



Ritual and ambiguities of social (dis)order in East New Britain.

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Abstract

This paper explores the namata ritual, common among Tolai people in Papua New Guinea's, East New Britain Province. The namata is often presented as an event that contributes towards social order, both in the ethnographic record and by Tolai themselves. The namata is often experienced however as being highly ambiguous as various actors use the ritual to make sense of and intervene in hazardous processes of social change. In particular, the namata is a site where anxieties about perceived breakdowns of the socially cohesive power of reciprocal obligation are expressed and attempts are made to halt their corrosion. Paradoxically however these attempts are made from a position that is often experienced by those that they attempt to discipline as themselves being expressive of that very breakdown of reciprocal obligation, thus intensifying the sense that the namata has now become a site for the creation of uncertainty rather than social stability.

Keywords

Ritual, Papua New Guinea, Reciprocity, Ambiguity, Society.

Word count: 8351

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8 *The namata*
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12 The *namata*, is a ritual conducted at some Tolai villages in Papua New Guinea's, East
13 New Britain Province, that ideally involves the seclusion of the first-born son of a
14 family in 'the bush' for a period of time, before his ritual revelation¹. On the occasion
15 of his ritual revelation, those in attendance, will present him with amounts of *tabu* or
16 shell-wealth. This is ideally used to pay for the young man's bridwealth. In the past,
17 the ethnographic record suggests that the *namata* only took place after the young man
18 had married (A.L. Epstein 1969:218-221). Today it commonly occurs before
19 marriage, sometimes before a bride has even been arranged for the young man, in
20 which case, the *tabu* enters the young man's family's store of wealth (Simet
21 2014:194-195), where it will be available for future customary expenses (including
22 any subsequent marriage).
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40 The *namata* is often presented as the site for the reproduction of particular types of
41 social relations based upon reciprocal interdependence, that will be familiar to many
42 from the regional ethnographic literature. A.L. Epstein (1969:220), who conducted
43 long term research at Matupit village for periods between 1959 and the early 1990s
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55 ¹ The Tolai are among the largest and well-known of PNG's ethnic groups. They were among the first
56 groups to receive both Christian missions and education in the early colonial era and became known
57 throughout the twentieth century as something of an educational and political elite. This position had
58 become increasingly insecure at the time of my field research in the early 2000s, due in part to a long
59 process of economic growth in other regions and in part to the volcanic eruption that devastated the
60 regional capital of Rabaul and surrounding Tolai villages, such as Matupit, where I conducted my
research. The story of the Tolai is told in more detail in Epstein (1969) and Martin (2013).

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3 describes how the *namata* operates within a wider web of social obligation that it
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5 helps to reconstitute in the following words;
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10 [E]ach contribution imposes on the recipient an obligation to reciprocate on
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12 some subsequent occasion. From this point of view, the *namata* provides an
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14 arena within which standing obligations are fulfilled and new debt
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16 relationships incurred. The full significance of the *namata* . . . only
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18 emerges therefore when it is set in the context of an ongoing series of
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20 exchanges and distributions of various kinds.
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26 All of which remained the case in many regards at the time of my fieldwork 40 years
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28 later. Any Tolai, regardless of their degree of enthusiasm for customary ritual such as
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30 the *namata*, would agree with Epstein that it provided an arena for fulfilling and
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32 making new debt relationships that could only be fully understood within the context
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34 of wider networks of such relationships and exchanges.
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40 These interlocking obligations upon which *namata* depends and of which it is a
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42 constituent element are sometimes presented as being the basis of the underlying
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44 order of Tolai society. Even in comparatively recent accounts, *namata* is presented in
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46 a manner suggestive not only of an underlying social order, but one that presents itself
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48 in an almost Radcliffe-Brownian fashion as the power of a Society that stands above
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50 individuals and imposes its power upon them. So, Tateyama (2006:28) describes the,
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52 ‘coming-of-age ceremony for a boy, which is called *varkinim* (or *namata*)’, as a rite of
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54 passage by which, ‘by which an individual is brought into a wide network of social
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56 relations and comes to be in debt to society.’ Simet (2014:183) similarly describes of
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3 namata ceremonies how, 'In the end they are about checking, rekindling and
4 reinforcing kinship relations', in a chapter on the namata that appears in a book
5 section revealingly entitled, 'Relationships and Social Cohesion'. Simet's
6 presentation is worth taking seriously as that of someone who is both a fully trained
7 anthropologist (with a PhD from the Australian National University) and as a Tolai
8 from Matupit who himself is deeply involved in these rituals. As we shall see, a
9 presentation of *namata* as a ritual which makes social order through the reproduction
10 of reciprocal obligations and interdependencies is one that other Tolai make as well.
11 But it is a presentation that is not necessarily considered desirable or viable by many
12 other Tolai. Such presentations of *namata* have to increasingly be considered not as
13 descriptions of the ritual, so much as part of its performance, attempting to highlight
14 particular interdependencies that the ritual itself is supposed to make apparent in order
15 to achieve the desired social effect.

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35 ***Matthew's namata. 28th September 2002.***

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40 *The usual singing and dancing entrance. Cllr Charles² introduces prayers.*
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42 *Charles is MCing in a Kool t-shirt. ToDoppel collects the mat and a large coil of*
43 *tabu. His face is one half white one half orange. It's a bit Bravehart. I think he*
44 *throws the tabu on the pal na pidik³ to buy it for his other pubus⁴ namata next week.*

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² I use pseudonyms throughout this extract from my field-notes. Throughout the rest of the text when I am using extracts from material written by A.L. Epstein I use the real names of the persons involved as they appear in his writing, except in two cases where I change them to accord with the pseudonyms used for these persons in my writing.

³ *Pal na pidik* literally translates as 'House of secret(s)' in the Tolai vernacular language Kuanua. It currently is used to refer to a structure in which the boy who has been secluded in the bush is ceremonially revealed at the *namata*.

⁴ *Pubu* (more commonly written '*bubu*') is the term for grandchild or grandparent in the national lingua franca of PNG, Tok Pisin.

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3 Charles explains this is to buy the pal na pidik. First up the line of papamama tupela
4 wantaim⁵. ToDoppel is standing up, overseeing. The olgeta lain bilong ples⁶,
5
6 including one white woman who it is speculated is one of Matthew's teachers as she's
7
8 come with a smart looking man who is also not from Matupit. The meri bilong lain
9
10 bilong papa go insait⁷ and get the boy with much ritualised wailing. A crowd of dogs
11
12 run through barking trying to fight each other. There is much "ohhh" ing. I am
13
14 embarrassed to ask, but it sounds like people think it's a bad omen.
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19 Talk a little about the events. Charles and ToRobong tell me that they only
20
21 really do namata at Matupit and Talvat. On the Kokopo side they do varkiaian which
22
23 only takes a day- they take them to the bush in the morning and bring them back in
24
25 the afternoon. It still costs a lot of money grins Charles, all the relatives will ask you
26
27 to buy food and you can't say no. In the past hiding in the bush would last 4-6 weeks,
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29 but now it costs too much. It was different when the boys just went and got garden
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31 foods and caught birds. They used to wander place to place and if they found a
32
33 relative in the bush then they'd give them food, and that's where this habit of giving
34
35 tabu afterwards to those who had helped the boys (umavoko - 'dew') comes from. I
36
37 mention that lots of people have said that it's hard to work custom now. Charles
38
39 looks cross and demands to know who said that. Oh, just some people. These people
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41 are just les, yu save⁸? People who don't want to work and don't understand that if
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43 you give it comes back to you.
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55 ⁵ Line of *papamama tupelo wantaim* (Tok Pisin) would most literally translate as the clans or extended
56 lineage groups of both parents together.

57 ⁶ *Olgeta lain bilong ples* (Tok Pisin) meaning all the remaining general population of the village.

58 ⁷ *The meri bilong lain bilong papa go insait* (Tok Pisin) meaning the women of the father's clan go
59 inside.

60 ⁸ *Les, you save?* (Tok Pisin) meaning 'lazy, you know?'

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3 *The women go round the pal na pidik giving first buai⁹, then tabu. Just as*
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6 *ToDoppel did last week, Charles shouts out "long namel" to encourage them to make*
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8 *sure very one gets it. I ask Charles why this kind of custom continues to be important.*
9
10 *This is interesting. The immediate response is "bilong wanem em i kastom bilong*
11
12 *mipela¹⁰. Things have changed, but we still have to follow our tumbunas¹¹ as you*
13
14 *follow yours... It is about showing respect. Sure some people don't follow custom*
15
16 *now, but it is important for teaching people a good life, and respect. There are some*
17
18 *people now who think "i no gat narapela moa, mi tasol¹²". Custom teaches*
19
20 *otherwise... Even more interesting- Charles talks about how the kids need custom to*
21
22 *stop them stealing and fighting. The minute he says this, a huge fight breaks out in*
23
24 *the pal na pidik. One kid batters another to the ground, picks up one of the stakes*
25
26 *and tries to kill him with it and has to be pulled off... Then Charles' father stands up*
27
28 *and orders the young men to sit down. Then ToDawai comes forth a starts shouting*
29
30 *angrily to the young people that they've got no respect. It was his son fighting*
31
32 *ToGuria's son. ToGuria shouts after him as he's led away. ToGuria comes up to us.*
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34 *He is off his head. I think I smell rum, but Charles assures me it's powerful buai of*
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36 *the kind you take to see visions to design dances or pal na pidiks. Talks a bit about it.*
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38 *They use these kinds of buai for magic or Iniet¹³.*
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47 Fieldnotes 28.09.2002.

54 ⁹ *Buai* (Kuanua and Tok Pisin) meaning betel-nut (see below).

55 ¹⁰ *Bilong wanem em i kastom bilong mipela* (Tok Pisin) meaning 'because it is our custom'.

56 ¹¹ *Tumbunas* (Tok Pisin) meaning 'ancestors.'

57 ¹² *I no gat narapela moa, mi tasol* (Tok Pisin) meaning 'there's no-one else, just me'.

58 ¹³ *Iniet* was a secret male sorcery society that is now largely believed to have been concerned with
59 malicious sorcery. Most informants at the time of my fieldwork stated that *iniet* practices had either
60 died out or were practiced in secret by a handful of malignant actors

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3 This extract from my notes from my first fieldwork at Matupit certainly illustrates a
4 presentation of the idea that the *namata* is part of reproducing a desirable form of
5 social order that is fundamentally tied in with the reproduction of the reciprocal
6 obligations and interdependencies that are made and made apparent through its
7 performance. Indeed, it might be fair to say that those repeating patterns *are* the
8 desired social order. Charles' description of why customary ritual such as *namata*
9 continues to be important is full of nods in this direction. When I mention to him that
10 many people feel that it is too hard to 'work' custom today, his angry response clearly
11 suggests that this is because of their misunderstanding of or lack of respect for the
12 power of reciprocal obligation that such ritual ideally visibly reinforces and
13 reproduces. These are people who, 'don't understand that if you give it comes back to
14 you.' He goes on to tell me that the *namata* is fundamentally about 'respect'; a
15 concept that is nearly always implicated in the Kuanua vernacular term *wariru* with
16 an idea of respecting reciprocal obligations¹⁴. This association becomes clearer as he
17 continues his explanation. He contrasts the ethic embodied in ritual with an imagined
18 opposite; in this case the kind of 'individualism' that many fear is becoming more
19 entrenched in modern Tolai life. Some people today might think, 'there's nothing
20 else, just me' (*i nogat narapela moa, mi tasol*), but customary ritual teaches
21 otherwise. Charles certainly expresses a commonly held vision of what ritual such as
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49 ¹⁴ My conversation with Charles took place almost entirely in *Tok Pisin* with some *Kuanua* and *English*
50 words included for clarity of communication at various points. Where I paraphrase Charles in *English*
51 in these notes that I wrote up later that day, it is largely an *English* translation of statements made in
52 *Tok Pisin*. *Tok Pisin* extracts are direct verbatim quotations that I was able to write down immediately
53 after the event. I do not know if the key *Kuanua* term '*wariru*' was used in this conversation.
54 However, on the basis of numerous other conversations with Charles and others I have no doubt that
55 he would have used this term if we had switched to *Kuanua* and it was used by all Tolai I discussed
56 these issues with as the translation of the *English* word '*respect*' or the *Tok Pisin* word '*rispek*'. The
57 *English* term '*respect*' potentially covers a number of ways of conducting relationship that both have
58 an apparent link to idioms of reciprocal obligation and others that do not. By contrast, while I do not
59 claim that the *Kuanua* term '*wariru*' always must carry that explicit connotation, in my experience it
60 nearly always could be fairly clearly linked to such an expectation (see e.g. Martin 2013:108).

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3 *namata* should achieve. But it is a vision that is undercut by other equally commonly
4 expressed narratives concerning the contemporary failure of ritual to re-make
5 reciprocal obligations in this manner and by the event's dramatic conclusion as well.
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12 Indeed, the memory of this event is still fresh fifteen years after it occurred, standing
13 out from the endless round of sharing cigarettes and cups of tea or waiting for food or
14 lifts to town that were the ordinary day-to-day experience of fieldwork. In this regard
15 the events of Matthew's *namata* fulfil an important aspect of ritual as it is commonly
16 described; namely an event that breaks everyday routine and impacts upon its
17 participants and observers alike with emotional intensity. For example, in Radcliffe-
18 Brown's (1922:122) vision of the role of ritual in Society imposing its norms upon its
19 constituent individuals, ritual's efficacy often emerges through this divergence, such
20 as in the contrast drawn in ritual mourning between the Andaman Islander's,
21 'everyday life', in which he is, 'black from head to toe', and his ritual presentation in
22 which, 'he turns himself as white as possible from head to foot, by covering his body
23 all over with clay', in order to mark his separation from, 'the world of living men.'
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42 This depiction of the power of ritual as being based in a break from the everyday that
43 then reinforces the social patterns of everyday behaviour can be found in the Tolai
44 ethnographic literature as well. It seems to be present in Charles' presentation of the
45 power of 'custom', a term that in this context is clearly referring to customary rituals
46 such as the *namata*. Customary ritual makes visible and teaches the importance of
47 respecting reciprocal obligations and interdependencies and this is the basis of respect
48 in general. In teaching people 'respect', 'custom' also shows them a good life and it
49 will stop the young men from engaging in anti-social behaviour such as fighting or
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3 stealing. Other such examples can be found earlier in the ethnographic record, such
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5 as Epstein's (1992:88-9) description of his conversations with an elder by the name of
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7 Turpui in the early 1960s. Turpui is describing a ritual known as *a vevedek* in which
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9 *tabu* collected through fishing is publicly displayed at the end of the fish-trap season.
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11 Turpui tells Epstein of a recent *vevedek* organised at the neighbouring village of
12
13 Talwat and how emulating their achievement should be Matupit's aim. Turpui
14
15 concludes by informing Epstein, 'Then our young men will see and begin to
16
17 understand the ways of our forefathers.' Turpui's description of the power of ritual is
18
19 clearly one in which the power of reciprocal interdependence is central- it is the
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21 display of *tabu* the social technology of marking such relations that is the heart of the
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23 ritual's power. Turpui's conversation with Epstein emerges out of an encounter with
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25 Turpui's son ToKaul, who is working on the beach making fish traps, in the
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27 expectation that this will bring the *tabu* that will enable young men such as him to pay
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29 bride wealth. When Epstein points out that a young man does not directly pay his
30
31 own bride wealth, Turpui intervenes to explain that it is through this kind of labour
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33 that the young man proves himself ready for marriage and worthy of the support of
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35 older male relatives who will help to sponsor the payment. Hence the acquisition of
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37 *tabu* ties the young men into ongoing reciprocal interdependencies- with the bride's
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39 clan and also with older men who they are related to who help to sponsor the
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41 payment.
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51 Turpui's depiction of the *vevedek* depicts a ritual whose power derives from the
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53 reciprocal interdependencies of everyday life, whilst simultaneously abstracting that
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55 power from its everyday contexts and specific relationships in order to present an
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57 appearance of power (the mass of *tabu* representing the labours of the entire village
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3 community) that will force the young men to understand the ways of their forefathers.
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5 In this regard, he presents an image of the power of ritual as being based upon the
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7 appearance of the abstracted power of everyday interdependencies that then by virtue
8
9 of this powerful presentation feed back into those interdependencies and reinforce
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11 them, in a manner that is echoed forty years on by Charles in his conversation with
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13 me. Epstein observes that even in the 1960s that this vision was increasingly undercut
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15 by the tendency of young men to pay less attention to these rituals, to the extent that
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17 he felt that even Turpui knew that he was, 'talking into the wind' (op cit:89). And as
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19 we shall see, it is not only claims that customary ritual works by virtue of intensifying
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21 the power of everyday reciprocal interdependence that have continued through the
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23 decades, but also expressions of anxiety about its enduring power or doubts
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25 concerning its efficacy as an organizing principle of social relations that have become
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27 increasingly prominent and commonplace.
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35 ***Broken patterns***

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40 Indeed, if there was a peculiar intensity of the impact of this event upon those of us
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42 present on that day was it was precisely that of its dramatic breakdown. I still
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44 remember clearly how the event exploded into violence at precisely the second that
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46 Charles had solemnly told me that such custom was needed to stop young men from
47
48 fighting. Charles may describe the *namata* as a means by which customary respect is
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50 taught to the young and thereby reproduced across the generations. But other
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52 interpretations are available, such as the suspicion that ritual such as the *namata* is not
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54 only incapable of stopping the breakdown of respect, but is even one of the sites at
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56 which nascent social pressures leading to that breakdown are realised, by virtue of the
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3 ways in which they bring together large numbers of disenfranchised young men with
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5 no future in conditions of high excitement often exacerbated by consumption of
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7 alcohol and other substances. Hence the comment made to me after the event by
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9 ToDoppel, the elder who I describe as looking like Braveheart, ‘‘This young men’s
10
11 manner, all this fucking fucking... I’m not happy with them’. ToDoppel’s comments
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13 are of a piece with many similar comments that I heard during my fieldwork that
14
15 expressed a concern with the effectiveness of ritual and whether it any longer
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17 embodied the power of reciprocal interdependencies upon which its power rested in
18
19 the depiction of men like Turpui or Charles. Just as claims that customary ritual
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21 taught the young generalised respect through respect for reciprocal interdependencies
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23 have a long history at Matupit, so to do expressions of doubt as to the effectiveness or
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25 desirability of such claims. But although such expressions of doubt may have a long
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27 provenance, the nature of the concerns that are expressed seems to have changed, in a
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29 manner suggesting that rituals such as the *namata* provide a site where not only the
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31 reproduction of social order but also troubling social changes are made apparent and
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33 brought into being.
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42 ***Kaputin Junior’s namata.***
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47 *‘‘Last Saturday I attended a namata at Matupit for a son of Kaputin. During the*
48 *nidok while the distribution was going on there was one young man who was already*
49 *quite drunk who was lurching around with a half emptied bottle of whisky sticking out*
50 *of his hip pocket. He came over to the pal na mamarikai¹⁵ and shouted obscenities at*
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58 ¹⁵ *Pal na mamarikai* (Kuanua) literally translated as ‘House of revelation’. This is the term that was
59 used in the 1960s for what was referred to as *Pal na pidik* (see footnote 2 above) during my fieldwork
60 in the early 2000s (see Epstein 1969:218-220).

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3 *what was going on, saying it was all a lie. Then he went round and distributed buai*
4 *as though to express his contempt for what was going on. Nobody present made any*
5 *move to silence him or in any way interfere. After the nidok¹⁶ Kaputin made a speech*
6 *in which he made it clear that he still grieved over his first son saying that he had*
7 *prepared to do this for John but he had vakaina ra nuknukigu¹⁷. Now he was doing*
8 *this for his other son, not because he was a malamalatene¹⁸, but so that others would*
9 *see it and do likewise for their children. Incidentally, in the party was ToNgala¹⁹, a*
10 *young man employed by Shell, whose namata I had attended earlier. He was said to*
11 *have had a leading part in the building of the 'house'.*

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26 *A few days later ToKonia called in at the house, and I asked about the young man in*
27 *question. He was ToGuria²⁰, a son of Pepelegi. It seems that he had served in the*
28 *P.I.R²¹. and now he stayed at home. He probably lived by niil fishing. Apparently*
29 *this kind of behaviour was nothing unusual, and he had clashed before with the*
30 *elders. ToKonia himself went on to say that he thought that when men like Kaputin*
31 *were dead there would be nobody to carry on, and such customs would finish. He*
32 *himself felt that they should be allowed to fade out gradually, rather than that they*
33 *should seek deliberately to abolish them. We then started talking about inter-racial*
34 *marriage when a small group of Rapitok arrived. In the past few years a number of*
35 *Matupi girls have married Europeans whilst there has also been ethnic*

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52 ¹⁶ *Nidok* conventionally refers the final stage of initiation in the secret male *tubuan* society. It is
53 unclear to me precisely what this reference to '*nidok*' means in this context.

54 ¹⁷ *Vakaina ra nuknukigu* (Kuanua) literally translated as 'ruined my knowledge' (see below).

55 ¹⁸ A *malamalatene* (Kuanua) meaning a man who is big-headed or conceited (see Epstein 1998:24).

56 ¹⁹ Epstein's notes use this individual's real name. Here I change the name to a pseudonym that I have
57 adopted to refer to this person elsewhere.

58 ²⁰ Epstein's notes use this individual's real name. Here I change the name to a pseudonym that I have
59 adopted to refer to this person elsewhere.

60 ²¹ The Pacific Islands Regiment.

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3 *intermarriage. The eldest daughter of Kaputin has married a Papuan employed in*
4 *the Administration. No view was expressed indicating disapproval. ToKonia thought*
5 *that the 'race' would disappear, for already they could see through intermarriage the*
6 *skin changed, a pala paka. Perhaps even the name Tolai would disappear in time. I*
7 *omitted to mention that this discussion arose because when we had been discussing*
8 *the disappearance of the namata ToKonia mentioned that fairly recently a group of*
9 *young people had written letters to Radio Rabaul which had been discussed over the*
10 *air suggesting that the moiety system should be abolished."*
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24 A.L. Epstein Fieldnotes 'Attitudes- changing social'. 29.12.1967
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31 This extract from Epstein's unpublished Matupit fieldnotes evokes many of the same
32 issues as the incident that I observed some 35 years later in the same village. A
33 young man under the influence disturbs proceedings, leading to disquiet among those
34 present. It suggests that ritual such as the *namata* has been the site for the discussion
35 and shaping of changing patterns of social behaviour for generations; as evidenced
36 not only by the extract itself, but even by the title that Epstein gave it in his fieldnotes.
37 Epstein's own work is unusual for Melanesian ethnography of the period (indeed of
38 any period) for the extent to which it eschews a vision of a fundamentally unchanging
39 self-reproducing village-life for a focus on processes of social change occurring in the
40 context of entanglements with colonial and global economic forces. The title of his
41 main Tolai monograph, *Matupit; Land, Politics and Change among the Tolai of New*
42 *Britain*, published two years after the incident described in this extract, illustrates the
43 focus of his attention. The descriptions of land disputes or conflicts over wage labour
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3 or political autonomy within his monograph tend to illustrate how existing patterns of
4 village-based relational (particularly kinship) obligation are the means by which such
5 battles are fought. In the process they end up being presented as both transformed
6 and transformative as networks of (other) social relations. The description of ritual
7 such as *namata* tends to have a slightly different framing in his published work
8 however. This is largely described in the kind of ideal presentation seen in the earlier
9 extract from his monograph in which it is presented as part of the reproduction of, 'an
10 ongoing series of exchanges and distributions of various kinds'. These rituals are not
11 seen as being immune from the processes of social change that Epstein is keen to
12 describe, but rather than being analysed as changing processes within the context of
13 connected changing networks, whose changes they mutually influence - they are
14 either described as being stable processes operating with the context of other stable
15 networks, or as being threatened with destruction by wider processes of change, in a
16 manner that thereby contrasts with the more fluid descriptions of local land disputes
17 or relations with colonial authorities that make up the bulk of the book²². Whereas
18 *Matupit* contains lengthy and detailed depictions of particular land disputes, for
19 example, designed to illustrate how they embody complex processes of social change,
20 detailed depictions of particular ritual events tend to remain limited to unpublished
21 fieldnote extracts such as the one quoted above.

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49 The clue to the partial exclusion of this type of detailed ethnographic description, of
50 the kind that Epstein as a leading member of the Manchester School, was in other
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²² This tendency is modified in his later work, following return visits to Matupit in the 1980s, in which he describes the revival of ritual practices but in a manner that begins to suggest the emergence of tensions over their meaning and efficacy caused by their changing position in wider socio-economic networks (e.g. Epstein 1999).

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3 contexts so keen to develop, perhaps appears within the extract itself. ‘Traditional’
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5 Tolai land tenure based upon kinship and exchange obligations did not appear to be
6
7 under threat to Epstein. Although it was implicated in wider complex processes of
8
9 social change, it was not about to be simply removed or replaced with a different
10
11 system. Rituals such as *namata* on the other hand appeared to be simply threatened
12
13 with extinction by the Matupis incorporation into wider economic networks of wage-
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15 labour and cash-cropping, and this is how it was often described at the time by Tolai
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17 themselves, illustrated in the above extract, where Epstein’s main research assistant,
18
19 ToKonia, informs him that after Kaputin’s death there will be no men left to keep
20
21 such rituals going. Rituals such as the *namata* have survived, but ToKonia’s
22
23 prediction would be met with some agreement by many Matupi at the time of my
24
25 fieldwork. The implication that was often voiced during my time at Matupit was that
26
27 such rituals no longer embodied the power of reciprocal obligation that made them
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29 valuable and that despite their revival, after a period in the 1960s and 1970s when
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31 many thought that they would die out, that they were no longer constituted by or
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33 constitutive of, the kind or reciprocal obligation that had been their entire *raison*
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35 *d’etre* and source of their efficacy.
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45 That fears of the failure of ritual to reproduce the socially cohesive power of
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47 reciprocal obligation have a long provenance, are also revealed at other points of
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49 Epstein’s account. Here we see not only ToKonia’s expression of the opinion
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51 commonly held at the time that such rituals were living on borrowed time, but also
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53 expressions of the desire to hasten their demise and that of the power of reciprocity
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55 that was at their heart. This is most clearly illustrated in the discussion of the letter
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57 suggesting the abolition of the ‘moiety system’ written by some young people to
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3 Radio Rabaul. Tolai are divided into two moieties, with marriage inside the moieties,
4
5 being strictly forbidden in pre-colonial times. As late as the 1960s, Epstein
6
7 (1969:203-4) observed that, ‘...even though the penalty of death can no longer be
8
9 exacted, [the taboo on intermarriage] is observed with the same stringency as in
10
11 former times.’ The moiety system, as described by Epstein, was fundamentally a
12
13 system designed to promote ongoing ‘exchange’ marriage, between the two social
14
15 groups who did not have any other existence or social purpose than the division of
16
17 society into two groups linked to each other by ongoing exchange. As such inter-
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19 moiety marriage marked the power of enduring and self-reproducing reciprocal
20
21 obligation at the widest and most abstract social level. Rituals such as the *namata* are
22
23 presented as a part of this cycle; the *tabu* collected is the outcome of previous cycles
24
25 of reciprocal obligation and it is intended to go into furthering such cycles at a
26
27 subsequent bride wealth payment that itself will then contribute to the wider abstract
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29 power of reciprocity instantiated through the ‘moiety system.’ That these things are
30
31 seen as aspects of a greater whole is illustrated in the way that ToKonia introduces a
32
33 discussion of the young people’s letter in the context of a conversation about the
34
35 *namata*. For the young people who wrote the letter, their attack on the moiety system
36
37 should be seen as part of an attack on the stifling power of traditional customary
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39 obligation that Epstein notes was a common trope amongst young progressives at the
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41 time.
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51 Although this marks the most obvious deliberate attack on the customary power of
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53 reciprocity in this extract from Epstein’s fieldnotes, there is another example as well.
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55 The young man, ToGuria who I was to encounter at the heart of another ritual
56
57 disturbance 35 years later, enters the ritual space and loudly proclaims that the ritual
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3 is, 'a lie' acts in a manner designed to draw attention to and subvert this power. The
4
5 distribution of *buai* (betelnut) alongside *tabu* is a key part of the *namata* and other
6
7 such rituals whose key foundation is the reconstitution of reciprocal obligations
8
9 through the circulation of *tabu*, and is itself a part of the recognition and
10
11 reconstitution of these ongoing relations. By entering into the ritual space and
12
13 seemingly randomly distributing *buai* in a manner designed to, 'express his contempt'
14
15 for the proceedings, he expresses his contempt for that kind of distribution and the
16
17 social power that it is intended to instantiate. But although his actions bear some
18
19 similarity to the drunken fight that broke out at the *namata* that I attended 35 years
20
21 later, there appears to be an important difference as well. His actions are a deliberate
22
23 assault upon the customary power of reciprocity. Drunk as he is, he has a clear target
24
25 and he attacks it in a politically loaded and considered manner. The young men who
26
27 erupt in violence at the later *namata* appear to have no such conscious intent. It later
28
29 emerged that their drunken rage had been fuelled by a disputed illegal drug deal in
30
31 town a few days earlier. The *namata* might have survived ToGuria's attack on the
32
33 ritual reciprocity underpinning it in 1967. But the extent to which it really did
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35 demonstrate the socially cohesive power and efficacy of reciprocity that he sought to
36
37 undermine and that Charles sought to defend is increasingly called into question.
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47 Likewise, the 'moiety system' was never 'abolished' as the progressive young Tolai
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49 of 1967 desired. And given that it was not backed by a state or central authority it has
50
51 hard to imagine who would have the power to 'abolish' it in conventional terms. But
52
53 the situation by the early 2000s was very different from that described by Epstein for
54
55 the late 1960s. Intra-moiety marriage had gone from being unthinkable, to being
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57 broadly (if in some cases reluctantly) tolerated, and even some who were considered
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3 to be customary experts or leaders were now known to have married within their own
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5 moieties. Likewise, marriage or cohabitation without the exchange of *tabu* at bride
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7 wealth ceremonies had gone from being largely unthinkable (e.g. Epstein 1999:80) to
8
9 being commonplace. Political attacks on the desirability of rituals based on reciprocal
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11 respect had largely been replaced by anxieties concerning the durability or
12
13 effectiveness of ritual's role in the reproduction of such networks of reciprocal
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15 obligation.
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22 ***Reciprocity in question.***
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26 The kinds of tendencies that would lead to increasing anxieties concerning the power
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28 or even the existence of reciprocity at the heart of ritual such as the *namata* can also
29
30 be seen in embryo in Epstein's depiction. Epstein describes Kaputin's grief for his
31
32 first son John. He describes John as having '*vakaina ra nuknukigu*', to be literally
33
34 translated as having 'ruined my knowledge'. Kaputin was the pre-eminent Big Man
35
36 at Matupit during the time of Epstein's fieldwork, and was still talked of in tones of
37
38 almost universal respect, 15 years after his death, at the time of my research in the
39
40 early 2000s. His son, Sir John Kaputin was also talked about consistently at Matupit,
41
42 having been the Member of Parliament for Rabaul from 1972 onwards and being one
43
44 of the pre-eminent statesmen in the nation-state of Papua New Guinea, following its
45
46 independence from 1975. Sir John was pre-eminent among the generation of young
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48 men who, as it was described to me, would have been groomed to become the new
49
50 generation of Big Men in the 1960s and 1970s, but who left the village to go to
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52 university or pursue careers in politics and business that would have been closed to
53
54 their fathers but were opening up to them as the Papua and New Guinea moved
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3 towards independence. It is this that Kaputin is likely referring to in his comment that
4
5 he mourned for John, who had 'ruined' his customary knowledge by no longer being
6
7 in the village to receive and reproduce it.
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14 Sir John may have ruined his father's knowledge, but he acquired knowledge of a
15
16 different type, using his education to carve out a career first as an anti-colonial leader
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18 and then as a leading figure in the post-colonial political establishment. Both Sir
19
20 John's supporters and his opponents at Matupit agreed that he never became schooled
21
22 in the ways of village life, having left it behind in order to immerse himself in the new
23
24 forms of expertise that enabled him and others of his generation to lead the nation to
25
26 independence. I was told that later in life, Sir John returned to the village to take his
27
28 part in customary ritual, but that he was not able to fully engage. He was not able to
29
30 eat much of the village foods that were often part of the circulation of reciprocal
31
32 obligations at ritual events, having become used to 'white man's food', for example.
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34 Such shortcomings were justified as inevitable by his supporters but denigrated by his
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36 opponents as indicative of the increasing separation of 'Big Shots' such as Sir John
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38 from day-to-day village reciprocity.
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47 Sir John may have returned to Matupit periodically and taken part in the ritual events,
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49 but despite this, for some Tolai at least, he never acquired the true knowledge that his
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51 father wished to transfer to him. The young man denouncing the *namata* as a 'lie' is
52
53 probably best understood in the wider context of others who wished to break away
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55 from the power of customary reciprocity, that was common at the time, such as the
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57 young Tolai who wrote the letter attacking the moiety system to Radio Rabaul. The
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3 grassroots Tolai who denounced Sir John and other 'Big Shots' behind their backs for
4 turning custom into a 'pastiche' 35 years later are probably best understood as
5 expressing a different criticism; that whether the customary power of reciprocity was
6 to be desired or not, that it was no longer made manifest by men such as Sir John in
7 the same way that it was by their fathers. Kaputin may have been keen to perform
8 such rituals primarily to encourage others to pass on the practices that they embodied
9 to their own children as he had been unable to do for his own. As it turned out, his
10 son later did engage in those ritual practices that Kaputin had been unable to pass on
11 to him. But the extent to which either he, as one of the elite of the post-independence
12 nation-state, or the young men whose drunkenness erupted into violence at the event
13 that I witnessed, as representatives of those at the other end of the new economic
14 hierarchy, were able to enact the ethics of reciprocal customary respect that the rituals
15 were supposed to reproduce was clearly up for question.

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35 Another figure is mentioned in this vignette who would also go on to be significant in
36 the social changes enacted through ritual in the following decades. Epstein mentions
37 the presence of a young man called ToNgala. His introduction to the narrative is,
38 'incidental' according to Epstein, suggesting perhaps that he is felt to be significant in
39 some way beyond the fact that Epstein had previously attended his *namata*, but that
40 Epstein is not able or willing to fully articulate or commit to. His significance is
41 signaled in the other detail that Epstein gives us regarding his position; his
42 employment by Shell. ToNgala was an immensely ambitious young man who, like
43 Sir John, used his education to build up skills and expertise outside of the village. He
44 worked for the Shell Oil Company for a number of years until he finally acquired the
45 skills and the capital to begin running his own highly profitable petrol station in
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3 Rabaul Town in the 1980s and early 1990s, before its operations were halted by the
4 Rabaul volcanic eruption of 1994. Unlike Sir John, whose life has been based in
5 cosmopolitan centres such as Port Moresby, Cairns and Brussels however, ToNgala
6 remained close to the village, not moving further away than Rabaul Town. Matupit
7 village lay less than an hour's walk from the edge of Rabaul Town and was often
8 considered as a peri-urban suburb of the town, as early as Epstein's first fieldwork in
9 the 1950s (Epstein 1969). And unlike Sir John whose involvement with customary
10 ritual was thus of a fly-in fly-out nature (often combined with his sporadic returns to
11 the region for the purposes of political campaigning), ToNgala took a keen interest in
12 customary ritual, acquiring a pre-eminent and leading position in customary ritual at
13 Matupit by the time of my fieldwork. Yet despite these differences, Sir John and
14 ToNgala were closely interlinked. They were political allies and ToNgala acted as Sir
15 John's campaign and political agent in Rabaul for many years. And ToNgala's
16 closeness to the village did not insulate from him the kind of criticism leveled at Sir
17 John. Indeed, if anything it intensified it, as ToNgala ended up becoming blamed by
18 many who were reluctant to openly criticize Sir John as being the bad influence on
19 him who misled him about life 'back home' and used his connection to him for his
20 own advantage.
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In search of respect.

51 It is this history that sheds some more light on Charles' comments to me in 2002.
52 When I mention to him that many people have told me that it is getting too hard to
53 work custom today, his angry response is that they are 'lazy' and that they don't
54 understand the power of reciprocity (or that, 'if you give it comes back to you').
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3 Charles seems to frame the complaint that it is getting 'too hard' to work custom
4 today as one based on a reluctance to expend the energy and effort or to devote time
5 to the work that it entails. Yet I am certain that he would have been aware that such
6 complaints more commonly had another basis; that the increased need for access to
7 money made it ever harder to participate fully in customary events. Organising an
8 event such as a *namata* today requires money and can place a real strain on those
9 grassroots villagers at the bottom of an increasingly economically stratified post-
10 independence PNG. In earlier ethnographic accounts from the 1960s, Tolai
11 customary ritual is described as having been largely insulated from the money
12 economy. It was impossible to buy large amounts of *tabu* with state currency and
13 men such as Sir John and ToNgala's fathers could both be considered customary Big
14 Men in the 1960s without having access to large amounts of money. In Epstein's
15 account, the threat to custom was that young men with access to money would focus
16 more on earning and spending money rather than acquiring *tabu*. Money was
17 conceived of as a threat to the circuits of reciprocity embodied in the circulation of
18 *tabu* at ritual by virtue of its separation from those circuits that thereby provided the
19 young with an alternative focus of time and energy. By the start of the 21st century
20 the situation appeared somewhat different to most Matupit residents. *Tabu* was
21 bought in bulk by so-called Big Shots such as Sir John and ToNgala, many of whom
22 would fly to neighbouring Pacific Islands nations, such as Vanuatu or the Solomon
23 Islands to buy the shells that made it. To Ngala had acquired a pre-eminent position
24 in customary ritual and had apparently acquired much secret customary knowledge
25 through the use of his *tabu*. But whereas in previous generations the acquisition of
26 such *tabu* was said to itself mark the extent of a man's engagement with the give-and-
27 take of daily village life (as is exemplified in Epstein's account of his conversations
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3 with Turpui for example), the *tabu* that was bought by this new generation of leaders
4
5 was seen by many grassroots villagers as marking a different kind of social power;
6
7 one that was removed from the cycles of reciprocal obligation and relation that ideally
8
9 made it powerful.
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14 Even though ToNgala had remained close to the village and had immersed himself in
15
16 customary ritual in a manner that Sir John had not, his involvement was still
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18 denigrated (largely behind his back) as the *tabu* that secured his pre-eminent position
19
20 was (rightly or wrongly) claimed to have its source in these national and international
21
22 business and political connections (not in the kinds of village-level reciprocal bonds
23
24 that had secured his father's customary power). We see early signs of the potentially
25
26 transformative power of these connections as they enter the ritual space in Epstein's
27
28 description, but they are not yet fully visible to anyone, as the participation of a young
29
30 man, 'employed by Shell' is mentioned incidentally and in passing. The story of the
31
32 drunk young man consciously attacking the ethic of reciprocal obligation with his
33
34 parody of *buai* distribution is the centerpiece of Epstein's description, but ironically
35
36 enough it was the incidental figure of ToNgala, who sincerely believed himself to be
37
38 the genuine custodian of authentic customary ritual, who went on, in the eyes of many
39
40 of his opponents, to be the executioner of the genuine reciprocal ethic that made ritual
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42 matter.
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51 Charles was a 'child' of ToNgala's clan²³ (his father also mentioned in this extract
52
53 was a member of ToNgala's clan) and as such closely linked to ToNgala and Sir John.
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55 In 2002, the tide turned against Sir John and he was defeated in a landslide in a
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60 ²³ See Martin (2013:34).

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3 general election. The main impetus behind this shock was the perception that he had
4 become too distant from the village and increasingly treated grassroots villagers with
5 disdain. On one occasion at an election rally, he accused villagers who asked for the
6 return of government services, such as a school, to Matupit, of wanting to be ‘spoon-
7 fed’; a dismissal that sealed his fate with many of his previous grassroots supporters.
8 Due to their close relatedness to ToNgala, Charles and others (though not all) in his
9 immediate kinship network tended to be amongst the minority of grassroots villagers
10 who remained most loyal to both Sir John and ToNgala. As such he is more likely
11 than most to dismiss the claim of other grassroots villagers that they are excluded
12 from full participation in ritual because of lack of money and to present that as a
13 moral failing caused by the lack of desire to work hard enough at reproducing
14 reciprocal relational obligations through ritual. He is also more likely than most to
15 dismiss these villagers’ claims that the likes of ToNgala have themselves destroyed
16 the power of reciprocity at the heart of ritual by introducing money-purchased *tabu*
17 and increasingly insulating themselves and their businesses from demands based on
18 reciprocal obligation in non-ritual contexts. Both sides of this debate see the
19 reproduction of relations of reciprocal obligation through customary ritual as being
20 under threat. For Charles they are threatened by the laziness and moral turpitude of
21 those who do not see how important the reproduction of these obligations is. For
22 other grassroots critics they have already been weakened by the actions of the new
23 elite.

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54 In recent years, some accounts of similar ritual and exchange processes have
55 attempted to criticize the supposed assumption of reciprocity that underpins classical
56 anthropological analyses (e.g. Rasmussen 2015). But rather than attempting to
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1
2
3 classify particular moments of transfer as being either reciprocal or not, what this
4
5 material suggests is that we should look at reciprocity as a performative perspective
6
7 on chains of social relations that comes in and out of being depending on the
8
9 standpoint one takes. For many grassroots villagers the Big Shots' *tabu* does not
10
11 embody reciprocal obligation because they foreground the chains of economic and
12
13 political entanglement that the Big Shots' ability to distribute *tabu* emerges from
14
15 (chains of relations that in ToNgala's case began all the way back with his
16
17 employment at Shell in the mid-1960s). For others who choose not to foreground
18
19 these networks by contrast, it is the Big Shots who help to keep customary reciprocal
20
21 obligation instantiated through ritual alive, by providing the money and *tabu* that
22
23 makes its survival possible. The Big Shots are seen in this framing as keeping the
24
25 reproduction of reciprocal obligation going, but their sacrifice is threatened by a
26
27 growing laziness among the grassroots who are characterized as wishing to be 'spoon-
28
29 fed' - a desire for one-way dependence that denies reciprocal obligation- or wishing to
30
31 remove themselves from custom altogether to concentrate on the survival of
32
33 themselves and their families in the modern cash economy. These conflicting
34
35 perspectives that bring reciprocity in and out of vision depending on the networks of
36
37 relations that they foreground and occlude are themselves performative, helping to
38
39 shape the outcome of future webs of relational obligation and ritual effect.
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49 ***The power of ritual***

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53 In Epstein's writings there is a clear sense that ritual such as the *namata* has a real
54
55 social power and efficacy. Even the young man who consciously subverts the ritual
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57 acts in a manner that suggests that there is something in the ritual that he feels a need
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3 or desire to undermine. His courage in doing so might not only be down to the half
4 bottle of whisky that he has consumed, but also a sense that the ground was already
5 beginning to slip from beneath the Big Men's feet. But like the letter writers to Radio
6 Rabaul, he still felt the need to make a deliberate attack on the reproduction of
7 reciprocal obligations underpinning the ritual, suggesting that he still felt a power
8 there that it was worthwhile to confront. By contrast, at the time of my fieldwork,
9 although there was clearly a desire in some quarters to argue that customary ritual did
10 have a social power, it was tempered with an anxiety about exactly what that power
11 was (did it really reproduce the kinds of village-level reciprocal obligations that it was
12 supposed to) and consequently about the extent to which it was efficacious in creating
13 the kind of social order that reciprocal obligation that it was ideally described as
14 producing²⁴. Charles' statement that custom will teach the young men not to fight and
15 steal by virtue of this power is of course immediately undercut by the fight that breaks
16 out (allegedly sparked by the theft of money gained from an illegal drug deal)
17 immediately upon its pronouncement. His statement was a variation of a kind that
18 was often publicly made at such events, that was more expressive of a desire to use
19 customary ritual in this manner than it was a universally accepted depiction of how it
20 worked in practice. All sorts of figures, from the young men drunk on jungle juice
21 and high on cannabis, to the Big Shots driving in to the village with dollar-bought
22 *tabu* could be seen from different angles as threatening the reproduction of reciprocal
23 obligation and the consequent recreation of social order that such ritual was supposed
24 to create.

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²⁴ The concept of 'obligation' itself changes in definition and tone in different conversational contexts, both academic and non-academic (Testart 1998, Guyer 2012). Testart's attempt to distinguish between, 'feelings of obligation and what is obligatory' (Testart 1998:99) usefully reminds of us the manner in which the nature and existence of 'obligation' is itself a matter of social-contextual perspective.

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6 But such statements are still vitally important as they express the hope amongst many
7
8 that ritual could create a kind of social order based upon 'respect'. Customary ritual
9
10 is here imagined as a force that might discipline the young into correct behaviour.

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12 This is not necessarily to be conceived of as an alien power standing over the
13
14 Individual taking the form of a reified Society that impresses itself upon its members,
15
16 in the manner that both Strathern (1988:8) and Gluckman (1963:18) in their different
17
18 ways take Radcliffe-Brown to task for presuming. But the power of this ritual
19
20 reciprocity does appear in this presentation to ideally take on the form of a self-
21
22 replicating structure of relations that produces persons obedient to its own
23
24 reproduction, whether or not that structure is best described as existing as an
25
26 independent entity outside of and in some way opposed to their own existence.
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30 According to Charles custom such as the *namata* 'teaches' people 'good life and
31
32 respect'. The power of reciprocity made and made visible in such ritual is conceived
33
34 of as ideally having the effect making both good persons and social solidarity
35
36 (however conceived). Yet what ethnographic exploration of specific instances of
37
38 *namata* reveals is that just as it can be conceived of as the site where the social order
39
40 that makes good persons is reproduced and revealed, that it has long also been capable
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42 of being viewed as the very place where the potential fragility of that order is most
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44 brutally exposed.
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52 Claims to the efficacy of ritual of the type made by Charles are best understood not as
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54 statements of fact or descriptions of the overt or underlying truth of the nature of
55
56 ritual, but ultimately as performative attempts to use the space for the 'working
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58 through' of paradoxes of life that rituals provide in one particular direction. As
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3 Austin (1979:251) might suggest, our attention should not so much be towards what
4 the utterance, ‘means.... as to what was the force, as we may call it, of the utterance.’
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6 Such performative utterances do not always shape the social contexts of which they
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8 are a constituent element as successfully as their authors may intend; as the eruption
9
10 of violence at the precise moment that Charles was solemnly describing the role of
11
12 ritual in teaching the young respect illustrates. There may be times when socially
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14 sanctioned understandings of ritual as a socially reproductive practice seem largely
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16 unchallengeable and when the performative utterances that this is ritual’s purpose
17
18 seem to largely unproblematically be fulfilled in practice. But ritual is always capable
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20 of being interpreted as having outcomes whose performative force leads to the
21
22 reproduction or emergence other kinds of relations. Statements such as Charles’ are
23
24 themselves attempts to temporarily fix the ambiguities that rituals evoke in a
25
26 particular direction, but as the different instances of the *namata* ritual detailed here
27
28 demonstrate, both these statements and the ritual events that they help to constitute
29
30 can just as easily create spaces for the explosion of different responses that exceed the
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32 attempt to make ritual into a tool for the recreation of any particular desired social
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34 effect.
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