

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND SUNG TALES IN THE HIGHLANDS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

DON NILES

During a pikono performance, people don't speak as in ordinary conversation... it is like singing, but the melody and voice are different... It's a difficult thing.

–Kenny Yuwi Kendoli¹

TELLING STORIES

People everywhere enjoy telling and listening to stories.² Good storytellers draw in their audiences with their skillful uses of language, often turning the mundane into something that vividly captivates the imaginations of listeners and holds them throughout the telling of the tales.

Throughout a large part of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, some highly skilled storytellers create their tales in performances that transcend the style of everyday narratives through a masterful combination of poetry and melody. Although each language group in this region has its own term for such stories, interdisciplinary researchers working in this region have come to call them “sung tales,” “chanted tales,” or “ballads” in English. While the Highlands region is home to some languages spoken by relatively large numbers of people, there is still considerable diversity throughout.

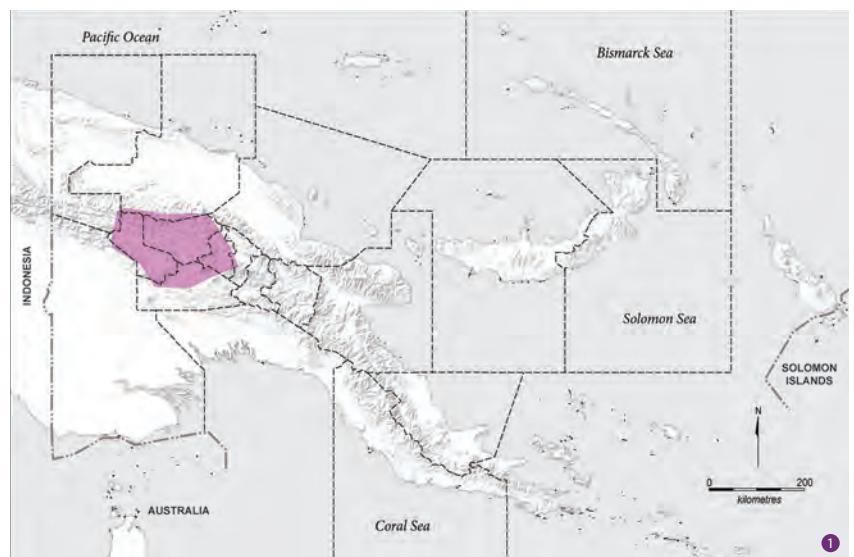
1. Kenny Yuwi Kendoli, “Yuma Pikono,” in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context*, ed. Alan Rumsey and Don Niles (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 42.

2. In addition to the performers I have been privileged to work with, I would like to thank Alan Rumsey for his constant enthusiasm and encouragement to pursue the study of sung tales. I also appreciate the comments and suggestions of the reviewers and editors of this volume.

This article concerns such performances and the efforts of performers and researchers to collaborate on the documentation and promotion of sung tales. It also describes how some examples of this genre, traditionally known and appreciated by necessarily small groups of people at any one time, have become popular over a much wider region and have begun to be appreciated and acknowledged well beyond the regions in which they have been performed. This has been brought about through access by performers to new methods of dissemination as well as through new interest in such performances.

SUNG TALES IN THE HIGHLANDS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The area in which sung tales are performed stretches over parts of four provinces in the central mountain region of Papua New Guinea, from west to east: the Hela, Enga, Southern Highlands, and Western Highlands provinces (Figure 1). Based upon our present knowledge, it appears sung tales are performed by speakers of at least sixteen different languages. Sung tales are excellent examples of a genre that may purport to primarily entertain yet is also rich in traditional knowledge and highly valued by listeners.



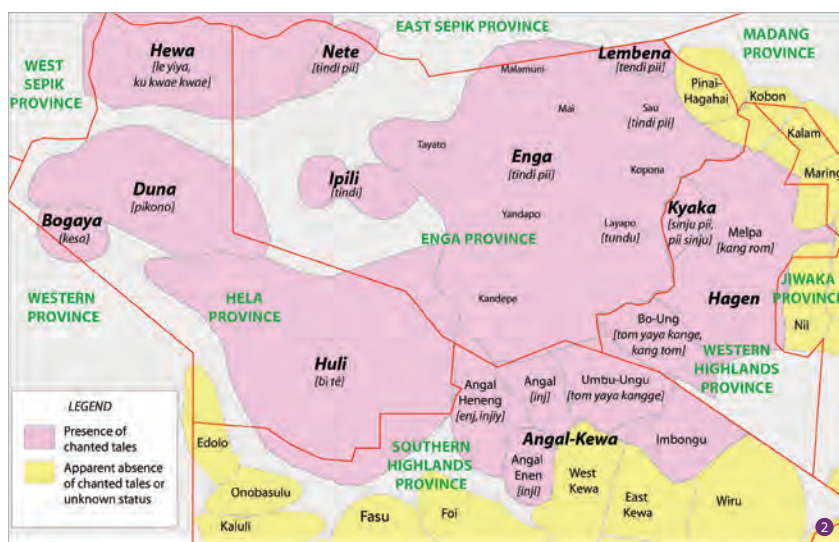
1 The provinces of Papua New Guinea. The purple area shows where sung tales are performed. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

Across this region, what constitutes a sung tale varies significantly, but a number of characteristics are shared. Sung tales are primarily a type of entertainment to be enjoyed by all. The tales may also be educational or even related to aspects of bachelor initiation, as explained below, but they do not concern esoteric knowledge.

A performance usually takes place at night, by a seated individual, often indoors. No dance or instruments accompany the telling of such stories. Competent performers are rare and are valued members of their communities. Performers of sung tales in Papua New Guinea are often men, but in some areas women may also be prominent and highly regarded. These performers learn to perform from listening to others and practicing much to develop their skills.

The performer “sings” the text of the tale using a melody and distinct phrasing that are very different from normal speech. Often it appears that the melody resembles that of genres more readily identifiable as songs. In the sung tales of some areas, syllables or words that are not part of normal speech, called “vocables,” may be added in performance.

Seldom is a special term used to indicate the genre here called “sung tales.” Instead, the general vernacular word for “story” is used, although such a word includes narratives told in a normal speaking voice as well. Figure 2 shows the distribution of sung tales in relation



2 Map showing the language areas in which sung tales are performed in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

to languages spoken in this part of the Highlands. Where known, the vernacular name is listed in brackets beneath the language name.

Storytellers poetically create their tales in performance. Although the stories may be well known to listeners and can often be told in normal speech as well, frequent use is made of poetic expressions (Figure 3), archaic language, and various types of parallelism to attract listeners. This is a highly valued skill that few can master, and the performer is usually paid at the performance's conclusion.



While the above characteristics are typical of performances throughout the region, other aspects are more variable. The audience may be all male, all female, or a mixture. Listeners may interject verbal responses of a single syllable or more extensive questions or comments during the performance, or they may be totally silent, focusing intently on the performance itself. Vocables may be almost totally absent from a performance, occur only at line endings, or be quite frequent throughout the text.

The performance of a sung tale lasts from a few minutes to several hours, depending upon the tradition concerned. Plots of sung tales and the main characters vary significantly, but there is very often a journey involved, during which many obstacles must be overcome. In areas in the western part of the distribution region, such as the Duna or Yuna, boys may be nurtured by a female spirit in the form

3 Highland vistas are often poetically celebrated in sung tales. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

of a beautiful young woman in their encounters with “cannibal giants,” the first human-like beings to inhabit the earth. In this area, the performance of sung tales (*pikono*) was previously associated with bachelor cults, a ritual complex in which boys were secluded and initiated into secrets regarding growth and attraction. They were guided by ritual specialists, who were considered the “husbands” of the female spirit. When such bachelor cults were functioning, the cult was one of the main settings for the performance of *pikono*, and the main characters were initiates in the cult, aided by the female spirit, just as actual initiates were aided by her “husbands.”³

Further to the east, the journey undertaken is frequently that of a young man leaving home to court a young woman in a distant place. During the return trip to bring her home for marriage, they also encounter many challenges to this plan.

The stories are often highly entertaining. Josep Haip’s amusing *enj* from the Karinj (Angal Heneng) area in Southern Highlands Province (Figure 11) includes his gestures highlighting a story about a man equipped with an outrageously elongated penis that eventually is cut down to manageable size.⁴ Pita Tapuli (Figure 12) eloquently presented a *Huli bi té* concerning a handsome young man who outwits a cannibalistic male ogre and in the end ascends to the paradise-like sky world with the help of a beautiful sky woman.

3. Cf. Kirsty Gillespie and Lila San Roque, “Music and Language in Duna *Pikono*,” in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context*, ed. Alan Rumsey and Don Niles (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 49–64; Kendoli, “Yuna *Pikono*”; Stewart and Strathern, “Duna *Pikono*.”

4. Hans Reithofer, “Skywalkers and Cannibals: Chanted Tales among the Angal,” in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context*, ed. Alan Rumsey and Don Niles (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 230.



4 Paulus Konts, one of the most talented performers of sung tales in the Ku Waru (Bo-Ung) area of Western Highlands, in 2004. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

5 Paulus Konts (left) and Paul Pepa, dressed for courting, at the opening of the sung tales workshop held in 2004. Konts learned Pepa’s performance style from listening to him on the radio. They met for the first time at this workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies



5. *Kange* refers to a type of story in which the narrated world is quite different from that of the narrator and audience. Such stories are usually told in a style similar to everyday speaking. *Tom* appears to be associated with ideas of “praise,” “being loud,” or “singling out.” *Yaya* also seems to be associated with such a meaning, although it is also akin to some of the vocables used in performances of sung tales in the region. The Melpa name for sung tales is *kang rom*, a form obviously related to the Ku Waru form but lacking the *yaya* component. Source: Don Niles, “Structuring Sound and Movement: Music and Dance in the Mount Hagen Area” (PhD dissertation, Anthropology and Sociology, University of Papua New Guinea, 2011), 220–21.

6. Don Niles, “Metric Melodies and the Performance of Sung Tales in the Hagen Area,” in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context*, ed. Alan Rumsey and Don Niles (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 294–96.

7. Terrance Borchard and Philip Gibbs, “Parallelism and Poetics in *Tindi* Narratives Sung in the Ipili Language,” in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context*, ed. Alan Rumsey and Don Niles (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 173.

While plots tend to concentrate on long-established themes and characters, some composers/performers place characters in more contemporary settings, for example a journey from the highlands to the coast to bring back betel nut and sell it for great profit at a large gold mine. Composer/performer Paulus Kots from the Ku Waru (Bo-Ung) area of Western Highlands Province (Figures 4 and 13) casts himself as the main character of his story. In his *tom yaya kange*⁵ sung tale, Peter Kerua (Figure 14) describes a more topical issue: the history of the tribal fighting that plagued his part of the Nebilyer Valley in Western Highlands Province for a number of years.⁶

One candidate in the national elections commissioned a particularly well-known performer, Paul Pepa (Figure 7), to compose a sung tale describing the candidate’s journey to forge political alliances and gather support. Sung tales and their performance styles have also been used in some areas to present the Christian gospel or parts of the liturgy.

One of the important poetic features of sung tales is parallelism—that is, the repetition of a line of text with changes to some of the words. For example, compare the following pair of lines from a *tindi* performance in the Ipili language:⁷

iyu tunduni mindi yane okona mee keyea-ko
iyu yuu pokoli mindi yane okona mee keyea-ko

he climbed way up on a mountain that was there
he climbed way up on a ridge that was there

6 Alan Rumsey, the workshops’ principal organizer, speaking to Paul Pepa during a coffee break in 2004. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

7 Paul Pepa, dressed for courting, ready to demonstrate his performance of Melpa *kang rom* at the 2004 workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea

8 Teya Hiyawi, from the Duna (Yuna)-speaking area, performed *pikono* at the 2004 workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

Or in the following lines from a Karinj or Angal Heneng *enj*:⁸

ten konwi saim umu tas ii hama-on pirisa la
ol konwi saim san ii hama-on pirisa la
nonak mari umu nonak ii hama-on pirisa la

the women [covered up] the pigs' faeces on the dance ground
 the men [covered up] the dog's faeces on the dance ground
 the mothers [covered up] the children's faeces on the dance ground

Performances frequently involve the repetition of certain formulaic phrases, allowing the performer to frame parts of the narrative but also take time to think through upcoming parts of the performance. While a general story may be repeated in different performances, no rendition is ever a precise repeat of a previous one because the details are all improvised.

Paul Pepa (c. 1959–2005) (Figures 5 through 7) was one of the best-known performers of sung tales, or *kang rom*, as they are known in his Melpa language, spoken by about 130,000 people in Western Highlands Province.⁹ In 1980 he recorded one of his performances at the local radio station, Radio Western Highlands. While the performance of sung tales is traditionally only heard by a small group



of people who happen to be gathered near a performer, the repeated broadcast of Pepa's performance in the 1980s presented his *kang rom* to a much larger number of listeners than had ever heard him before. He has also inspired a number of other singers to perform sung tales

8. Reithofer, "Skywalkers and Cannibals," 233. *Enj* is the general name for a type of story, similar to those described for Ku Waru *kange*. Most *enj* are told in a normal speaking voice.

9. For much more about Paul Pepa and his performances, see Niles, "Metric Melodies," 275–92; Niles, "Structuring Sound," 225–35.

9 Ru Kundil is not a performer, but a respected elder known for his knowledge of Melpa traditions. At the 2006 workshop, he offered insights into differences between past and present performing traditions of *kang rom* sung tales. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

10 Richard Alo offers his interpretive skills concerning Duna (Yuna) *pikono* at the 2006 workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

in the same language or a closely related one. An excellent example is Paulus Konts (Figure ⑤), who learned, imitated, and now excels at performing sung tales in his own language, where they are called *tom yaya kange*.

Pepa's 1980 recording begins with an *amb kenan*¹⁰ courting song—an unusual device, but perhaps fitting as a preface to his performance of the story of the man Miti Krai and the woman Ambra Rangmba, one of the most well-known tales in the Melpa-speaking region. Miti Krai and Ambra Rangmba are prototypes of a couple who marry because of personal preferences, despite the odds against them, yet who pay the consequences for doing so. Although Pepa's listeners are probably very familiar with this story, his command of the language, genre, and presentation is still regarded as masterful.

10. *Amb* literally means “woman, female,” while *kenan* is a generic term for “song/dance”; hence, *amb kenan* are “songs/dances for women” (Niles, “Structuring Sound,” 158).

11. Niles, “Metric Melodies,” 285–86. Translated by Gomb Minimbi.

His *kang rom* begins as follows:¹¹

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1a. <i>mukl</i>
<i>miti wö kraï mel ni</i>
<i>mukl miti rona murum a</i>
<i>kopanda tömbön pint ngurum a</i></p> | <p>1a. the man named Krai from
Miti mountain
lived on top of Miti mountain
like a <i>tömbön</i> spear moving forward</p> |
| <p>1b. <i>el nöngön gu purum a</i>
<i>pilin kumb pa nitim o</i>
<i>könin kumb pa nitim a</i>
<i>kae wamb kae namen a</i></p> | <p>1b. like a <i>nöngön</i> arrow with blunt barbs
“let’s hear about it and
see,” they said
“who are these nice people?”</p> |
| <p>2a. <i>nimba kumb kelipa purum a</i>
<i>moklopa rang köndöröm mel o</i>
<i>ambra okupuna kuta pint ka</i>
<i>ndip to nonom kant o,</i></p> | <p>2a. he said and finished his talk
on top of the mountain he looked
to the east to the sweet potato
plantation of Ambra valley “I see a
fire is coming up”</p> |
| <p>2b. <i>en mel nant nitim a</i>
<i>könimb ama mbi nitim o</i>
<i>tepam nga kang ni nto</i>
<i>i kapulka wuu nitim o 6</i></p> | <p>2b. “what’s happening there?
I must go and see”
his father said “it’s fine with me”</p> |

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>3a. <i>pilin kumb pa nitim a
na mam nga ambokla ni nto
nam mba köndöröm konil o
pein piliken en nitim o</i></p> | <p>3a. “let’s hear about it,” he said
his mother said
“none of us ever go to that place
where do you want to go?”</p> |
| <p>3b. <i>nimba kumb kelipa purum o
tepam nga kang ni nto,
i kapulka uis nitim a
kuntin nga waki nökl o ...</i></p> | <p>3b. she said and finished her talk
but his father said
“it’s fine with me”
his <i>kuntin</i> stone axe ...</p> |

Distinctive of the style of performance in this region, a melodic fragment is used to present the first four lines of the text (1a). The same melodic fragment is repeated for the second half-verse, but with some of its pitches shifted downwards (1b). Hence, the two half-melodies combine to produce one full melodic statement. Note that each line of Melpa text often ends in an extended *a* or *o*. These vocables do not add meaning to the story, but are necessary to fill out the lines of text to fit the melody. Such use of vocables is typical of Melpa song performances as well. The same two half-melodies are repeated over and over to present all 780 lines of text of the entire story in about sixteen minutes. Pepa’s performance of the sung tale has a pulse of about 268 beats per minute—a very fast pace that challenges the creativity and endurance of the performer as well as the listening capabilities of the audience. Although recorded



11 Josep Haip from the Karinj (Angal Heneng) area performing an *enj* at the 2006 workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

12 Pita Tapuli performed a *Huli bi té* at the 2006 workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

almost thirty-five years ago, Pepa's performance continues to enthrall listeners because of his excellent poetic command of the language, very fast rendition, and superb overall presentation.

Gaining even a preliminary understanding of such a complex form has required the collaboration of performers, listeners, and specialists in fields such as linguistics, folklore, ethnomusicology, and anthropology. The more carefully we consider such performances, the greater our respect becomes for the practitioners. They must draw upon their intimate and thorough knowledge of various traditions, vocabulary, musical structure, and narrative development to present a performance that is appealing to everyone. Certainly they entertain, but they also educate listeners about important cultural aspects.



While some researchers have considered specific aspects of sung tales since their first published reference in the mid- to late 1960s, more focused, comparative research has only occurred much more recently. In particular, from 2003 to 2006, funding was received from the Australian Research Council to examine this genre more closely. Alan Rumsey (Figures 6 and 18 through 20) of Australian National University was the principal investigator for this project, which became an international collaboration

13 Paulus Konts after an exhausting performance of Ku Waru (Bo-Ung) *tom yaya kange* during the 2006 workshop. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

14 Peter Kerua's performance of Ku Waru (Bo-Ung) *tom yaya kange* at the 2006 workshop featured a different but related style to that of Paulus Konts. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

between researchers, authors, and performers from Papua New Guinea, Australia, USA, Germany, Malaysia, and New Zealand.

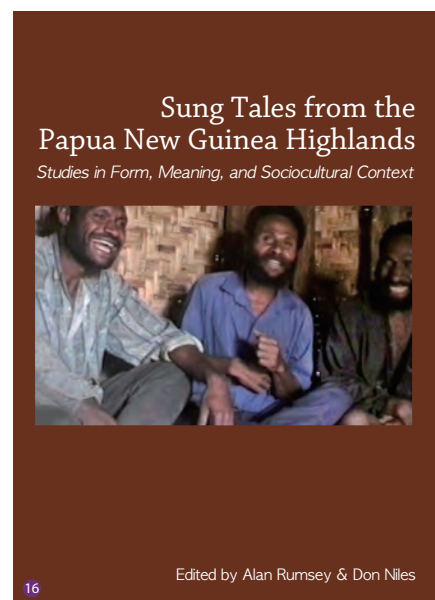
WORKSHOPS ON SONG TALES

Two workshops have been held on the subject of sung tales, acknowledging the particular importance of the project and encouraging an appreciation of sung tales across the region. One took place in 2004 at the University of Goroka (Figures 5 through 8) and a second in 2006 at Kefamo, both in Eastern Highlands Province (Figures 9 through 15). Participants included established researchers, beginning students, performers, knowledgeable elders, linguists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and historians, all intimately involved in various aspects of the research project.

Academic presentations and discussions on various aspects of sung tales were held in both English and Tok Pisin, the most widely spoken language in the country, so that everyone could benefit and participate as much as possible. There were also frequent performances of sung tales. In many cases this was the first opportunity for performers and researchers to learn about sung tales from outside their own regions of focus. Everyone was thrilled to work with intense consideration of the genre, which is traditionally little known or understood beyond a very limited area.



15



16

Edited by Alan Rumsey & Don Niles

15 Participants at the 2006 workshop upon departure. Sitting/kneeling (left to right): Paulus Konts, Andrew Noma, Howard Halu, Alois Along, Joe Rex, Alan Rumsey, Richard Alo, Pita Tapuli, and Wapi Onga. Standing (left to right): Lewa Onga (baby), John Onga, Ru Kundil, Chris Haskett, Lila San Roque, Gomb Minimbi, Kirsty Gillespie, Snow Ru, Gabe C. J. Lomas, Philip Gibbs, Kenny Yuwi Kendoli, Hans Reithofer, Nick Modjeska, Nicole Haley, Josep Haip, Oliver Wilson, Ben Hall, Wan Minimbi, Don Niles, Peter Kerua, and Michael Sollis. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

16 Cover of the book *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands* (2011). © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

BOOK PUBLICATION

The workshops proved enlightening and stimulating for all participants. While the Australian Research Council project officially ended in 2006, it was strongly felt that the work on this subject must be more widely known. Because of their intimate performance setting, sung tales within Papua New Guinea are not known or appreciated very widely. Furthermore, sung tales have some similarities with other, more well-known epic storytelling traditions throughout diverse parts of the world, such as ancient Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Turkmenistan, Russia, Mongolia, Mali, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, and Korea.¹² Such reasons encouraged participants to find a way to further promote this genre. Work then began on preparing an edited volume on sung tales for eventual publication. The published volume appeared in 2011, with the title *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context*, edited by Rumsey and Niles (Figure 16).¹³

12. See, for example: Karl Reichl, ed., *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music* (Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag, 2000).



13. As an ANU E Press publication, the book is available as a printed book or for free download from the Internet: http://epress.anu.edu.au/sung_tales_citation.html. Also online are a supplementary PDF file, twenty-two audio files, and a short video. These materials provide multimedia access to many of the performances discussed in the article.

This publication was launched at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, in 2011 (Figures 17 through 18) and at the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, in 2012 (Figures 19 through 20). These launches represent the importance of and interest in sung tales both internationally and locally. Perhaps as recognition of this international collaboration, particularly between Papua New Guinea and Australia, the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Hon. Peter O'Neill, presented

17 Dr. Ilinus digim'rina from the University of Papua New Guinea and Mrs. Jacinta Warakai-Manua from the Papua New Guinea High Commission at the book launch in Canberra, Australia, on 28 September 2011. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

18 Alan Rumsey (right) talking to one of the contributors, Gabe C. J. Lomas, and his wife at the Canberra book launch. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

a copy of the book to the Governor General of Australia, Her Excellency Ms. Quentin Bryce, when they met during an official visit late in 2011. While participants in the performances, research, workshops, and publications on sung tales are thrilled to have been able to share this wonderful tradition, there is much more to learn.

This study has focused on one particular type of oral tradition in Papua New Guinea. Although found in only one part of the country, it is performed by speakers of a number of different languages. Performers must be experts in many aspects of culture, but, in particular, they must be poets, entertaining listeners. Through the collaboration of performers, other cultural experts, and researchers, something of the special nature of this tradition has been learned, written about, and made available to anyone interested.



However, it is also vitally important for younger people to develop the extraordinary skills necessary to ensure that sung tales continue to enchant generations in the future, skills that require outstanding ability as poets and musicians coupled with considerable stamina. In particular, such performers need to entertain and educate those who are fortunate enough to hear their tales.

¹⁹The Papua New Guinea book launch took place on 8 August 2012. Attendees (*left to right*): Alan Rumsey (co-editor and researcher, Australian National University), Kirsty Gillespie (contributor, University of Queensland), Bernard Minol (official book launcher, University of Papua New Guinea), and Don Niles (co-editor and researcher, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies). © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

82 ²⁰Alan Rumsey (*left*) with Gomb Minimbi, one of the expert translators who assisted in the sung tales project, at the 2012 book launch. © Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies

ADDITIONAL READING

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