Report on Flag #152 Expedition
New Britain & New Ireland Cultural Survey

INTRODUCTION

For the past eight years, Ed Roski (MN’90) and Peter Keller (FN’84) have undertaken a series of one month expeditions focusing on assessing the cultural traditions of all the significant islands that make up New Guinea and the surrounding areas with the ultimate goal of visiting and documenting the cultural vitality of each island. New Guinea itself is the world’s second largest island and is surrounded by hundreds of much smaller islands. The expeditions to date have included two journeys up the Sepik River to as close to its source as was possible; and then successive expeditions to the Torres Straits, Milne Bay, Island Indonesia and the Asmat, the Admiralty Islands, the Solomon Islands, Bismarck Sea. From June 30 through July 26th of this year, the Roski – Keller Expedition explored much of the coastal areas of New Ireland and the north coast of East New Britain. The Expedition team included Ed Roski (MN ‘90), Peter Keller (FN’84), Bret Keller (SN ’02), and Johan Reinhardt (Medalist ’86). The team leader was Lesley Martin, a native of Papua New Guinea with a rich knowledge of its culture and languages. It is worth noting that Johan Reinhardt is one of the most prominent high altitude archeologists in the world today. In total, this expedition traveled over 1000 nautical miles and described over 20 islands. In addition, the team attended a traditional mask festival at Kokopo, East New Britain where it documented the very important Fire Dance of the Baining people.

The 4 am flight out of Port Moresby arrived in Kavieng just in time for sunrise and a spectacular double rainbow over our boat, the MV Golden Dawn. We headed out immediately and got settled into the routine of shipboard life. We were about to explore all of the significant islands around New Ireland, and then proceed to Rabaul and nearby Kokopo to see the traditional mask festival before ending the expedition along the north coast of East New Britain. New Ireland is an island just north of New Britain and is only about 10 km wide in places and about 320 km long. Traditionally, New Ireland is most famous for the “Malagan” rituals and the incredible carvings, especially masks that are produced on New Ireland to this day. It was our hope to document and collect as many of these carvings as possible as part of a major exhibition that will open at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California and travel nationally starting in Houston, Texas.

NEW HANOVER ISLAND

After an overnight run over to New Hanover Island, an Island just northwest of New Ireland, we awoke to good weather, and were ready for our first village. It was the village of Kalabeng on Selapiu Island just east of Planet Channel on our way to New Hanover. At Kalabeng we saw very little of cultural significance except for some bark cloth headdresses. At nearby Enang village, we still saw very little of cultural significance except for a simple dance wand and some bagi (shell bead currency most famous in Milne Bay to the south). It was interesting that given the combat history of all of this area during WWII, we were shown some Australian metals and a
US Army survey marker. It turns out that many of the people were back in Kavieng to see the televised Australian Football finals. It was a sign of things to come.
By lunch time we made it to New Hanover proper and looked for villages along the south coast as we headed west. Unfortunately, due to extreme low tides and a barrier reef, most were impossible to reach. By late afternoon, after the disappointment of not being about to get ashore, we did find a beautiful bay with a stream and the village of Metemana. Here we did make it ashore just before dark and we were shown lots of stone adzes and most surprising, a stone bowl that the villagers thought was a helmet. It was found in the stream by the village teacher who thought it spoke to him at night. Because of the low tides and barrier reefs, we decided to get out earlier from now on. Still along the west coast of New Hanover, we saw very little of cultural significance except for a few clam shell adzes similar to those we’ve seen in the Admiralty Islands. Off the NW coast of the island, we had a very interesting dive on a Japanese Minisub. It was a Type D Midget Submarine that sank in 20 meters of water about 100 meters from a tanker, the Taisyo Maru. According to reports that we found, it was actually scuttled after the tanker was hit by B-25’s of the American 345th Bomber Group. We dove on both vessels. The tanker was badly broken up, but the sub was in perfect condition. After this exciting dive, the Golden Dawn continued east along the north coast of New Hanover as bad weather started closing in on us. We found shelter back in Kavieng.

LIBBA VILLAGE, NEW IRELAND

We got supplies in Kavieng and hired a vehicle to take us about 150 km down the east coast of New Ireland to the traditional carving village of Libba. Here we commissioned a traditional Malagan Sing Sing with the Libba people and arranged to visit and interview several of the villages master carvers. We documented the dance ceremony and interviews on video and managed to acquire a few very good masks. The Malagan carvers of today are world famous in the tribal art world and it is because of the art that the Malagan traditions are preserved today. We saw three different types of masks including the Tatanua with fiber down the center; the Kepong, which has big bark cloth or elaborate wood ears; and the Waris, simpler, but clearly different in style. We also interviewed to son of master carver Ben Sesiak who carved a large Malagan skeletal fish that the Bowers Museum acquired several years back as a masterpiece of the art form.

TABAR AND TATAU ISLANDS.

We overnighted to Tabar Island where scholars such as Michael Gunn in St. Lewis believe that the Malagan culture began and were it is most alive today. The Malagan culture was first recorded in 1643 when Dutch traders encountered a shark-hunting canoe off the coast of Tabar. Tabar is located about 40 km north of the east coast of New Ireland and consists of three main islands: Simberi, Tatau, and Big Tabar. It is so traditional that when Gunn visited the area in 1982, he documented almost 400 different Malagan rites
And each of these contained the prescription to make a Malagan object; a mask, display platform, or even an entire display house. Today, the population is about 3000 inhabitants, most of which appear to be children. Our first stop was in very rough seas on the small island of Mabara just east of Tatau to meet a master carver named Maku. We located him rather easily,
but were very disappointed to find that he stopped carving due to his time being consumed with settling land disputes. Land is a huge issue on these islands east of New Ireland because of the recent discovery of very large gold deposits. We next headed south to the village of Wang on the southern tip of Tatau to meet another master carver, Maris Memenga. We found him, but it was Saturday and the village of Wang was strongly Seventh Day Adventists and were forbidden to do any business. Maris did show us into his house, however, where we were shown some of his work. After great disappointment we headed for the northwest coast of Tatau to visit a village we noticed on the map named Lawa. We were very surprised to find a very rich tradition here with young men drumming outside of a traditional men’s house and we were shown how the Malagan masks were made. It was startling to find that they collected copal, or tree sap often used to imitate amber, as an adhesive and coloring agent to put the fibers on the mask. The men were also preparing a coconut pudding using hot rocks which were put into a palm leaf bowl filled with coconut milk. As we were leaving the young villagers were very excited in showing us bottles of what they thought was gold from the area’s many mines. Unfortunately, all they had was the sulfide concentrate that was made up almost entirely of pyrite, commonly called “fool’s gold”. We finally headed out to another village to meet master carver Edward Sale, but he had sold everything that we made to a nearby mine geologist on the island of Simberi. Gold mining as all but eliminated the carving tradition on this very important island. Unfortunately, the villagers think they will get rich quick with all the pyrite they are concentrating, but reports indicated that the concentrate is running less that a tenth of an ounce per ton.

LIHIR ISLAND

Lihir Island is located about 900 km NE of Port Moresby and consists of a complex of several overlapping stratovolcanoes rising as much as 700 meters above sea level. We found virtually no remaining traditions on the island and people from all over New Guinea came to work in the gold mine which is a huge open pit. The entire island is a mining lease and is reported to be the second largest gold reserve in the world with an estimated 40 million ounces. The island’s power is entirely geothermal and funerals are seen all around the mining area on the east side of the island.

TANGA ISLANDS

Next we continued south to the next group of islands, the Tanga island group. This is a group of three main islands and some smaller ones. It is very remote and we hoped to have better luck in finding some traditional culture. The first and most populated of the islands was Boang Island. We landed at the village of Sunkin which is home to former Papua New Guinea Prime Minister, Julian Chan. The island was home to a Japanese Base during the war and still has remains of a War Monument and several Japanese graves. The villagers took us to an old copra shed where we were shown five human faced Kipong style masks and two slit gong drums that were all painted with modern paints indicating that they’re still being used today. Next we went south to the much larger village of Amfa where culture was very much alive and well. We were taken to a Men’s House where we were shown quite a few dance staffs in the traditional form of an ax club similar to those seen in the Solomon Islands not far to the East. In another Men’s House we were shown an amazing and ancient pre-contact stone carved garamut drum. We
documented everything as completely as we could. We then hired a truck with minimal tires and no starter to explore the rest of the island since the island has a ring road that goes completely around the top of the island. Unfortunately, except of a couple of Christian carvings and some shell money from the Green Islands, we found very little of cultural interest outside of Anfa village.

The next day we headed off to Malendok, the largest island in the Tanga group. On Malendok’s northern tip we visited the village of Gargaris where we found another stone bowl very similar in style to the one we saw on the west side of New Hanover. The people were very friendly and were proud of their dance wands and some very fine clam shell bracelets. They told us of a second village around the point named Balawarasau which maintained very rich traditions. The village has a large Men’s House and the people were practicing for an upcoming Sing Sing. Best of all, they had a sacred cave where their secret society “duk duk” masks were kept and they were willing to take Johan Reinhard and Peter Keller up the very steep maintain to see them. The cave was well documented. Next on the island was the village of Sinaudo where we were taken to the top of a hill by a couple of young men to their Men’s House where we were shown several totem snake figures over 6 feet tall and two excellent spears as well as three axe-type dance clubs. One was exceptionally old.

**Feni Islands**

The Feni or Anil islands are a small group of islands with lots of geothermal activity including hot springs and geothermal vents. The main island is Ambite which is a caldera which erupted in 350 BC based on recent radiocarbon dating. The west side of the island in Tutum Bay is where most of the geothermal activity is concentrated and you can see much of the venting even from the sea. Underwater there are discharges of both gas and hot fluids rich in arsenic. It is undoubtedly these hot hydrothermal fluids rich in arsenic that are responsible for the region’s rich gold deposits. The water temperatures are well over 100 degrees C when they come out, and the force of the water is comparable to a fire hose. The island also has a spectacular channel running through it that has a Tal Air twin engine plane which crashed killing two people aboard many years ago.

**Green Islands**

The last of the island groups off the east coast of New Ireland are the Green Islands which consist of two main islands that are no more than very low coral atolls. The first of these that we explored was the smaller and less populated Pinipel. On Pinipel, traditional culture was very much alive with a large Men’s House with three large garamut drums and beaters that consisted of bunches of reeds that made a rattling sound at the same time as the drum beat. We also observed several spectacular examples of shell money, including two very thick, heavy examples that we were told were used to buy babies in cannibalistic times. The most spectacular find of the day, however, was a greenstone anthropomorphic ax head. Nothing like it has ever been seen anywhere else in the region.

The larger and more populated of the islands was Nissan Island which is a huge circular atoll and is where the Japanese had a major seaplane base during the war. In early 1944, the Americans and the New Zealanders invaded this atoll and killed all 500 Japanese defenders. The
roughly 14000 invading troops set up a significant base here for the rest of the war. We were shown an old Marine Corp camp with lots of beer and coke bottles and other war junk, the remains of a pontoon, and lots of vehicle parts. The villages still had Men’s Houses, but little but garamut drums in them. The shell money that we observed on the islands to the north was supposed to be make here but we saw very little of it and what they had was very highly prized.

DUKE OF YORK ISLANDS

We now headed around the southern end of New Ireland known as Cape St. George. The seas at this time of year were far too rough to try and land anywhere in the area, so se continued north along the West side of New Ireland stopping at Lambon., which had nothing except a WWII airplane propeller. The weather was bad with high winds and a driving rain. However, we noted several villages up the coast, so we took the tender into the rough seas and worked our way up to the village of Kabaikumu where we were very surprised to find a greeting party of several missionaries from the United States attached to the “New Tribes Mission” They didn’t know a great deal about local traditions since their focus was translating the bible into the local language. The villagers took us for a walk into the jungle to find the best masks of the trip and a very old iron ax head club used in past time for killing men. After a great village trip we saw three large sacred stones outside one of the three churches in the village, and hit the rough seas to rejoin the Golden Dawn to get dry and have a warm dinner. We then overnighted to the Duke of Yorks, a group of islands half way to Rabaul in East New Britain. At first light we went on a very shallow water dive on two Type 93 Japanese tanks in about 8 meters of water. They apparently fell off their transport while being loaded. Wee also touched base with the local Duk Duk clan members who were going to the Mask Festival at Kokopo where we would be for the next few days.

RABAUL, EAST NEW BRITAIN

Rabaul was one of the most important Japanese Naval Bases during WWII and is famous for the very large numbers of Japanese wrecks on the bottom of the bay. However, for the past twenty years or more the area’s volcanoes have been erupting at a nonstop pace and have virtually buried much of the town of Rabaul itself. Almost all commercial enterprises have shifted south to the town of Kokopo where we would anchor and attend the local traditional Mask Festival. The mask festival included the Baining Fire Dance which we wanted to document for the exhibit, the Asoro Mudmen from the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea, the Duk Dukd for Tolai of Agoigoi village in the Duke of York Islands and also from Kokopo itself. There were other traditional mask participants from the East Sepik Province, Madang Province, and West New Britain Province. The most spectacular of the participants, however, were our friends form Libba on the East Coast of New Ireland and the Malagan carvers. The Malagan Master Carvers really are the ones responsible for carrying on the Malagan tradition and maintaining its visibility around the world. After the festival was over, we drove high into the hills above Rabaul to visit the Baining people and they subsequently took us to the hiding place in the forest for their several different types of masks and our timing was such that we were able to buy them for the museum before they were burned.
The entire time that we were in Rabaul, the erupting volcano was always in sight. At night there were spectacular light shows as the volcano shot out incandescent boulders and lightning shooting down into the crater following each major eruption.

NORTH COAST OF NEW BRITAIN

We left Rabaul and overnighted to Ponde Point on the north Coast of New Britain where there is a major lumbering operation. The area is reported to have rich traditions, but the lumbering operation has inhibited most of them. We did, however, visit a village west of Ponde Point where a very dramatic initiation ceremony takes place in which the initiate has to wear a ten foot tall decoration pinned in place with cassowary bone daggers through the flesh covering the spine. He then has to dance until the ten foot decoration is ripped out of his back. Most of the men in the village had scars from this ordeal. We continued on to West Nakanai Island (Lakalai) which, as with the coast, is home to the “Valuku”, a local variant of the tubuan traditions of the Tolai people that we saw on the Gazelle Peninsula around Rabaul. There is a perfect volcano erupting on the coast named “Mt Ulawuan” which is over 2000 meters high and looks like Mt. Fuji. We did a detailed exploration of Lalakai Island and found that they did maintain their cultural traditions, but as with the Baining, destroy the masks after the ceremony and make new ones for each occasion. They did have some dance shields used in their Sing Sings as well. Noteworthy also were the very well made rattan baskets which they use with banana or pandanas leaves for serving food. The dive resort and Walindi Plantation is not far to the west and they have made the sharks in the area almost tame as they feed them. We went for a dive and Johan was immediately surrounded by at least six sharks at the bottom the the anchor chain. It was quite a sight.

We headed west along the coast until we reached the Walindi Plantation where Peter and Ed said goodbye. We did note that villages along the way seemed to have wooden bowls very similar in style to those we saw in the Bismarck Sea around the Siassi Islands where they are used as a form of Bride Price as well as for serving food. At the end of the Talasea Peninsula we found a village below a very large fresh water lake which is full of crocodiles. We were shown a very large, but crude stone bowl that was brought down from a campsie on the lake.

CONCLUSION

We traveled over 1000 nautical miles, visited dozens of villages on over twenty islands as we traveled almost all the way around New Ireland, and along the north coast of New Britain. For the most part, modern civilization and missionaries have all but eliminated cultural traditions. Especially noteworthy was the gold mining activity on the off shore islands East of New Ireland. We did see pockets of traditions being maintained on remote islands outside of the normal shipping lanes and on smaller islands that have remained pretty untouched. The most significant finding, however, was that the Malagan Culture is very much alive and well because of the master carvers who have commercially maintained their art form and with it the rich traditions of the Malagan people.