor, Robert Willie, took charge of the planning of the program of the ceremony and also decided on the participants for the occasion. This arrangement then conflicted with the accused family's initial plan of having a ceremony free of political influence. It so happened that the MP canceled his plans to attend the peace ceremony at the last minute, thus raising a lot of uncertainty among the people. Nevertheless, just a day before the set date, the family of the accused made final preparations to host the ceremony.

These are some of the challenges that local people are faced with every day when ceremonial activities get muddled up with political motives. It is wise for many families to take ownership of their own ceremonies, using knowledgeable people to plan and execute them rather than allowing politicians to interfere in such activities.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

The ceremony that took place between the two families was a bel kol ceremony, performed to cool down the tense situation. It did not compensate for the life of the deceased, but rather was seen as a first step to ensure peace in the community.

Before staging the ceremony, relatives of the accused gathered in Tuomilik Hamlet to finalize the contributions. The occasion also allowed for late contributions from others who wanted to participate in the peace process (Figures ⑧ and ⑨). Contributions from individuals and families indicated their support to see peace prevail.





Other preparations that day included the display of plants symbolizing peace and a notice board publicizing the occasion (Figure 10). The plants displayed included palpal (symbolizing peace) and the cocoa plant (symbolizing wealth). By displaying these plants, the Faik family expressed their sincerity in apologizing to the victim's family over the incident that had kept them apart for two years. As the victim was a blood relative of the Faik family and was seen as a source of generating income for the family, the incident shattered all forms of financial support for his family. For this reason, this situation was represented by the cocoa plant, which is known for its cash value.



8 Family members from Kwaghuie Village making cash contributions. © Naomi Faik-Simet

9 Family members from Karapia Village contributing cash towards the peace ceremony. © Naomi Faik-Simet

10 Symbolic plants: the *palpal* (left), symbolizing peace, and *cocoa* (right), symbolizing wealth. The bucket at the center holds the cash contributions.

## ORATORY PERFORMANCE

Oratory, in this case, is a form of performance that is part of Yangoru culture passed down across generations and is a key ingredient in peace ceremonies. An important aspect of the preparations was the speech made by the leader of the Nemenduon clan to which the accused family belongs. He emphasized solidarity in maintaining peace among the family (Figure 11).



Another powerful speech made was by Johnny Sausengu, who spoke on behalf of the Faik family and addressed the past activities that the family had been successful in hosting. He emphasized the importance of staging the bel kol ceremony so that the younger generations could witness the importance of making peace (Figure 12). Other speeches that accompanied contributions stressed the need to maintain and support family relations in such difficult situations.



11 Head of the Nemenduon clan making his speech during the contributions. © Naomi Faik-Simet

12 Johnny Sausengu making his speech. © Naomi Faik-Simet

Following the speeches was the display of money on a bamboo stick, known locally as a *nok*. In any ceremonial activity in Yangoru, it is a traditional rule that money be displayed publicly on a *nok* for the others to see the full amount accumulated by the family (Figure 13). This *nok* is then carried in a procession led by the accused family to the place of the grieving family. In this case, the *nok* was held by the daughter of the head of the family, Joseph Faik. She led the procession to Kungere Hamlet, where the peace ceremony took place. She was accompanied by other family members who held the other items, such as the palpal plant and the traditional kol money.



## PEACE CEREMONY

The peace ceremony was staged in Kungere Hamlet and attracted people from all four local-level government areas in East Yangoru. It was a historical event for many who attended, as it involved close family members on opposing sides. Relatives of the deceased gathered to witness the ceremony as many were unsure whether

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13 Traditional *nok* used to display money. © Naomi Faik-Simet

the payment would be accepted by the grieving family. Before any speech took place, the master of ceremonies placed the bel kol items in the center of the *kumaingie* (main arena where the ceremony took place) for others to see (Figure 14).



The ceremony began with an introductory speech by the ward member from Karapia Village, who gave a brief description of the tragic incident in 2011. He then stressed the importance of peace between the two families as this situation had affected the lives of many others in the community. After this he asked the father and brother of the deceased to come forward and receive the bel kol money. This was the moment everyone had been waiting for —the grieving family coming forward to receive the peace items from the accused’s family. The ward member then asked both families to shake hands in agreement to show that there was now peace between the families (Figure 15).



This concluded the bel kol ceremony. Both parties were satisfied and could interact more freely with each other and continue their normal lives in the community. It was important, especially for the younger generation of both families, to witness this event and have a sense of appreciation for ceremonies that promote peace in society.

## CONCLUSION

The bel kol ceremony held between the Faik and Naemon families was not to compensate the life of the deceased but was a first step towards completing the peace process. This is how such ceremonies are conducted in Papua New Guinea, and especially in Yangoru. Such occasions are important in maintaining and strengthening family relations and also in enabling normalcy and continuity of life in the community.

## REFERENCES

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