

NAMATA: RITUAL SECLUSION AMONG THE TOLAI OF NEW BRITAIN

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So too in tribal societies the ties of kinship between individuals come out most dramatically in the focal points of a person's life—birth, initiation, feasts, marriage, death. The action group that mobilizes around a person in support, celebration, or mourning is in almost all societies crystallized from networks of the individual's relatives and in-laws.

—Robert M. Keesing¹

INTRODUCTION

Namata, as a body of knowledge, is a ritual sequence that is practiced by the Tolai of New Britain. Despite over 140 years of contact with the outside world, this ritual sequence is very much an important part of the cultural life of the Tolai. The sequence comprises three main segments, with each segment markedly separate from the others; however, the whole sequence is known as *namata*. The three segments of the sequence are *wuwuai warwaba* (to throw into hiding), *paraparau* (seclusion), and *namata* (emergence).

The *namata* ritual sequence is a public statement about a young man leaving childhood and entering into adulthood, and in this sense it is

1. Robert M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), 218.

a rite of passage. On the other hand, the ritual process is also about raising *tabu* (shell-money) for the expressed purpose of paying bride-price for the young man. At the same time, it is an occasion for a family to amass *tabu* for themselves, in which sense it is seen as a commercial venture. However, over and above the issues of raising *tabu* for marriage and/or amassing *tabu* as family wealth, a lot of the rituals of *wuwuai warwaba*, *paraparau*, and *namata* have a great deal to do with matters of kinship.

The various rituals in the three stages specifically require the participation and performance of and by certain people who stand in particular relationships to the key players of the ceremonies. Even the materials and symbols used in the ceremonies have to be of particular relation to the key persons, whether these be the boys or their parents. In the end they are about checking, rekindling, and reinforcing kinship relations.



All of the above can be reasons for the organizing and staging of a *namata* ritual sequence. Sometimes one or two of these reasons are emphasized more than others. *Tabu* is the traditional Tolai medium of exchange still being used today, and it occupies a central position in the cultural life of the people.

① Coils of *tabu* being displayed on bamboo cross-bars before ritual use. © Jacob Simet

Knowledge of namata is generally held by all the men and boys. However, some parts of this knowledge are held by certain men only, in that class of knowledge that may be known as esoteric or restricted knowledge. This knowledge is held by a man or group of men on behalf of a family or clan and is not freely available to all. The way in which this knowledge system is maintained by families and individuals is consistent with certain rules and guidelines.

THE NAMATA SEQUENCE

Before contact with the outside world, the ritual sequence would take at least three months. In recent times, this period has been reduced to between one week and two weeks. The reduction in the duration was mainly due to the time pressures on young men undergoing this ritual, such as those of school and work.

The ritual sequence starts with the wuwuai warwaba, followed by the paraparau, and lastly, the namata.

Wuwuai Warwaba (To Throw into Hiding)

The rite of wuwuai warwaba is a small occasion attended by close relatives and friends of a young man. It often takes place at the young man's parents' house at about 19:00. It involves the *warkinim* (capture) of the young man, who is then taken into seclusion somewhere in the bush. After this small ceremony, the young man is accompanied into seclusion by a group of boys, mostly his friends and some senior male relatives.

An important part of this rite is the payment of tabu by the boy's parents to those who will accompany him in the place of seclusion. This is followed by a tribute payment in tabu, known as *warlapang*. This is a ritual payment found in many other ceremonial activities of the Tolai and involves the payment of pieces of tabu by all to the host or sponsor of a ceremony. This is one of the ways to raise tabu for an individual or family. In the namata sequence, this is the first occasion for raising tabu.



Paraparau (Seclusion)

Paraparau is the period of seclusion undergone by the young man. This can take between one and two weeks. While in the past the place of seclusion could be anywhere in the bush, today this is mostly at the *taraiu* (*tubuan* sanctuary).² What happens in the sanctuary during the period of seclusion is not for public knowledge. The men and boys are not allowed to talk about what may have happened in seclusion to anyone in the village. After the seclusion period, the men and boys emerge in the namata ceremony. A case study will be presented here to discuss the namata rite.

The case study to be presented is one that was staged by ToDi Turagil for his two sons, David and Tobual, from 15 to 19 September 2013. While this is normally done for one young man only, some parents do opt to have more than one son undergo this process at the same time, as ToDi decided to do this time.

Namata (Emergence)

After three days of seclusion in the bush, the two young men and their companions emerge in the village for the namata. In the case of ToDi's sons, this was on 19 September 2013.

2. The *tubuan* is the representation of a spirit, which can be an ancestral spirit or a spirit of the wild. In some cases the spirit becomes the deity of the clan.

On the night before the day of emergence, the boys and other young men bring a number of items into the village. This happens under the cover of darkness, around 1:00. The main three items brought into the village are the *tulu*,³ *balau*,⁴ and the posts for the *pal na mama rikai*.⁵ These items are placed in a designated place near ToDi's house.

On the night before the day of the namata, a lot of activity occurs in the place of seclusion. All the men and young boys are busy putting the final touches on the above-listed items. Apart from these items, there is the important house-top, the *pal na mama rikai*. This is the centerpiece of the emergence ceremony. The men and young boys are also busy preparing their costumes for the next day while, at the same time, the women and girls are busy in the village, mostly preparing the food but also setting the stage for the next day's ceremony.

After completing the food and other preparations, the women and girls go to sleep. The men in the place of seclusion, however, do not sleep. Instead, they stay awake until after midnight, when they will bring the above-mentioned items into the village. When they are ready to proceed into the village, someone starts up the *konga* (bull-roarer). This makes a weird sound in the quiet of the night and is said to be the spirit of the namata entering the village. On hearing this sound, those women and girls who are not yet asleep must go into their houses, lest they might set eyes on the spirit.

Accompanied by the sound of the *konga*, the men and young boys stealthily move into the village. It is important that they do not make any noise while doing this, so that the only sound that the women and girls can hear is that of the *konga*. This is so they will believe it was the spirit coming into the village and not any humans. Thus, when they wake in the morning and see the things that were erected in the night, they will attribute them to the spirit that entered the village in the night.

On reaching a designated area in ToDi's yard, the men and young boys erect the *tulu*, the *balau* and the posts for the *pal na mama rikai*. Again they do this in silence, still playing on the idea that the spirit has entered the village. During this time the *konga* is silent. On completion of the tasks, the *konga*

3. The *tulu* is a thirty- to forty-meter-long bamboo pole that is elaborately decorated with other plant material and colorful birds' feathers. A clan has its own *tulu*. The decoration on a *tulu* gives it its identity and separates it from other *tulu* that may belong to other clans.

4. *Balau* are mere saplings that have been decorated for the occasion by putting them over a fire. This gives a black-and-white curvilinear look on the saplings. They are planted in the ground around the *tulu*.

5. The *pal na mama rikai* is the model house that becomes the centerpiece of the namata.

starts up again, and the men and young boys head for the place of seclusion the same way they have come. On reaching their destination, they stay awake for the rest of the night, mostly completing some of the preparations for the next day.

The items erected near ToDi's house will be a sight for the women to behold when they wake up in the morning. The *tulu* is a very long length of bamboo, about fifty feet high. It is planted into the ground, in the center of the ceremonial ground prepared for the next day's activities. It is elaborately decorated with all kinds of items, including ferns and an assortment of bird feathers. The important part of this structure is the last two meters, which is even more elaborately decorated.

Around the base of the *tulu*, a number of stakes are planted in a circle. These are a set of *balau* that are larger in size than some of the other ones in the outer circle. Close to the base of the *tulu*, the posts for the *pal na mama rikai* are also erected, positioned to hold the *pal na mama rikai* when it is brought in the next day. An outer circle of smaller *balau* is created around these erected items and is decorated with *wup* (bird feathers). This is then the stage for the *namata* of the next day.



3 The ceremonial ground set for the next day with *tulu* and *balau*. © Jacob Simet.

On waking up in the morning, the women and girls notice the new structures but keep their distance from them. It is not until well into the afternoon that the ceremony will start, so they will have to contain their curiosity and keep their distance for almost the whole day.

Toward the afternoon, people begin to trickle into the ceremonial ground. As a large number of the men and young boys are in the place of seclusion, a majority of those who are gathering are women and girls. They are seated around the ceremonial ground, but still keep their distance.

After some time, a shrieking sound is heard in the distance from the direction of the place of seclusion. It is recognizably the konga of the previous night. This is the men now making their procession into the village and to the ceremonial ground for the ceremony. For the next few minutes, the konga still sounds in the distance, meaning that the party is moving very slowly. Slowly the party emerges at the end of the road leading up to ToDi's house and is now visible to the small expectant crowd. They appear like a mess of leaves at first sight. It is hard to see the men and the young boys as each of them is armed with branches of trees, with leaves covering the whole lot of them. As they move closer, some of them are visible, but the rest of them are still hidden from sight. In the middle and still hidden from sight is the pal na mama rikai that has the two young men, David and ToBual, still securely hidden by a ring of men and young boys with their branches. At this stage some of the women begin to wail, calling the names of people, mainly men, who have passed on in the past.



4 The men entering the village while keeping the boys in concealment. © Jacob Simet

On entering the ceremonial ground, the men remain standing with their branches still concealing the two young men and their *pal na mama rikai*. They remain standing to allow the house-top to be fitted onto the posts that had been erected the night before. Once successfully fitted, the men drop their branches and sit down, revealing the two young men and their *pal na mama rikai*. In an instant, a horde of women storm the house-top and start ripping off little parcels that are suspended under it. These are eggs that came in with the house. These women are mostly of ToDi's clan and stand as aunts to the two young men. The eggs signify the first presents to them from the two young men, as this will be one of the main responsibilities later in life.



After the men have sat down, the women go into action with the *warlapang*. This is the distribution of *buai* (betelnut) to all.

Soon after the *warlapang*, a silence seems to grip the crowd, during which people can only whisper to each other. The silence is one of expectation as if something is about to happen. All eyes are fixed on the *pal na mama rikai* that has been brought in by the men. People are keen to know who this particular design belongs to—whether it has been passed down through a clan or is a new design that might be up for sale at the end of the ceremony. Unfortunately, this

particular house belonged to ToDi's father's clan and could not be put up for sale. It has been used by ToDi's family for a fee in tabu. At this point, the maternal relatives of the two boys throw fifty fathoms of tabu on top of the house as a payment for the person who designed and built the house. This payment is known as *u mawoko* and *wamong*.



ToDi explains that the house design belonged to the *tubuan* IaRigoi.⁶ This *tubuan* belonged to his wife Margaret's clan, to which the two boys also belonged. In this sense, then, Margaret was the heir of the knowledge of this item; however, due to the fact that only males can control ritual knowledge, she could not be a custodian of this knowledge. Her two sons, however, are now in a position to acquire this knowledge and be custodians over it on behalf of the clan.



6. ToDi Turagil, personal interview with author, 2014.

⁶ The *pal na mama rikai* depicting the motif of the *tubuan* IaRigoi. © Jacob Simet

⁷ Margaret, heir to the house design but not custodian of the knowledge. © Jacob Simet

The *tubuan* is a masked figure that is an important ritual object of the Tolai (Figure 8). It is the spiritual representation of an ancestor or deity of the clan, so every clan has a *tubuan* which is clearly distinguished from other clan *tubuan*. The motif of the clan *tubuan* can be replicated on other ritual objects for use by the clan only and no others, as in the case of the *pal na mama rikai* in Figure 9. The center figure atop the *pal na mama rikai* is a miniature replica of the clan *tubuan* IaRigoi,⁷ while the two figures on either side are *dukduk* (children) of that *tubuan*.



The *tubuan* is an institution that has a body of knowledge in itself, which includes its design, its magic, and its set of guidelines. This knowledge is in the custody of a senior member of the clan, one who is a member of the *tubuan* society. The *tubuan* IaRigoi was managed by ToWarpian, a senior member of Margaret's clan. ToWarpian died in 2008, but before he died, he had handed over much of the knowledge of the *tubuan* to other members of his clan.

Wauleau Victor, a first cousin to ToDi, was not a member of Margaret and ToWarpian's clan, but he acquired knowledge of this design from the latter. After ToWarpian passed the knowledge to him, Wauleau actually saw this clan's *pal na mama rikai* on display in a clan ceremony in 2012. This then completed his custodianship of the

7. The *tubuan* IaRigoi is the representation of a female ancestor of the clan of many generations earlier. Some say she might have been the first known ancestor of the clan.

8 The *tubuan*, from which the motif of the *pal na mama rikai* is taken. © Jacob Simet

knowledge. On this occasion, it was Wauleau who then built the *pal na mama rikai*. It was his hope that after the occasion the two boys would remember the clan design and be able to recreate it in the future.



The Tulu

The *tulu* is the long, pole-like structure that was erected in the middle of the ceremonial ground beside the *pal na mama rikai*. Like the model house, every clan has one of these that has a particular design. The *tulu* is also an important ritual object that is part of what we may call the “heirloom” of each clan. Again, the motif of this *tulu* is restricted for use in matters of the owning clan only and no others. ToDi explained that this *tulu* belonged to his clan and that he himself had taken custody of it in 2008 from one of his maternal uncles. This happened during the *namata* of one of his brother’s sons.



The next rite is the *kutu tabu*, which is the payment of pieces of tabu to all the men and young boys who accompanied the two into seclusion. On this occasion, some of the elder men received longer lengths of tabu than the others. A number of elders were paid first, clearly meaning that these men were instrumental during the period of seclusion. Next were some adult men who also seemed to have had some important roles in the two boys' seclusion. Then came the rest of the men and the young boys, who got lesser amounts of tabu. All these payments were done by the two young men who had just come out of seclusion.

Aumana Iap

During the period of seclusion, the men and young boys who accompanied the two young men had taken care of them with food and other necessities. A common sight during the period of seclusion was the constant string of men and young boys bringing parcels and pots full of food into the seclusion area.

The food had been prepared by different families. It is said that, in the past, it was only the relatives and friends of the boys in seclusion who prepared and sent these foods into the seclusion areas. These days, however, everyone and anyone can prepare this food. This is because of the namata, in which lengths of tabu would be paid for this food. Thus, during the seclusion period, someone had to meticulously record the names of the families that had sent food into the bush.

¹⁰ The *tulu* of ToDi's clan. © Jacob Simet

¹¹ ToDi, custodian of his clan's *tulu*. © Jacob Simet

On this day of *namata*, the records were taken out and the names of the persons or families were read out, following which lengths of *tabu* were paid to them. This was their payment for having prepared the food. On the occasion in question, the records showed that a total of fifty-six *iap* had been received during the seclusion period. As one fathom was paid for each, a total of fifty-six fathoms was paid for them by ToDi and Margaret.

Warlapang

The next and final rite of the *namata* is the *warlapang*. This rite is of the same name as the distribution of *buai* (betel nut) described earlier. This time, however, it involves the tribute payment of *tabu* by all and is probably the most important part of the ceremony.

Within a few moments, ToDi and Margaret emerge from the house with coils of *tabu*, which they then place on a mat in the middle of the ceremonial ground. ToDi has fifty fathoms while Margaret has another fifty fathoms, all of which they place together in one pile. This *tabu* is known as the *tabu na paplai lua* (*tabu to lay down first*).

On the announcement that it is now time for the *warlapang*, all move forward with varying lengths of *tabu*. They deposit these lengths on a mat that has been placed in the middle of the ceremonial ground in front of the *pal na mama rikai*. Soon there is a growing pile of *tabu* in the middle of the ground. By the time the crowd has all taken their seats again, there is a pile of *tabu* on the mat. Some men are called to come forward to organize it for counting. After it has been organized and counted, an announcement is made for all to know the total amount. On this day, it is announced that a total of 1,500 fathoms was collected, including the hundred placed by the parents. This was a good collection for ordinary parents such as ToDi and Margaret. On the other hand, wealthy people who have wider connections could fetch twice or even three times this amount.

After the *namata*, the *tabu* is put into baskets and taken away for storage in the boys' parents' house. Depending on the original intention of the venture, this *tabu* may be used very shortly as bride-price payments for the boys or may be rolled into coils known as

lolo, which are put into storage for many years and become part of the wealth of the family.

In the case of this particular namata, as the two boys were still too young to get married, the tabu collected on the day went into storage in the form of *lolo* and is still in that form today. For the moment, ToDi and Margaret have no immediate plans for the use of this tabu, so it will be part of the family wealth for some time.

In the end, the wuwai warwaba, the paraparau, and the consequent namata had challenged ToDi's and Margaret's organizational skills and affordability in such ventures. Above this, the three series of rituals had tested their connectivity to their kinship links with their respective clans. If their links had not been strong, not many people would have turned up at the three occasions.

After the event, ToDi highlighted the absence of a number of people during all three occasions. He was particularly bitter about the absence of a number of persons whom he had relation to as brothers, through his father's line. At the same time he complained about the absence of some members of his own clan. Further, he also raised issue about the absence and lack of support from Margaret's clan, as they were important to his two sons' maturation and future life.

Overall, however, both ToDi and Margaret were happy with the way things had turned out. They were happy with the total tabu collection at the namata, but most importantly they were happy with the way many people had turned up at the three occasions. This confirmed that they had invested correctly in the maintenance of their kinship relations and that it had thus paid good results.

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