

MALA AMONG THE KOWAI

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What good did Mala do? He had all sorts of crooked ways. *Mala i no gutpela tumas*. I think that Molap did a good job.

--A Barang villager

THIS ARTICLE concerns the Kowai, one of the four linguistic groups in Siassi District. The Kowai live in the western half of Umboi (see Pomponio, Maps 1 and 3, above). I carried out field research among them from 1978 to 1979, with my work focusing on social and economic development in the district. Since I wanted to be near the Siassi district office, located on Kowai territory, I settled in the Kowai village closest to it. But I did not want to become closely identified only with the Kowai, so I did not learn their language. My field data are in Tok Pisin and in English.

My data on Kowai oral tradition are far from complete, but they do allow me to deal with the topic of this volume: the documentation of a culture hero figuring in the traditions of a number of ethnic groups in northeast New Guinea and western New Britain. Among these groups he is remembered under various names. The Kowai also remember him; they also use various names. In this article, I use the name Mala. I do not know the Kowai terminology with regard to their oral tradition and follow Pomponio (this volume) in using the term "story" for an oral account that the narrator regards as an entity. The term as I use it is also a translation of the Tok Pisin word *stori*, used by the Kowai.

Among the peoples discussed in this volume, the Kowai are, with the

Anêm and the Waskia, speakers of a non-Austronesian language (McElhanon 1973, 1978). Whether they are also bearers of a non-Austronesian culture, supposing a category of non-Austronesian cultures exists, is hard to ascertain, especially in the absence of ethnographic data about the Kaimanga, speakers of an Austronesian language living on eastern Umboi who are the only other ethnic group in Siassi that is more land- than sea-oriented (Harding 1967b:23). McElhanon concludes that the Kowai language is part of the Trans-New Guinea phylum (see also Thurston, this volume, for its lack of relationship with Anêm). The Kowai language, he comments, "although exhibiting basic similarities with the Huon Peninsular languages, has been so influenced by neighbouring Austronesian languages, that I have not attempted to determine a family status for it" (McElhanon 1978:7).

Kowai Habitat

Kowai stories, like many of the stories discussed throughout this volume, are "full of details about place" (J. Grant, pers. com., 1990, ASAO meetings). Umboi topography is irregular (Pomponio, Map 1). There has been volcanic activity on the island of which there seem to be memories in Kowai oral tradition. In the 1970s, the Kowai lived in an irregular series of line villages extending from Gomlongon in the south to Aupwel in the north. Aupwel was then the only Kowai village on the coast. It was located on the territory of the uphill village of Arot. In the north and northwest are patches of grassland, while the southern parts of Kowai territories are covered with dense forest, both primary and secondary. The difference in vegetation is reflected in a distinction between grassland and forest people. The latter live in the villages from Gomlongon to Omom, grassland people in those from Gom to Aupwel. The information I collected is almost wholly from forest Kowai. I can complement it here with two stories that Pomponio collected in Aupwel--one concerning Mala and a creation story--told from a grassland Kowai perspective.

No seafarers themselves, the Kowai depended on others for goods absent in their home territories. They were one of the end links in the trade system centering on the small islands off southeastern Umboi, supplying primary goods from garden and forest, and purchasing such goods as fish, carved wooden "Siassi" bowls, and earthenware pots. Both bowls and pots were decorated and much desired as wealth objects.

Each village forms a neighborhood, and neighborhoods formerly often warred. Their territories stretch from the interior of Umboi down to the coast. Barim village, on the coast, is on Obongai territory. Its inhabitants speak an Austronesian language. Their ancestors moved from the northern

tip of Umboi to the present locality after they had been hit by a sea wave that, Kowai told me, followed the failure of the first, short-lived attempt at mission settlement, in 1848. Most likely they were referring to the sea wave resulting from the Ritter eruption of 1888.

Before pacification, most Kowai villages were at sites differing from the current ones. In the north, people belonging to one neighborhood may have lived in separate hamlets along streams (G. Hafmans, pers. com., 1979). Both during my research and in the precolonial years, the Kowai spent periods of time away from their main settlements. In the 1970s, they did so because their coconut palms, the main cash crop, were along the coast; precolonially they lived now and then in bush settlements, to collect forest produce or to avoid enemies. Hence, when the Kowai told me that Mala lived away from a settlement, this was not exceptional. It was more exceptional that he lived alone.

Kowai Society in the Late Seventies

At the time of my research, the Kowai were deeply influenced by the colonial and postcolonial agents of Christian churches and central government. The people were peaceful. They had converted to Christianity. Traditional leadership had to a large extent been replaced by that of postcolonial government and the church. The people wanted to benefit more from the cash economy, both by commercial agriculture and by wage employment. Hence the persisting lack of transport facilities, the emerging lack of jobs for school leavers, and the inability or unwillingness of their leaders to do much about these problems frustrated them.

The majority of Kowai were Lutherans, and a minority were Roman Catholics. The Lutherans lived in the central part of the Kowai territories, the Roman Catholics in the northern and southern ones--the southern end being closest to Mandok, the center of the Roman Catholic church organization in Siassi. My own base was in Barang, in central Kowai.

West Umboi became the headquarters of the mission of the Australian Lutheran church in 1936 (Strelan 1986:256). Their missionaries were quite hostile toward central elements in Kowai culture, such as the *mailang*, competitive food contests, and ceremonies focusing on masked *tubuan* dancers. The latter the Kowai had discontinued. During my research, Kowai society was still dominated by converts, primarily men who had experienced in their youth the unruliness of neighborhood fights. Conversion for them meant the transition not simply to a different mythological and religious order, but also to a state of peace; and peace they greatly appreciated. A few times during my stay, hostilities threatened or had started on a very minor scale.

The older men especially were active to prevent their eruption or further development.

Another consequence of missionization and of Kowai proximity to the mission headquarters was that many Kowai worked in other parts of the country, first for the mission and later for ELCONG, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea. As a result, Tok Pisin was widely used, even by older women. It had become the language used during church services and meetings. Migration had continued: Kowai who had stayed behind regretted the absence of so many of their kin. Barang and Omom villagers commented, with reason, that they lived in half-empty settlements.

Shortly before my arrival, a series of developments caused the Kowai to begin a major reassessment of the value of the church and of Christianity and, contrastively, of the institutions that they discarded when they became Christians. First, the Australian Lutheran mission joined ELCONG in 1977 (Strelan 1986:269). Siassi ceased to be a headquarters, and church personnel were withdrawn. Furthermore, ELCONG started to replace expatriates with local personnel at the higher echelons. Until the mid-1970s many expatriate church workers had lived and worked among the Kowai. At the end of my stay in mid-1979, there was only one left. The Lutheran Kowai were dissatisfied with the sudden departure of the expatriates. They realized that they would have to run the local church organization themselves, did not know how to go about it, and regarded it as a burden on their tiny financial resources.

A third development was the political independence of Papua New Guinea (1975). The postcolonial government urged its citizens to treasure their traditional ways of life after their rejection by the colonial administration.

Whatever the influence of each of these developments separately, the Kowai were slowly resuming practices that for decades they had been told were non-Christian. However, they did not abandon Christianity. The co-existence of such seeming incompatibilities is also apparent in their ideas about Mala. Some saw him as incompatible with Christianity. Nevertheless, he had remained a historical figure for them. The cultural revival is likely to further boost interest in Mala.

Mala seemed to be better remembered among the Siassi in the late 1970s than among the Kilege in the early 1980s (Grant and Zelenietz 1990). Kowai memories of Mala were vivid. People seemed to visualize him and other figures in the stories while talking about them. People who told me about Mala included a young man, an agricultural assistant, who had been away from Siassi for years. Boys also knew about him and linked events in the story with the locations where they supposedly had taken place. Grant

and Zelenietz report that among the Kilenge “few villagers today ‘believe’ in Namor” (1990:2-3). In my view this did not hold for the Kowai; I find support in Grant and Zelenietz’s statement that their Siassi informants (however, they do not say from which part of Siassi) were younger and knew the stories in more detail than their Kilenge counterparts. The contrast is notable since the Roman Catholic priests in Kilenge likely had a less negative view of local traditions than had their Lutheran Siassi counterparts. If the cultural revival continues among the Kowai, Mala will not soon be forgotten.

Kowai Stories about Mala

I heard about Mala in a number of ways: on several occasions a number of men told me about him in sessions arranged for this purpose; several men mentioned Mala while we discussed other topics or while we happened to pass through locations associated with Mala; and a group of young boys told me about him. Finally, Pomponio gave me a tape-recorded version of the story, told her by Metke Pius from Aupwel (Pomponio 1992:206, n. 1).

The stories I collected about Mala are not identical, but they do not seriously contradict each other. A striking difference is that not all the Kowai use the name Mala. That was the name I always heard used among forest Kowai, but Metke Pius, a grassland Kowai, used in his account the name Molo. In this article, I use the name Mala to emphasize that the bulk of my information comes from forest Kowai.

The accounts focus on Mala’s exploits on Umboi. They agree that he died there and that his son Ambogim, or Ambugim, took his role. Conforming to the Mandok usage (Pomponio 1992:38ff.), I use the name Ambogim. In some accounts, Ambogim, after he has taken on his father’s role, is referred to as Mala. The accounts are brief about where Mala came from and where Ambogim/Mala went after he left Umboi. In one account, he stayed on Umboi. When the narrator mentioned Mala’s place of origin, it was stated that he came from the west. One man said that Mala had originally lived on the mainland, on New Guinea, but had left after a quarrel with his brother, although not over adultery, as in the Kilibob-Manup story (see articles by McSwain and Pomponio, this volume). My spokesman said he had forgotten the name of the brother. This is the only echo of the Kilibob-Manup story in the Kowai accounts of Mala.

The accounts agree on main locations of Mala’s stay on Umboi. He settles down in Tarawe, where he lives with his wife Gainor. The accounts differ as to Gainor’s natal village. For this narrator, she seems to come from Gasam or Gom, for others she is from Tarawe (Pomponio, this volume). After he has left her, he lives by himself in Awelegon, uphill from the

present-day village of Obongai (I do not know its exact location). Later he moves to Gasam, where he is buried.

Mala leaves Tarawe after he has mistakenly eaten food that Gainor had cooked for the pigs. Some accounts blame his wife; in others it is unclear who is to blame. Ashamed, Mala leaves and settles in Awelegon. Several Kowai seemed to make a point of mentioning that they did not know how he got his food while living there. At the time of his departure, Gainor is pregnant, but, after she has given birth, she is unable to care for the child, distressed as she is by having been left by her husband.

The child, Ambogim, is first looked after by a snake, in the bush. The villagers discover him as a boy and take him back, so he can stay with his mother. After he has grown into a young man, Ambogim goes searching for his father. He finds him in his solitary dwelling place, and Mala starts asking Ambogim about his identity and their mutual relationship. After some questioning, he finds out Ambogim is his son. He then flicks sweat from his face onto Ambogim, thus transferring his identity onto his son. He also instructs him to go back to Tarawe and to wait there for the message of his, Mala's, death: a leaf of a breadfruit tree will plummet down and touch him on the breast.

After his encounter with Ambogim, Mala moves and settles on Gasam territory, again away from a village, near a stream. One man told me he did not know what Mala did while living near Gasam village. Another said he was killed because of his dealings with women. In the most elaborate account, he seduces the village women who come to the stream to fetch water. Their husbands, having become suspicious because their wives were taking so long to fetch water, send a child after them to find out what is going on. The child duly reports the seductions, and the men decide to kill Mala. Although he at first manages to escape them by his tricks, they finally outwit and kill him.

Ambogim learns of Mala's death in the way Mala had told him and goes to Gasam with his wife and his mother, Gainor. While Mala's body is in the grave, he enters the grave and takes off his father's skin and takes it with him. On the way back, he puts it on to scare his mother, who thinks Mala's ghost is following them.

The narratives do not agree on the place where the three lived afterward. Some say Awelegon, some say Tarawe. After some time--the narratives do not mention how long--they leave again, either for no apparent reason or because Ambogim/Mala has heard about a child who has climbed to the top of a tall tree, a *malas* (Tok Pisin; Latin, *Homalium foetidum*), a hardwood species that can grow to a height of about forty meters. The village men in vain try to rescue the child. Tricking them, Ambogim/Mala arrives in the village as a decrepit old man. But to the surprise of the on-lookers, he manages to climb the tree and retrieve the child. Via another trick, he subsequently manages to make the children of the village bring all the household possessions to the tree. Finally, Ambogim/Mala disperses

the goods away from the tree. Some, such as areca nuts, land everywhere, but most land in one area only, so people have to rely on others to get hold of them.

The above composite account shows an interrelated sequence of events that I regard as the core of the story. Several accounts include additions that do not seem part of this sequence. For instance, they elaborate on Mala's life before he settled in Tarawe. One version describes him as a big-man who gets people to settle in villages and clear the forest there. He is also described as leaving marks of his wanderings around the country: holes made by his stick, river crossings he deliberately created. Most conspicuously, he turns people into named stones. His grave near Gasam is also marked by stones. Apart from his responsibility for removing artifacts from Umboi, some accounts credit him with the distribution of some valuable goods on Umboi such as game and wild fruits.

In most narratives, the dispersal of goods away from Umboi tends to be the virtual end of the story. Some mention that Ambogim/Mala went on to New Britain and do not elaborate further.

Kowai History

The Kowai stories outlined above are part of what the Kowai see as their history: they contain events that people think actually took place, having left physical traces still observable today (Pomponio, this volume). As in other New Guinean societies, including societies discussed in this volume, named rocks and boulders figure prominently among such traces. Given their permanence and their prominence in the landscape, they are particularly suited to mark past events. The Kowai have in the course of their history intentionally added to this record, naming stones to commemorate events such as wars and battles. A minor example occurred during my stay: the Suzi youth group of Obongai village had to deal with an unwieldy boulder while improving the road from Obongai to the government station. They called it Suzi and planted shrubs close to it. By recording their history into their habitat, the people seemed to clothe it with an aura of factuality (Geertz 1966:4), and hence to better identify with it as their part of Umboi.

In the Mandok narrative, Kilibob/Mala/Ambogim/Namor migrate over Kowai territories, as do Mala/Ambogim in the Kowai ones (Pomponio, Map 2, in this volume). However, some differences in the accounts are telling. The Mandok say that Kilibob/Mala first settles downhill from Tarawe. Like Mandok and other coastal dwellers, he is a fisherman and his wife trades fish for agricultural products (Pomponio 1992:35, and this volume). The Kowai,

agriculturalists themselves, say Mala settles in Tarawe village and do not mention Mala's fishing.

Metke Pius's version contains references to the route Ambogim/Mala takes when wandering eastward. It is located on the northern part of Umboi. Metke Pius, the narrator, mentions that he and the two women went uphill, following a ridge leading toward Mt. Bel (Pomponio, Map 1, this volume), and he refers to the uphill sections of Marli and Kampalap. Hence, for this northern Kowai, the migration takes a more northerly route than documented by Pomponio for the Mandok. The southern Kowai perception conforms more closely to the route shown in Pomponio's book (1992), reproduced here as her Map 2. However, I did not ask and was not told where Ambogim/Mala went in eastern Umboi.

In keeping with the trading voyages of the Mandok and the land orientation of the hill-dwelling Kowai, the Mandok version of the story shows the wider world. Apart from the names Mala and Ambogim, the Mandok use Kilibob and Namor, which the Kowai do not employ. And the last section of the Mandok account contains events in Kilenge, a name merely mentioned by one Kowai narrator, when he wonders where Mala/Abogim has gone.¹

The stories and other information I collected prompt me to subdivide Kowai history into five phases:

- 1 /Humans, both black and white, appear on the earth's surface. There is no economic specialization as yet. Quarreling brings about a flood.
- 2 /White people leave Siassi, black people remain. Molap teaches about sex.
- 3 /Mala appears from the west and brings about the areal economic specialization in Siassi.
- 4 /Kowai fight among themselves, their numbers dangerously declining. Colonial pacification ends the fighting.
- 5 /The colonial and postcolonial eras.

Mala lived at the end of the third phase. Kowai history starts with the appearance of humankind from underground, on Umboi.² Three types of humans appeared: white-, black-, and red-skinned. Their surfacing was watched over by a wallaby (Tok Pisin, *sekau*), which judged the red-skinned people to be inadequate and turned them back. Initially people settled in one or a few (accounts differ) settlements.

A quarrel between two brothers over the distribution of pigs given in bridewealth escalated until the slighted man had killed his own son and later his brother, and this escalated further into an intense fight. Things became even worse when an earth spirit sent an emissary (in one account, his son) to find out what was going on. The emissary was killed in the fight, and in reprisal the earth spirit brought about a flood.

In the Gomlongon account, one settlement was washed away, while the others remained. The white people were carried off by the water and resettled elsewhere in the world, taking all their things with them beyond the reach of the people left behind. Among these people were the black-skinned Siassi, although, I was emphatically told, their origin is the same as the origin of the white-skinned people and although the wallaby had judged both groups adequate to continue life on the surface of the earth.

In the Metke Pius account, the watchman of the earth spirit is killed and the spirit himself emerges and brings about the flood. When people have fled into the trees to escape from the ascending waters, he lectures them on how to behave properly, for example, by working hard and by reciprocating services. In this version also, the unity of humankind was stressed, since the instructions were said to apply to all people, whether white or black.

The flood ends the first phase of Kowai history. In the second phase, the grassland Kowai, who did not know about sex, were taught about it by forest Kowai. The way in which this happens shares many similarities with scenes described by others. McSwain, elsewhere in this volume, records Kulbob for the Karkar, and Counts notes Namor as instructor for the Kaliai. For the Kowai, a man or spirit named Molap teaches them about sex. It is unclear to me if this story belongs to the same tradition as the origin story outlined earlier, for in that story people marry and have children, so seem to know about sex. Hence, although I have the sex instruction ending a phase in Kowai history, this does not imply that we can speak of a unitary historical tradition among the Kowai.

The following phase, the third, lasts until Ambogim/Mala disperses part of the people's material possessions, forcing people to trade if they want to obtain specimens of the lost goods and enabling a system of "proprietary specialization" (Ambrose 1978:329; Harding and Clark, this volume).

The event also occurs in the Mandok version of the story under discussion (Pomponio, this volume). For the Mandok, it signals the starting point of their central position in the trade network in Siassi and its surroundings; but for the Kowai and the Kaimanga, it means their relegation to a peripheral position in the same network. From then on, they have to rely on the natural resources of Umboi--for example, the hulls of the two-masted Mandok sailing canoes are made from trees out of the Umboi forests--and their hard work in their swiddens to obtain by trade what they lost owing to Ambogim/Mala.

The fourth phase lasts until the arrival, or rather the return, of the whites. The Kowai remember this period as marked by mutual hostilities. Their numbers, they told me, declined seriously through sorcery and fighting. Hence they see the Pax Australiana of the colonial era, the fifth phase, as an

improvement. Moreover, it enabled people to travel, so they were no longer dependent on the Siassi traders to get access to the lost goods. At the time of my research, the Kowai seemed uncertain if political independence, the introduction of provincial government, and the localization of the Lutheran Church--all thrust upon them--constituted yet another phase in which their fortunes might again turn for the worse.

The Kowai view of their precolonial history resembles that of the Anêm, which Thurston during symposium discussions in 1991 compared with peeling an onion: over the course of time, layer after layer is stripped off, leaving little. Kowai too experienced gradual impoverishment. There was first the departure of the whites, and after that a further depletion of material goods due to Ambogim/Mala's intervention, and finally demographic decline.

Notwithstanding these changes, the stories portray a society in many ways similar to contemporary Kowai society. The food eaten, the houses people live in, the quarrels over who should get what in distributions, rewarding the participants in a working party with a meal, the role of shame in interpersonal relations, and so on: with all these features there is continuity between past and present. To highlight this feature of the Kowai perception of their history, I use the term "phase" rather than "episode." McDowell (1985:29), drawing on Gellner (1964), uses the term "episodic" to characterize a view of the past that consists of "periods of steady state, radically distinct from one another [and] separated by an episode or transition in which all things change." The Kowai view of their past shows more resemblance to that of the Ngaing, about whom Lawrence writes: "Each myth depicts the people's culture during the period of antiquity [an era without time depth, preceding the fifth ascending generation of living people] as quite recognizably up to date and complete except for that part that the relevant deity has to introduce and explain" (1965:219).

Kowai view their history as extremely brief. Several middle-aged persons described themselves as belonging to the sixth generation of humans. They placed Mala at the earliest in the second generation, since he arrived on Umboi when humans were already there. The subdivision of Kowai history compares neatly with the phases in Kalauna history, as reported by Young (1983:93). The Kalauna, on Goodenough Island, or Nidula, divide their history beginning with the time spent underground, "when people neither ate, procreated, nor died." The second phase spans the discovery of humanness with sex, production, and the division into local and family groups; the third, the decline into cannibalism and warfare; and the fourth, the colonial era. The emphasis in Kowai history is on the third and fourth of these phases; the first one seems to be implied by what they told me, although there were no explicit references to this period.

Mala a Big-Man?

In her analysis of the Mandok version of the Mala story, Pomponio shows how Mala conforms to the Mandok version of a big-man (1992: chap. 2, and this volume). He is “a trickster, a womanizer. . . a vagabond [and] a charismatic maverick” (1992:37). The Kowai Mala conforms much less to a big-man model, although their stories about him have a picaresque quality that the people appreciate. The episode in which the Kowai Mala behaves like a big-man occurs shortly after his arrival on Umboi, when he gets people to settle in locations he has selected and lets them clear the land. But when he settles in Tarawe, he remains monogamous. He is shamed by eating pig fodder and then withdraws from human society, rather than, as in Pomponio’s description of the Mandok Mala, transforming “an adverse situation into a winning one by using his wits and magic” (1992:37). From then until his death in Gasam, he lives solitary, as a deity does among the Garia and in other Madang area cultures (Lawrence 1964:15, 1984:202), or a bush spirit does in Kaliai culture (Counts, this volume). When the Gasam villagers discover his licentious behavior with their women, they succeed in outwitting him.

Mala consciously transfers his personality to Ambogim by flicking his facial sweat onto him, but Ambogim acquires the character of a trickster only at his father’s burial. Until then, Ambogim is portrayed as leading a village life, apparently looking after Mala’s wife, left behind by Mala. Dutifully he goes to Gasam to help bury his father. In both the Mandok and the Kowai versions, he goes there accompanied by two women; but according to the Mandok, they are his two wives, whereas to the Kowai, they are his wife and his mother, so he is said to be monogamous.

The Religious Nature of Mala

Mala is superhuman: he is able to perform acts that ordinary humans are not capable of. I take the term “superhuman” from Lawrence (e.g., 1984:201), who uses it to characterize religious beings as they occur in the religion of the Garia. In some other respects also, Mala resembles the creator deities of the Garia. First, he has a human form that he can change at will. And, second, after he has left Tarawe, he lives near rock faces and river pools, both in Awelegon and on Gasam territory.

However, whereas the Garia maintain reciprocal relationships with their deities, the Kowai are unable to do this with Mala. Their coresiding on Umboi presents a variation on an impasse outlined by Counts (this volume). She argues that people must behave morally to avoid the “destruction of

order and society,” while “those with supernatural powers and knowledge . . . do not recognize the requirement to live as social beings.” Ambogim/Mala leaves, and the people do not know where he might be. But even in the period before he leaves, the stories do not mention reciprocal behavior. Rather, Mala behaves like a trickster, hazing and deceiving. Pomponio (1992:44), quoting Mulderink, points out that the ability to change skin at will is a mark of immortality. It seems to matter, then, that Mala and Ambogim/Mala use two human forms: that of a vigorous and attractive young man and that of a crippled old man with diseased skin. The two forms are one generation apart, underscoring the identity between father Mala and son Ambogim. Although Mala’s body is mortal, his identity lives on in Ambogim.

Other examples of Mala’s religious nature are provided by comments and asides Kowai told me about him and the results of his activities. Mala’s throwing artifacts out of the *malas* was a local event that, according to Metke Pius’s account, did not even take place on Kowai territory. The other accounts I collected do not provide information on this point, but it was a local event with regional consequences, a feature reported by Tuzin for events in Ilahita Arapesh myths (1980:127n).

Another example is one narrator’s statement that Bamler, the first Lutheran missionary to settle on Umboi, did not build his house and station near the stones Mala had made, since he realized they were too powerful and would have rendered his attempts at missionization futile.³ The same man started his account by calling Mala *anut*, “deity.” Reflecting on the scene in which Mala flicked his sweat onto his son, he compared it with a baptism. When he told me his account of Mala, other men were present, and one of them said that sometimes he followed the teachings of the church and sometimes the story of Mala, simultaneously suggesting the incompatibility between Mala and Christianity, and Mala’s religious nature. By contrast, in one other account the narrator hinted at an identity between Christ and Mala, saying that Mala could walk on water. Seemingly influenced by the Old Testament account of Lot, the same man said that Ambogim’s wife had turned into a stone on the return from Mala’s burial in Gasam, because she looked back to where she had left her father and mother behind. This stone and a nearby *nar* tree (Tok Pisin; Latin, *Pterocarpus indicus*) had shortly before my arrival been overturned, and my spokesman blamed the overturning for the prevailing taro blight.

The incompatibility seen by at least some Kowai between their beliefs concerning Mala and those concerning the Christian God differs from Mandok, where pre-Christian and Christian beliefs are syncretized (Pom-

ponio 1992:50-53, and this volume). The contrast may result from the mission strategies of the Lutherans working among the Kowai and the Roman Catholic priest working on Mandok. Pomponio writes that a “popular missionary priest” in a “20-year relationship . . . stressed the similarities, rather than the differences, between Christianity and already extant Mandok beliefs” (1992:50-51). The Lutherans were more inclined to stress what they saw as objectionable in Kowai religion.

The Kowai thought Mala’s story to be an important one. They felt that I should get it right, and when they heard who had offered to tell me, they said that he might get it wrong, since he had long been away from Siassi. I was apprehensive also, since this man had asked for money in exchange for his story, and his reputation, moreover, was that of a trickster. When, however, I compared his account with what I later heard, the differences were not substantial. My impression is that he also wanted to get the story right. Furthermore, he made it clear that, during his stay away from Umboi, he had discussed the story with people from other ethnic groups--yet another signal of its importance.

Lawrence describes the religions of the southern Madang area as directly reflecting the materialism and anthropocentrism of the people’s world view (1964:28, and passim; see also 1982:58). “The world existed for man and he was master of it” (1964:29), and “Man’s primary concern was his own welfare” (p. 28). Religion was not concerned with morality, but was regarded as a technology to secure well-being (p. 75).

The Kowai world view, to the extent that I was exposed to it, seemed anthropocentric to me, in that it assumed that humans were the masters of the world. But the Kowai were after more than just material well-being; moral behavior was greatly valued. Several Kowai stories contain moral directives, for example, the Metke Pius version of the creation. Listening to Metke Pius, Pomponio supposed that the section that contained these directives might be a recent addition. Metke Pius denied this, but if he had been “updating myth” (Lawrence 1974:41, 44), he showed a susceptibility for a moral component in religion.

As for Lawrence’s contention that, for the peoples in the Madang area, religion was primarily a technology, a set of behavioral directives, serving to improve their material well-being: Kowai people did expect that the Lutheran Church would materially improve their lives. However, to this end, they did not rely exclusively, or primarily, on ritual, but also on their material contributions, especially those during church services and conferences (*Lukluk na Glasim*, no. 1, 1977), in exchange for which they expected *projek* (Tok Pisin, project), the worldly works of the church, intended to further their social and economic advancement.

Kilibob and Mala

Mala's role in their cultural decline, it seems to me, is the reason that the Kowai remember him. That he was a fickle wanderer enables them to blame their decline on an outsider whom they had given no reason for interference. I suggest that their belief in the important role of wanderers in their culture history was reinforced by missionary teachings, telling them about such wanderers as Christ and Paul, although Mala went around without a message to tell the people.

Mala explains relations among the ethnic groups in the Siassi area, in contrast with the role of Kilibob, who figures prominently in Lawrence's analysis of the search for the *rot bilong kako*, the series of cargo movements among the people of the Madang area. Given that the Mutu speakers on Mandok identify Mala with Kilibob and given that the Kowai notions of Mala show many resemblances with those of the Mutu speakers, it is to the point to compare Mala's role in Kowai history with that of Kilibob in Madang history.

As Lawrence states, traditions about Kilibob varied among the peoples in the Madang region (1964:21). They agree that Kilibob and his brother Manup hail from the area, in most versions from Karkar Island. They were sons or grandsons of the creator deity Anut or Dodo, and they were creators themselves. After a quarrel, one of them, in most versions Kilibob, left in a canoe, sailing east. On his journey he peopled the area and went at least as far as Siassi.⁴ In several of the cargo beliefs, either Kilibob or Manup assumed great importance as the creator of material and immaterial European goods, which he takes away when sailing off after he has quarreled with his brother. He is identified with the Christian deity and venerated as the future provider of these goods on his return (Lawrence 1964:71, 93, 102, 192).⁵ Lawrence analyzes these beliefs as a "series of interpretations of the triadic relations between natives, Europeans and the cargo diety" (1964:239).

As I have shown above, Mala's place in Kowai history is quite different. He is not born in the Kowai area. He is not the son of a creator god. He arrives on Umboi when there are already people around, and he is only one among a number of creators. His role in Kowai history is on balance a negative one. Mala, again unlike Kilibob, appears in different guises: as a human, as a superhuman--possibly a spirit--as a decrepit old man, as a glamorous young man, and so on. His multiple forms express the ambivalent feelings the people have about him (cf. Clifford's comments on Leenhardt's myth analysis [1982:203]). Their story about him interprets relationships between New Guineans only. In the accounts I heard myself, Mala removed New

Guinean goods and not European cargo from Umboi, so for these Kowai it is pointless to see in Mala a cargo deity. Although Metke Pius maintains that Mala also removed European cargo, he, like other Kowai, does not expect Mala to return. Given his perceived lack of reciprocal behavior, his return might not get them their New Guinean goods back anyway.

In their analysis of the Sio form of this ethnohistorical hero, whom the Sio call Male, Harding and Clark (this volume) make clear that the story about him is an explanatory myth, an account that purports to explain things by stating their origins. The Kowai story of Mala does the same; it states the origin of the current geographic distribution of a number of important artifacts of the Siassi cultures, as an explanation of how, in Harding and Clark's terms, "a bit of their traditional world came into being." The statement that Mala had all sorts of crooked ways, which I use as the epigraph for this article, comes from an argumentative man who may have wanted to show his independence of mind by being critical of Mala. He was a forest Kowai, so inclined to stress Molap's contribution to teaching the grassland Kowai. Nevertheless, his comments seem an apt assessment of the roles of Mala and Molap in Kowai history.

NOTES

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1. That the Mandok situate Mala's death in Gom (Pomponio 1992:40 and this volume) and the Kowai in Gasam seems insignificant to me, as far as the route is concerned, since Gom and Gasam are neighboring grassland villages in close proximity to each other.

2. A group of Gomlongon men told me about the origins of humankind, Pomponio provided me with the account that Metke Pius of Aupwel told her, and I heard several brief references here and there.

3. Kamma reports how in the Sentani area of Irian Jaya, the people deliberately built an evangelist a house on top of such a powerful stone (1976:716). The evangelist told them subsequently that he was bothered by unusual dreams, and asked them to move his house.

4. I take it Lawrence refers with this term to the small islands to the south of Umboi.

5. McSwain writes that the Karkar Island version of the "Manub-Kulbob" story always ends by affirming that Kulbob will "actually reappear with his superior goods and knowledge, when the time is ripe" (1990:8).