

16 *Mi sori long ol*

Seeing the ancestors in the collection

Porer Nombo and Pinbin Sisau

These are things we want to say together. We visited the British Museum in July 2009, with our colleague and friend James Leach, spending two weeks examining and commenting on objects from the north coast of PNG. While we have been here in London we have been talking about what we are doing here, and this article distils some of our conversations with James and others in the Melanesia Project in the context of looking at objects in the British Museum's collection. We have agreed this text together with James, translating back and forth between English and Tok Pisin.

One thing we have noticed particularly is how beautifully people made things in the past. They took a lot of care in their work. It was hard for them to make things, and because of that, these things have real value and meaning. We feel for these people, our ancestors and predecessors, who did not have the tools that we have now, nor some of the other advantages that we have. We identify deeply with them: we are sorry for them and we admire them at the same time. We have been very interested to see that it was not just these people (our own ancestors) who make objects like this, but that there are lots of other



Figure 83. Porer Nombo, Pinbin Sisau and James Leach documenting the collection (photograph by Elizabeth Bonshek, August 2009).

places in Melanesia where people make and use the same kinds of thing, and have also taken care to keep making them into the present. We feel for these people too. In the past they too worked with tools that made the work difficult.

It is very important that people from villages come to the Museum to document the collections. Village people understand how things are made and how they are mended, we can identify materials and we can explain why they are made in the way they are. Especially when we have been looking at objects from near Reite, but not directly from our place, we have focused on providing this kind of information about materials and manufacture. It is interesting to see how many objects there are in the Museum that were collected in the past without proper information, or any information. This makes us think about something that happened in the 1960s. Some American collectors came to Saidor on the Rai Coast, and they asked the local government leaders to collect old things such as stone axes, bows and arrows. They did not collect any information to go with the objects. Now we think that these things were taken away for nothing: they will not have any meaning in the future. In giving the Museum information about the objects we are looking at, we are helping all those collectors in the past who did not do their work properly, and we are helping the people in the places from which those objects were collected as well.

Seeing things from these other places has reminded us of objects that we used to make in the past but do not make any longer. This has helped us to document our own traditions too. We have been able to tell James about things that cannot be seen in Reite anymore. For example, we saw a slingshot, which reminded us that in the past Reite people used a particular kind of long leaf called *kari'iri sang* as a slingshot once their arrows were exhausted in battle. James had never had occasion to enquire into these things before. We are happy to see things that we do not have in the village any more have been kept in London, and that they will be here for our future generations. This seems very important to us.

As we think of our ancestors and predecessors, we also worry for those future generations who we see emerging now. People are giving up doing



things in the ways our ancestors did them. Some people no longer bother with the effort needed to follow the correct ways of bringing children up: of initiating them and teaching them how to carve slit gongs, or drums, or decorations for men's houses, or how to make skirts out of tree bark. Rather, some people seem to think they should be putting their effort into making themselves and their children more like white people. We continually say that it is fine to become educated and take advantage of change, but people must not forget the power and meaning of practising things in the ways appropriate to the place we live in. So it is very encouraging to be reminded of the range and variety of everyday objects that are made on the whole north coast of PNG, and to know that other people are still making and using

Figure 84. Porer Nombo at work on the collections (photograph by Elizabeth Bonshek, August 2009).

these things, and that there are people who are still interested in them. This is very affirming for us. Seeing how many other people in PNG make similar things confirms our understanding of the value of our practices, and of the objects that form an integral part of them.

Very few people are now able to use *kiramung*, the slit-gong drums which we use for communicating over long distances. James has written about these drums (Leach 2002). People don't know the different beats, and in a few years, after the old people who do know are dead, we will not have any use for the drums any more. When James first arrived in 1993, we made a joke and said that *kiramung* are our telephone. But our joke is now working against us. That is, people think that with the spread of mobile telephones, *kiramung* won't be needed any more, so they do not bother learning how to make or use them. But we know that there is much more to a slit gong than the ability to call someone at a distance. They are at the centre of a complex of *kastom* practices in which people co-operate in exchange, make and maintain marriage relations, learn knowledge of other practices such as artistic production or growing particular kinds of foods, and bring new valuables, such as spirit voices, into being. All this has nothing to do with what mobile telephones make possible.

It is good to know that many other people do still understand and maintain the importance of making objects of the kind the museum holds. A part of the feeling of affirmation we have here is the fact that the Museum thinks it worth looking after them, and thinks it worth asking us to come and add to the information about them. That helps us think about how to discuss the future in the village, and to make decisions about what is worth putting effort into. How can we look after the kinds of things we value in our own places in the face of the kinds of changes we are seeing? How are we to carry our *kastom* into the future? On the visit, we have had some new thoughts about how to carry *kastom* into the future.

Below are some of our thoughts expressed in the Melanesian pidgin of Papua New Guinea, as we do not speak English, nor do most of our kinsmen, or many others in PNG who would benefit from reading about our experiences here.

Porer Nombo

Kastom yumi noken lusim. Yumi lukim niupela pasin na laik lusim kastom, yumi ino baim meri pikinini, yumi ino save long garamut, bai yumi igo longlong nau. Dispela yumi mas lainim ol pikinini wantaim. Ol mas skul, tasol long dispela ol mas lainim kastom wantaim. Mipela save tokim ol man, yu no ken tingting olsem ol bai skul na yu ken lusim kastom.

[We must not lose our *kastoms*. If we see new ways and want to forget *kastom*, stop exchanging valuables in marriage and child payments, forget how to make slit gongs, we will become fools. We must teach our children. They should have education, but learn *kastom* alongside schooling. I am always telling people, you must not think that by gaining education you can give up on *kastom*.]

Pinbin Sisau

Mi lukim ol samting timbuna mekim na mi sori long ol. Ol yusim bun bilong ol long wokim ol dispela samting bilong bipor, ol ino gat gutpela tools long yusim na kain olsem na mi save pelim nogud, o sori long ol. Mi tu igat timbuna, na mi save tingim bek long ol. Papa timbuna ol save tok long bipor ol save gat liklik gaden tasol. Na ol nogat planti pikinini olsem mipela igat nau. Narapela em olsem taim bilong pait em olsem planti man save idai long dispela kain. Ol posin sanguma na ol kain olsem. Mi lukim ol dispela samting long museum na mi save tingim bek long ol kain lain olsem na mi pelim sori.

[I have seen things ancestors made and I feel for them. They used their strength to make things in the past, they did not have good tools and suchlike, and I feel bad – I feel sad – for them. My fathers and grandfathers always said that in the past they only had very small gardens. And they did not have lots of children like we do now. Another thing is that in the time before pacification many people lost their lives in fighting and sorcery. When I see all these things in the museum it makes me remember these people and feel empathy with them.]

Bipor sampela femili save pinis olgeta. Ol bai kilim olgeta: meri pikinini wantaim, na femili save pinis. Mi save bipor ol man save bikpela bikpela. Nau mipela ol liklik liklik man, ol igat mausgras bilong

Figure 85. Pinbin Sisau and Porer Nombo examining ancestral objects in the British Museum store rooms (photograph by Elizabeth Bonshek, August 2009).



ol na ol mariet nau. Bipor, ol save bikpela pinis, ol igat planti save long wokim olgeta samting – bilong pait, bilong wok gaten, bilong painim abus o kain olsem. Ol igat inup save na inup strong. Nau mipela nogat dispela kain. Ol pikinini nogat save. Ol bisi long wokim man tasol.

[Before, some families would die out altogether. They would all be killed, including women and children. I know that in the past men were older before they married. Now, we are all very young men, and as soon as we have beards, we marry. Before, people matured first, they had lots of knowledge about how to make all sorts of things, how to fight, how to make gardens, how to hunt and suchlike. They had enough strength. Now this is not the case. People are only busy making children.]

Yumi lukim ol man bai kam behain, na mipela wari tru. Mipela lukim bikpela mine ikamap klostu long mipela. Ol kolim Ramu Nickel Project long Basamuk bases, na lukim planti hevi kamap pinis long dispela. Ol man igo wok gaden na ol tok em graun bilong Somare na yu noken ikam long en, o kain olsem. Na planti sik, olsem AIDS tu ikam

klostu long mipela nau. Olsem mipela lukim ol samting bilong bipor, na mipela tingim behain bilong ol pikinini bilong mipela na wari istap.

[We look to future generations of people and we are truly concerned. We see a large mine being built near to our villages. It is called the Ramu Nickel Project Mine at Basamuk Bay, and we have already seen many bad and destructive introductions. People went to make gardens, and were told they could not, that the land now belonged to the Prime Minister (Somare). There are new diseases such as AIDS that have come near to us now. So when we look at all these things from before, we also think of the future for our children and we are very troubled.]