

DISPLAY OF THE DEAD

THE SMOKED CORPSES OF ASEKI

Ian Lloyd Neubauer



The smoked corpses adopt various poses. The positioning of this one suggests he was a chief. The site's custodian Dickson claims the chief was his great grandfather

If there's one thing I've learnt while working as a visiting reporter in PNG over the past five years, it's that little of what is written about the place – and even less of what is said – should be accepted as fact. Endless rehashing of horror stories from WWII, the discontinuation of

oral history as a result of westernisation and alcoholism, foreigners' tendency to 'big-note' themselves with tales of robberies and shootings, and a shortage of communication technology, have coalesced to create a culture of reportage rife with hearsay, exaggeration and lies.

And so, I approached my latest assignment on mummification in PNG with a healthy dose of skepticism. An extraordinary and – from an outsider's viewpoint – grotesque form of interment, the smoked corpses of Aseki have captured the imagination of anthropologists, journalists and

filmmakers for more than 50 years. Yet the ritual – and its origins – remains shrouded in mystery. When did it begin? Why, in a land where cannibalism was rife, did the Anga tribe at the centre of the practice begin mummifying their dead? What kind of relationship exists between the smoked

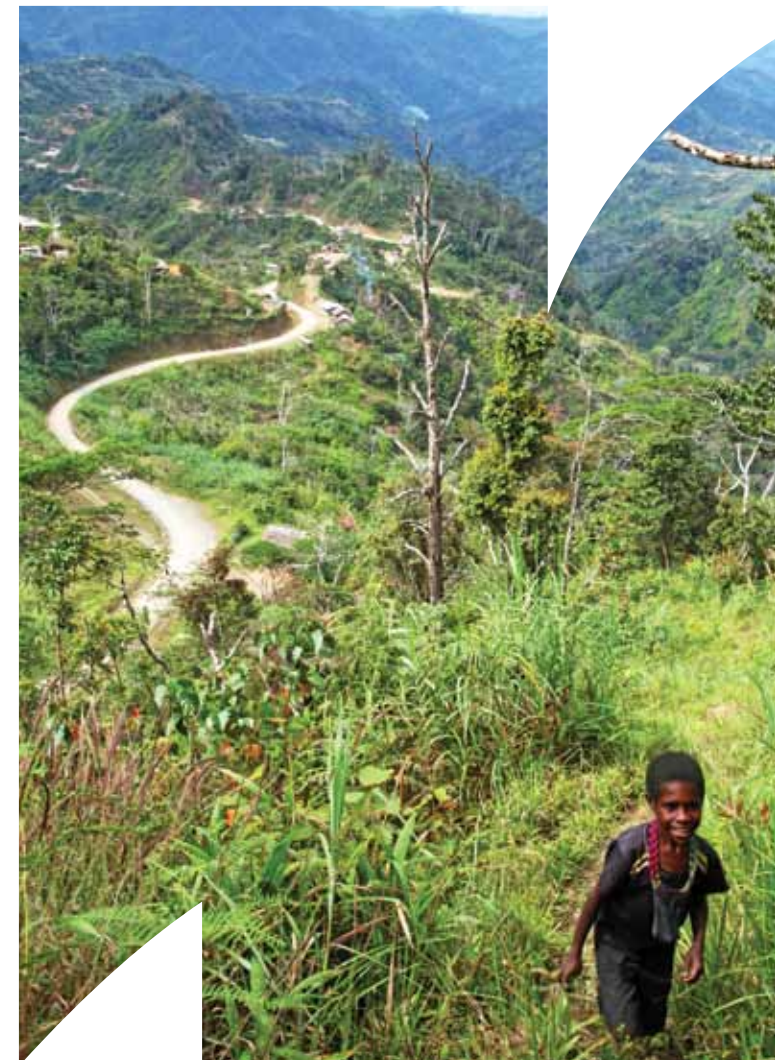
body ancestors and today's Anga? And when – and why – did the ritual disappear? The overland section of my journey begins in the east coast city of Lae, where I rendezvous with my fixer Malcolm Gauthier. Our journey is undertaken on motorbikes and takes two days to complete, with an overnight stopover at Bululo, a former 1930s gold

rush town that now operates as a logging station. The following day we continue southwest past the Owen Stanley Range, home of the infamous Kokoda Track, where 400 hopelessly-outclassed Australian soldiers and their New Guinean porters defeated 25,000 battle-hardened Japanese marines during WWII. Today, the Kokoda Track

“Why did the Anga tribe at the centre of the practice begin mummifying their dead?”

who made the ultimate sacrifice in the battle against tyranny. The further inland we progress, the worse

the road becomes, a seemingly never-ending series of muddy bogs, river crossings and switchbacks that reduce our speed to a mere 20km/hour. Aseki lies at the apex of the next saw-toothed ridge – a fringe highland region so detached from modernity that even the regular passing of mist through valleys is considered an omen from the spirit world. Aseki's description as a village is the first of countless details commonly misreported by the press. It is a district in Morobe



A goat track leads from the road through the jungle to the smoked corpse site

is a war pilgrimage destination writ large that each year attracts 3000 Australian tourists wanting to pay homage to those

Province, home to a tribe formerly known as the Kukukuku but that now identifies itself as Anga. Our destination is Angapenga, a large village not far from the border with Oro Province where we're directed to an unmarked nature strip 3km down the road. It's but one of dozens or perhaps hundreds of sites in Aseki District where smoked corpses are found, though the exact location of most have been lost over time.

As we dismount from our bikes we're approached by a man called Dickson who identifies himself as the custodian of the site. Speaking in Tok Pisin, he demands a princely sum to access the grounds. We bargain him down to a figure both parties can live with before setting off together on the final stage of our journey – a laborious half-hour climb through jungle riddled with spider webs and stinging nettles.

The walking track, if you can call it that, is so steep in parts we find ourselves crawling on all fours. It offers panoramic views of Angapenga village before disappearing into the canopy and rounding a ridge before coming to a conclusion at a clay wall that rises vertiginously to the sky. There, under a small indentation in the cliff, I finally come face-to-face with the smoked corpses of Aseki.

The mummies are more macabre than anything I could have ever imagined and fairly well-preserved given the heat and humidity of their tropical outdoor environ. Smearing with red clay, they are in various stages of decomposition, with parched sections of skin and muscle clinging loosely to skeletons. Some still have clumps of hair on their heads, full sets of nails and their hands curled in pensive positions. Their facial expressions are cut straight out of a Hollywood scream-fest, with rows of fully-exposed rotten teeth and eyeballs popping out of sockets. One of the corpses even has a bone from a small bird or mammal pierced through its nose.

There are 14 corpses in total, arranged in life-like positions on bamboo scaffolding or curled up in foetal positions inside baskets. Four of the corpses have disintegrated into piles of old bones, their skulls visible through nests of broken bits of bamboo on the dirt. Getting right up close to photograph the mummies proves to be a serious challenge. There's no flat ground to stand on and as I navigate my way through, I slowly slip down the sandy incline. When Malcolm comes in for a closer look, he loses his balance and grabs hold of the



It's a balancing act for writer Ian Neubauer as he photographs the corpses perched at the top of a sandy incline. The site's custodian Dickson keeps watch. Photo by Malcolm Gauthier

when the missionaries gifted the natives salt – a mineral they had hitherto never seen and which they began using to embalm their dead. A second group of missionaries, Dickson explains, put an end to the practice when they successfully converted the Anga to Christianity.

Dickson's story slightly mirrors a claim by the *Mail Online* that one of the mummies was bayoneted by the Japanese during WWII. But Dickson's story doesn't add up.

Even today, payback killings are practised throughout PNG. It's extremely unlikely the Anga would have cast aside their primordial desire for revenge over a few sacks of salt. The process of smoking corpses also appears highly complex and technical and would have taken the Anga years, if not decades or generations, to perfect. Above and beyond these perfunctory arguments, Higginson's seminal report on the smoked bodies of Aseki dates back to 1907 – eight years prior to the start of WWI. My suspicion that Dickson is simply telling us what he thinks we want to hear is confirmed when Malcolm asks him his

scaffolding, nearly pulling all 14 mummies into the jungle below. He then tells me he has seen them before, when they were displayed at the Morobe Show in Lae more than a decade ago.

I knew, from an old photo, the mummies are infrequently carried to villages for restorative work. But the idea of these delicate and priceless anthropologic artefacts being put in the back of a truck and driven more than 250km over broken roads to be gawked at as curiosities in a country fair leaves me dumbfounded. The smoked corpses

of Aseki are historical treasures that some people believe belong in a national museum. Just sitting here they are perilously at risk of damage by clumsy tourists, tomb raiders and the elements. A landslide is all it will take to wreck the lot of them.

As I continue my close-up examination of the mummies, I make a fascinating discovery. Cuddled into the chest of one of the corpses is the preserved corpse of an infant suckling on its mother's breast. The infant's presence here shoots holes in a recent report by the world's most visited English-language daily news

portal, the UK's *Mail Online*, which claims Aseki's mummification practice was "a rare honour bestowed upon dead Anga [male] warriors".

The *Mail Online* also claims the bodies "are placed in such a way that they look down the mountain and upon the village far below [to]... become watchers who continue to protect the village in the afterlife". Yet from where these corpses are located, the village of Angapenga is nowhere to be seen. I take the opportunity to ask Dickson about media reports based on the very first documentation on

the smoked corpses of Aseki by British explorer Charles Higginson that embalmers drained corpses' body fat and used it as cooking oil. Dickson tells us he has

“These are historical treasures that some people believe belong in a national museum”

never heard this before; that it's "tok giaman blo wait man" – a white man's lie. His riposte concurs with evidence at hand that suggests

preservation of the Anga's physical bodies was crucial to their metaphysical standing in the afterlife.

When we return to the road, I continue my interview with Dickson via Malcolm's translations. Dickson tells us the custom of smoking corpses began during WWI when the Anga attacked the first group of missionaries to arrive in Aseki and his great-grandfather, the corpse with the pierced septum we saw under the cliff, was shot dead in retaliation. The killing sparked a war of attrition between the Anga and the missionaries that was nipped in the bud



Cuddled into the chest of one of the corpses is the preserved corpse of an infant suckling on its mother's breast

great-grandfather's name (he doesn't know), his age (he looks to be in his 40s, but he is only 21) and his family background

(his parents died when he was very young, suggesting he would have had scant exposure to genuine oral history).



Feet and toes, with nails incredibly intact



Note the cassowary bone through the nostrils of this corpse

“Their facial expressions are cut straight out of a Hollywood scream-fest, with rows of fully-exposed rotten teeth and eyeballs popping out of sockets”

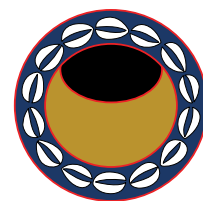
I stop my recording device and delete the file. Dickson's web of Chinese whispers is not worth the storage space it is occupying. One of his friends, however, suggests we visit the mission in Angapenga where an Australian priest may be able to shine some light on the mystery. When we arrive at the mission, we're told the Australian in question left many years ago. But we are able to engage his successor, a New Guinean pastor called Loland and his colleague Nimas, a teacher of indigenous



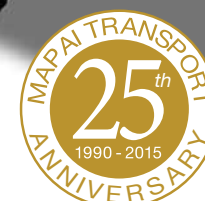
The eyeballs are amazingly well-preserved on this corpse, which appears to be wiping away tears

languages. They tell us they don't know when or how the mummification culture began, but that it had been practised by the Anga for centuries. He says the bodies were covered in red clay to maintain their structural integrity following the curing process, which would take place over extended periods in spirit houses. The intestines would fall out through the corpses' orifices and probably used to conjure white magic. Like Dickson, they scoff at the idea that fat was drained from the bodies for use as cooking oil. If the Anga had taken such a huge customary leap forward and stopped cannibalising their dead, Pastor Loland intones, why would they continue to consume body grease? Their answer concurs with a *National Geographic*

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This corpse is curled in a foetal position inside a bamboo cage

documentary shot at Koke, a different village in Aseki District, during which Anga tribespeople recreated a curing ceremony using the carcass of a pig. They show how fat was drained from the

corpse using hollowed out bamboo sticks and then rubbed on the arms and the legs of the living in a homage to the dead. Nimas says cannibalism was never practised by the Anga; that even



Sagging skin can be clearly seen



Dickson holds up a leg bone he found on the ground

when they killed enemy soldiers during inter-tribal wars, they would later allow enemy tribesmen to collect the bodies of their dead. His opinion strongly opposes Higginson's report, which describes the Anga as fierce cannibals who greedily lapped up the entrails of their own kin during the curing process. But if that was the case, how is it the Anga didn't make a meal of the lone foreigner in their midst? When and why did embalming in Aseki end? In 1949, Pastor Loland answers, when missionaries first arrived en masse in the region. "They taught us this is not the proper way to do things and we should bury our dead," Malcolm translates. "That way of life is over now." Their answers don't come close to putting an end to all of my questions. Yet they seem many times more credible than Dickson's tall tale and confirm the misgivings I had over

previously published reports. And so it is with a glass half-full of knowledge that I retreat from the highlands. Some secrets, perhaps, are best kept with the dead. ▲

Getting There:

PNG Air (www.pngair.com) flies from Port Moresby to Lae 27 times weekly. For bookings: Call 7222 2151. Niugini Dirt (www.niuginidirt.com) in Lae offers three-day motorbike tours to Aseki for K2330. The price includes bike hire, fuel, food, guides, support vehicle and twin-share accommodation. For bookings: Call 7157 4522.

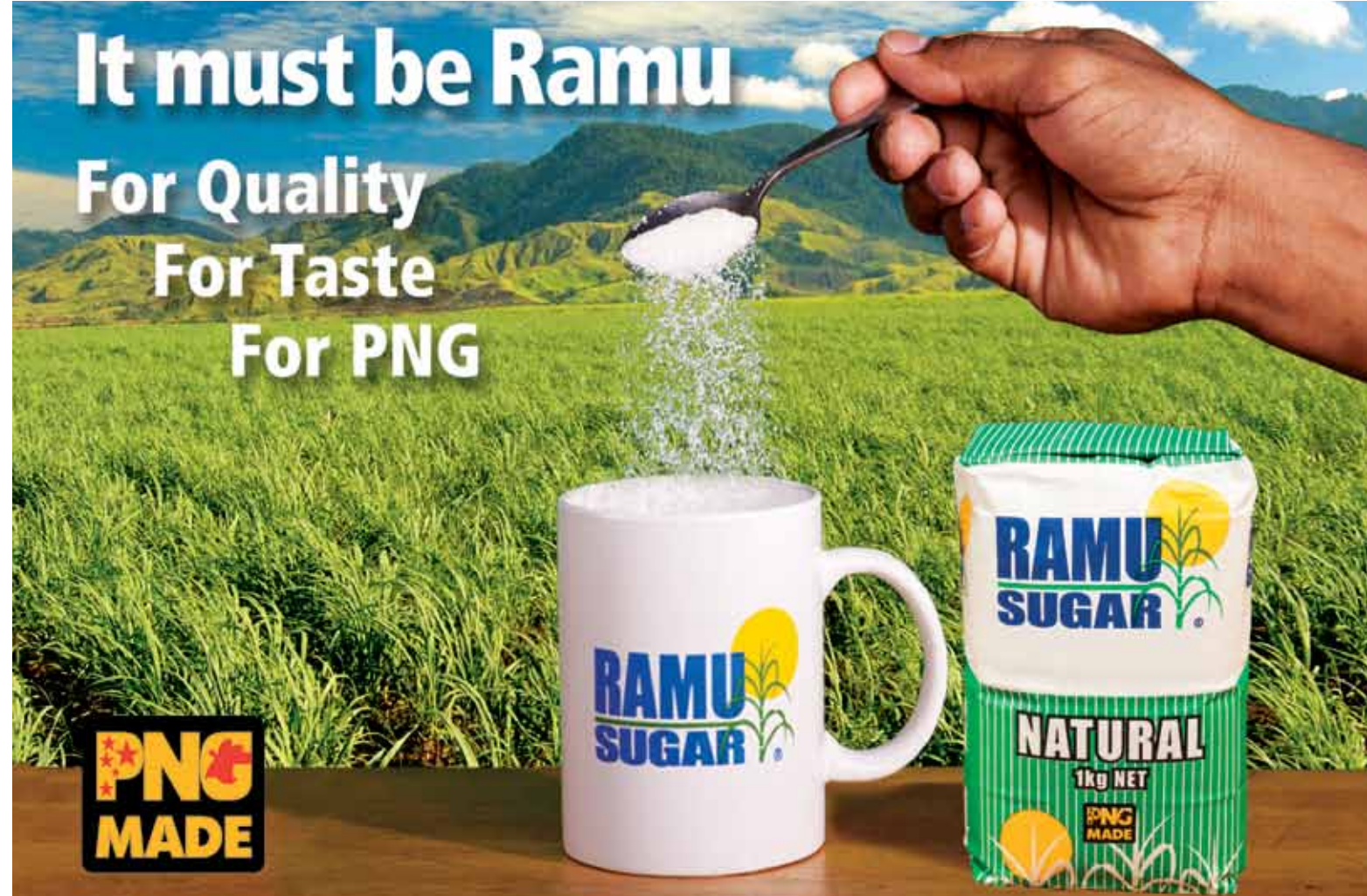
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