

The Middle Sepik

The Middle Sepik River

The Middle Sepik River provided sustenance for its people. Villagers caught fish and prawns, birds for food and feathers, crocodiles for meat, skins and teeth. They harvested sugar cane, sago palm and other wild foods, cut timber for canoes, carvings and buildings, and cultivated gardens in the rich flood plain soil.

An unnamed writer quoted by *The Papua New Guinea Scene*, October 1970 wrote,

“... although it brings so much to the people, they know it can never be trusted and they will never laugh at it. It is there for their use but also for their veneration.

“Too many of them have been sucked under by its temperamental currents and its grisly executioners, the crocodiles; too many of their dwellings and gardens have been ruined by its raging flood; too many canoes and boats have floundered on its submerged logs for men to regard it lightly. All its moods and changing scenes of mist shrouded rain squall, glistening rainbows, harsh sunshine, dawns and sunsets and delicate moonlight add to its peculiar mystique.”

Haus Tambarans

The *Haus Tambarans* honored the powers of the river and the ancestors. One of the most spectacular was the Kanganaman *Haus Tambaran*, already declared a National Cultural Property. *The Papua New Guinea Scene* describes it as a “large two storied building rising to a height of forty-five feet, length is forty feet, eight inches, the richly carved supporting posts are twenty-eight feet high. It was rebuilt in 1946. Tradition says a dead enemy is buried under every post of the *Haus Tambaran*.”

Figure 10.6: A clan ancestor carved into a post of the Kanganaman *Haus Tambaran* wears an elaborate necklace.

The large Middle Sepik villages and their talented carvers provided most of the artifacts Ron collected. Everyday life on the Sepik was hard, opportunities to make money few. Ron remembered going to school as a child with cardboard covering the holes in his shoes and mailing his Grandmother Hill's food boxes to Finland after the war. He bought something from everyone. Art and profit were not his primary motivations, the adventure was. He had money to buy and buying was power, but sustaining power on the Sepik involved knowledge and organization.



In an interview for his 1972 Arizona State University museum show, he listed what the carvers wanted, "... newspaper for rolling cigarettes, tobacco, beads and salt, but mostly money, especially Australian shillings, not paper money."

He added more about how villagers used newspaper in the February 18, 1972, *Tucson Daily Citizen*, "Knives and mirrors are popular, but so are old newspapers. The natives use them to wrap their tobacco to smoke. They prefer classified pages. They dislike the big print used in ads. I asked one man why he preferred the small print in the classified pages and he simply said — number one paper."

"Apparently taboo among New Guineans who roll their own is the comics page. 'I have yet to see a native smoke a comic.'

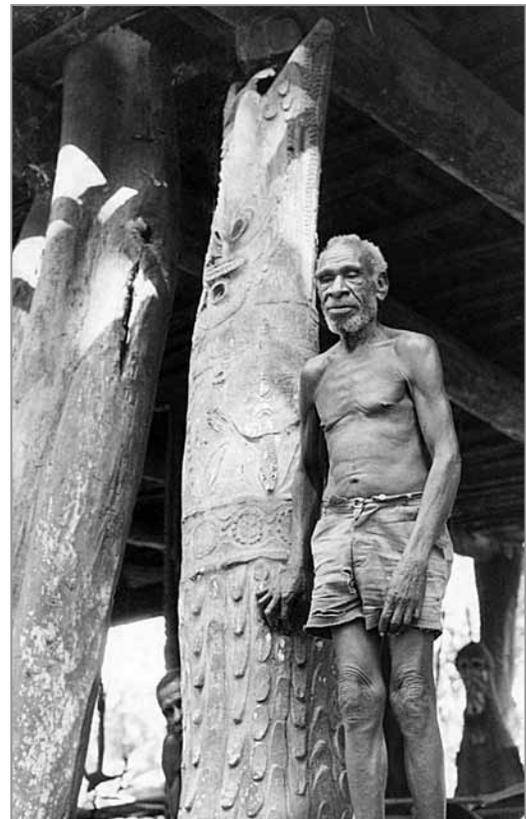
"At each village I would buy artifacts and list them. I would give the seller a slip of paper with a number on it and tell him to be at the base camp on day two of the next week — that would be Tuesday — with the slip of paper and the artifact. I would pay for all the items when I got back to the base camp.'

"Back at camp he would catalogue and pack them in the canoe for the trip back down the river."



Figure 10.7: Juliette Vanderpump waits on the steps of Kanganaman's *Haus Tamberan*. Women were not allowed on the upper level. A slit-gong drum sits under the *Haus*, a painted bark face looks out on the upper left, and a split-leg figure guards the entry.

Figure 10.8: Kanganaman elder, possibly blind, with post he carved as a young man.



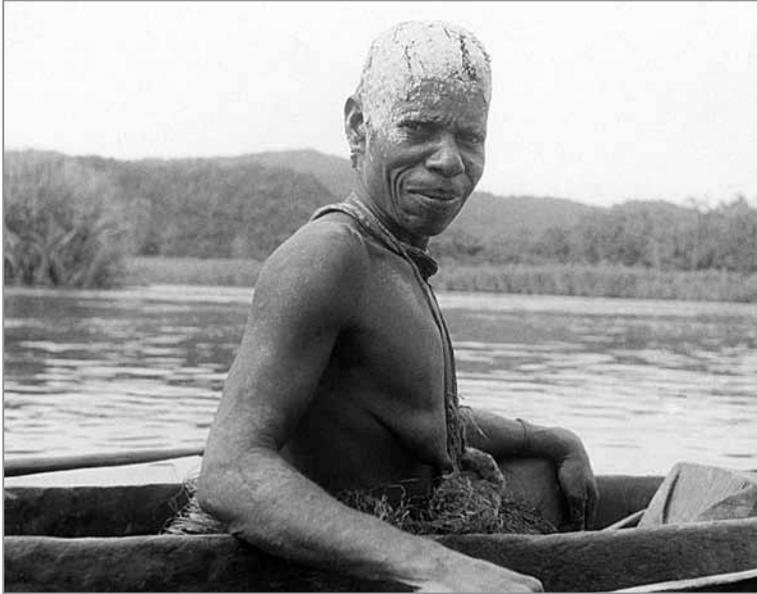


Figure 10.9: May River woman pauses in her dugout canoe. Women often paddled out at first light to fish or to tend their gardens along the river bank.

The May River

Ron bought enough carvings in the Middle Sepik to supply his dealers, but he preferred to explore remote rivers and villages. He knew most of the Sepik patrol officers by now, including the new patrol officer at May River. He left Ambunti on the Upper Sepik for May River with a faster motor, suntan lotion and his friend, Juliette

Vanderpump, a New Zealand nurse, but this time malaria knocked him about.

The patrol post perched on a high ridge above the narrowing river, directly across from a village. By the time they spotted it, the cold sweats of malaria fever held him shivering in their icy grip. He gulped



Figure 10.10: Crew and two expats unload Ron's canoe at a landing, possibly the May River Patrol Post. The women in the approaching canoes wear grass skirts.

down chloroquine tablets for the malaria from Juliette's medical kit and collapsed on the sofa into a feverish sleep. He commented later that the patrol officer, "a really nice guy, good looking like Paul Newman" and Juliette didn't miss his company that night, and that the officer, "owed him one."

The restricted area he did not get a permit to enter in 1966 was Mianmin. The village men had staged an ambush attack on another village, the normal way to collect heads. Warriors laid in wait in the early morning until a man came out to pee. They quickly and quietly killed him. When he didn't return, his clansmen started out to investigate.



Figure 10.11: Ron with sun tan lotion (or some substitute) on his nose and a May River man decorated with clay in his hair and *bilas* in his beard.

The man holds his lime container and its decorative stick in his hands. He wears a small *bilum* around his neck. Men's *bilums* contained personal carvings and other magical charms, plus cigarettes or money, if they had any.

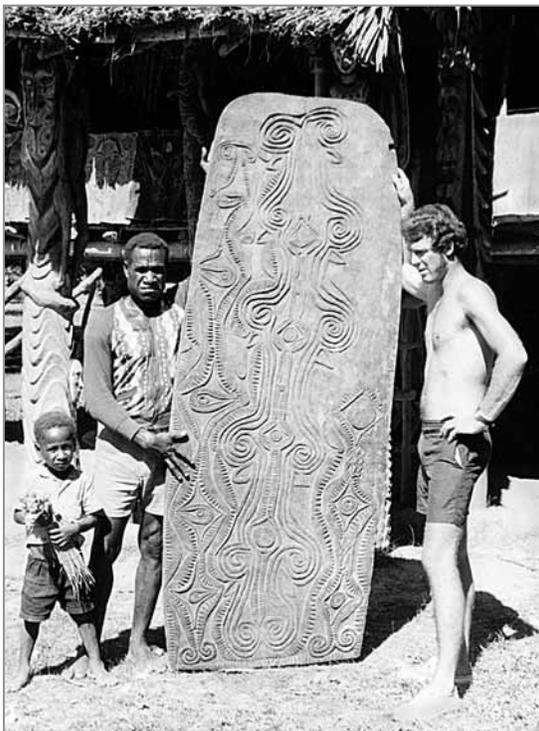


Figure 10.12: Little Ronnie, his father Jeremai and Ron in Angoram with a large May River shield. Some of Ron's New Guinea crew named their sons after him.



Figure 10.13: Ron believes this photograph may be in a village of the Mianmin people near the May River whose men were imprisoned for murdering men from another village. The women are very thin. Without their men to hunt, cut sago trees and help in the gardens, life would have been even harder than before in this marginal area of the Sepik River basin.

Figure 10.14: This boy may also be from the same Mianmin village. He looks fearful and worried.



The Mianmin killed ten or twelve. They ordered the rest of the people outside, then took the women and children captive.

The Australian Administration didn't look kindly on this traditional way of doing things. They sent in a patrol, arrested, courted and locked the murderers in jail for two years. A book, *The Mianmin Murders*, documents this episode. New Guinea men sent to jails often learned *Tok Pisin*, sometimes even a bit of English. A few became interpreters after their release.

Ron felt better in the morning, he decided to try for the Mianmin camp. The patrol officer told him that when the May River forked left to the east, to take the right fork and he would find a small settlement of Mianmin people. The tributary foamed into rapids just beyond the junction, so they walked the canoe

through the white water. His crew spotted an eight-foot saltwater crocodile on the sand bank ahead. It slid into the water, but they tracked it for fifty feet. It probably swam up during high water, another reminder of the mixed salt and fresh water environment of the Sepik, even this far inland.

The Mianmin settlement consisted of six to eight houses, too small to be on any map. The tiny *Haus Kiap* measured approximately ten-by-ten feet with a palm bark floor and a deeply overhung thatch roof to make up for its lack of sides.

Ron said, "The murderers were in jail, so not a lot of men in the village. The women still wore grass skirts. They'd never seen a white woman before. Everyone wanted to touch her blond hair.

"We sat on the floor of the *Haus Kiap*, about eight feet up, with our feet hanging over, eating tins of



Figure 10.15: Other May River villages prospered during good times. This woman displays surplus yams and squash for sale. Both vegetables, the African yams and the New World squash, improved sago based village diets.



BYO please

Ron always brought along food for himself and his crew. Many villages had no surplus and even if they did, it was unfair to count on buying or accepting food as villagers could not run down to the corner market for more. When fresh food was available, it was very welcome.

Ron also carried extra coffee, canned milk, tinned fish and rice. If he stayed in a village house, he fed the family. In the *Haus Kiaps*, the Big Men often stopped by for long talks into the night and a meal.

Figure 10.16: May River women wash sago in a palm sheath trough into a canoe. The woman on the bank holds a long dipper to pour river water over the sago pulp.



Figure 10.17: May River musician plays his jaw's harp. The timber raft will be floated down the May, then into the Sepik to a sawmill. These men usually did not own outboard motors. They would paddle back up to their villages with goods they bought in Angoram's trade stores.



Figures 10.18 and 10.19: Juliette Vanderpump probably took these photographs of mothers with their children while Ron bought artifacts, as well as other photographs on these early 1970s trips.

sardines. Sixty people sat on little stools down on the ground watching us. When we threw a lid or

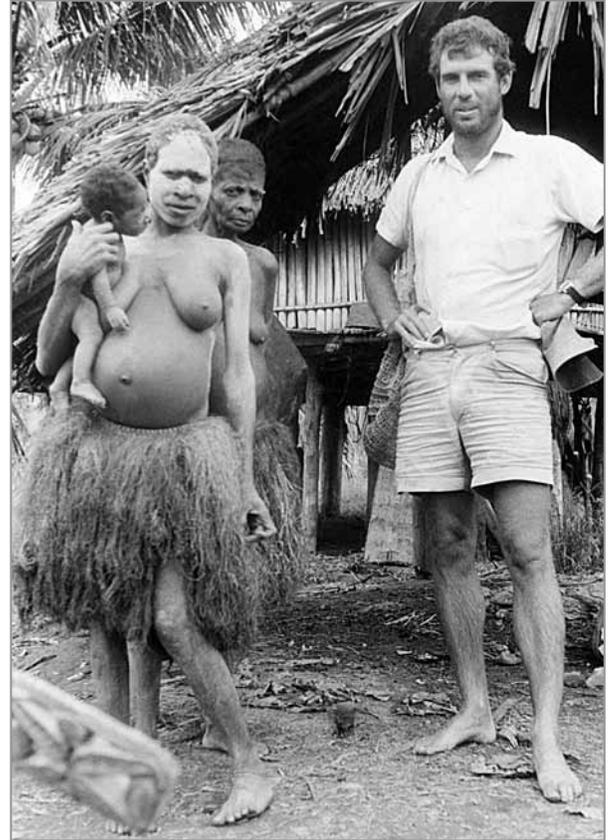


tin away, they all dived for it. They wanted the shiny metal and the red and yellow labels. They watched us take out our toothbrushes and brush our teeth. They even came to look at our spit. I bought beautiful bows and arrows with bone barbs there, plus some canoe prows and shields."



Figure 10.20 (left): Ron measures out salt or rice, luxury commodities in remote areas.

Figure 10.21 (below): Ron with May River women in grass skirts, he commented, "I'm wearing a white shirt, that's amazing."



On the way back to the Sepik, he took a smaller river towards Waniap and the landing for the Ama track. Ama eventually got an airstrip. Later, Ron collected fine arrows there, including some from the Frieda River.

He stopped all along this side river wherever he saw a settlement, bought the few things they had, asked if they knew of other places. Finally he took the canoe up a thread of a *baret* to a tiny, unpromising cluster of houses and asked if they had anything to sell.

"They brought out beautiful, old human teeth necklaces, six of them. The first ones I collected."

Figure 10.22: Human tooth necklace from the May River made of hand spun and twined *bilum* string, plus a cowry shell fastener traded up from the coast.

