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OUR WAY



PURI PURI

Don Silcock

Cooking pot

Ramsi Kum



The path through the rainforest was steep and still slippery from the previous nights rain and I could sense the handful of people from the Fiyogha clan watching me closely as we made our way down to the gully and the entrance to the secret Puri Puri place.

Concentrating on the path in front of me I struggled to maintain my balance as I moved from one firm foothold to the next, desperate to maintain my dignity & composure as we entered this place that no white fella had been before.

Only 20 minutes had passed since we left their village, but already I was totally lost and completely dependent on these people I had first met just a couple of hours previously. The only familiar face was Ramsi, my guide & general fixer, but I could tell from his expression that he was just as nervous as I was, because this was also the first time he had been allowed to visit the secret place.

I cast my mind back to the previous evening and the bar of Tufi Dive Resort,

but it seemed a very long time ago as I remembered the grin on the face of Simon Tewson, the manager of the resort, as he brought me the news I had been waiting two weeks for - "you're on for tomorrow, the chiefs have agreed to let you go and Ramsi will be here at nine in the morning to take you up there".

Simon was talking about the "Puri Puri" village up in the foothills of Mount Trafalgar from MacLaren Fiord, on Cape Nelson in Oro Province. It was November 2009 and I was staying at the resort on my second trip to the area in just over seven months as part of a book project I was working on with the resort.

To the casual visitor to Papua New Guinea, the impression that the country is deeply religious would be easily gained. Missionaries are common in the country and I have met them in even the most remote locations – once unexpectedly about 2 hours up the Isis River on the south coast of New Britain.

There is no doubt they do a great job of bringing education & support services



Puri Puri village

across the country and if you ever get into a conversation with an educated & eloquent villager in a remote location, you will quickly realize that the person you are talking to has acquired those skills at a mission school.

But the more exposure I gained to the local Tufi people and how they live, the more I sensed that beneath the external pious appearance was another story related to a belief system that time had painted over.

That system is called Puri Puri, which literally means black magic in the principal Motai dialect, but a more accurate description would be "traditional belief system".

I became quite intrigued by all this and convinced that I must get a better understanding of Puri Puri, but my initial attempts to go deeper on the subject with the local people I met around Tufi were met with embarrassed silences and it quickly became obvious that they really were not comfortable going there...

So I turned to the various expats I knew, starting with Simon Tewson who has spent most of his life in PNG and understands the people & their culture well. From these conversations I learned that the people who actually practice &

administer the more potent elements of Puri Puri live apart from the main villages.

In the case of the Fiyogha clan, they live in a small village called Tuvirade, further up in the foothills from the main villages Koje & Sefoa, and I asked Simon if there was anyway he could arrange a visit to them.

Simon sought the help of Ramsi Kumi, a member of the Fiyogha clan who lives

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in Koje and works with the resort to organize various events for tourists who want to experience village culture. Ramsi is an articulate & clear thinker who sees tourism as the best way to help his clan & the main Cape Nelson Korafe tribe to improve their lives and to do this he has worked with the village elders to arrange elaborate sing-sings & cultural shows where special local traditions, such as Oro Province face tattooing are demonstrated.

I had attended several of these shows and found them to be well organized & without any hint of the circus sideshow effect that could so easily happen. A very significant benefit to the villagers is the realization that their traditional culture has a tangible value that tourists will pay much needed hard currency to see!

But sing-sings & face tattooing demonstrations are one thing, Puri Puri is at a completely different level and to gain access to Tuvirade village it turned out that I would first need to meet the elders of the Fiyogha, Tawairi & Kandoro clans and explain my intentions...

So it was that on the last day of my February 2009 trip to Tufi, Ramsi & I made the boat trip round to MacLaren Fiord and then hiked up to Koje for what turned out to be one of the toughest



Koge village elders



Johnson-Egha

interviews I have ever had.

That afternoon I sat with the elders for nearly five hours while we discussed matters from far & wide and got the measure of each other. I started off with an explanation of who I was and explained that I was interested in learning about their history, culture & tribal structure and in particular what Puri Puri was and what role it played in their lives.

In return they shared the story about how the three nomadic clans had first come to the Tufi area some six generations ago in search of good land & hunting but had faced stiff resistance from the incumbent Korabi tribe. Fierce fighting was eventually followed by a peace locked in place by strategic marriages arranged between the clans and the Korafe tribe that dominates the Tufi area emerged.

I tried asking various questions about Puri Puri and the practitioners who occupy Tuvirade village, but received polite but diplomatic "non-answers" and accepted that for now I would have to remain patient. I decided to change tack and see if they had any questions for me.

There was much discussion amongst them in their village dialect before

Gordon Gumagara of the Tawairi clan, who was translating all the dialogue, turned to me and said, "Could you please explain the Global Financial Crisis?"

Initially I was not sure how to respond until it dawned on me what they were really asking was what impact will this great turmoil going on in the outside have on the tourists who visit the resort. Virtually all of the villagers in the Tufi area live a subsistence existence whereby they can grow or catch more or less everything they need to eat, but "luxuries" such as school books & pencils for their children, cooking oil, kerosene and clothes can only be acquired with cash and the only real source of cash is from the tourists who visit the resort and are interested in village culture.

My answer seemed to satisfy the elders and reinforce what I suspect they had been telling their people all along - which lead to a whole series of questions ranging from what it was like in China, where I was working at that time, to the chances of the Socceroos in the next World Cup...

It was a great afternoon and one that I will always remember, but the nearest I got to the Puri Puri was a promise to

seriously consider a visit to Tuvirade village if I came back to Tufi later in the year!

It was another 8 months before I got back to Tufi and waiting for me on the tarmac was Ramsi. In the interim, and unbeknown to me, I had become a minor celebrity in the area when my article on homestays had been published in the Airlines PNG in-flight magazine *Our Way*.

Copies of *Our Way* were in great demand and the lady from the village of Orotoaba who had allowed me to take her photo had ended up on the front cover of the magazine had become the talk of the area and "world famous" in Tufi.

Ramsi was keen to capitalize on this success and use it to convince the village elders to grant me access to Tuvirade, so he was keen to see if I had kept my promise to bring back certain gifts for the elders – which I had.

However it still took another two weeks before the final OK was given for me to visit the village, but even when it did I had no idea that I would be allowed to visit the "secret place" and photograph how the magic potions are prepared.



Main Puri Puri and Guards



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Puri Puri guard



Wife



I was unsure what to expect but was certainly not anticipating being greeted by an elder like Johnson Egha who spoke excellent English, and had traveled

" Puri Puri had evolved as a way of keeping order in the village and, in the absence of a formal law & order system ..."

overseas to both the USA and Australia during the 18 years he had worked at the Panguna mine in Bougainville.

I introduced myself and gave my standard introduction, sensing that it was probably redundant given all the discussions that had taken place prior to permission being granted for my visit. Nonetheless I felt it important to set the right tone prior to launching into all my questions.

Over the next two hours Johnson patiently answered those questions and educated me about the origin of Puri Puri and it's role in maintaining the balance of village life. Johnson explained that Puri Puri had evolved as a way of keeping order in the village and, in the absence of a formal law & order system, it's exponents basically kept "bad fellas" in check with the threat of, or if that failed, actually administering spells with the potions concocted in the secret place.

Together with traditional beliefs, such

as leaving food, tobacco & betel nut out for the spirits of their ancestors so that they would get good luck with their crops & hunting in return, Puri Puri played an important role in the lives of the villagers.

However when the first Australian missionaries arrived in the Tufi area in the 1920's and established a mission station at Sefoa, their steel tools & axes, kerosene for lighting and soap for washing greatly impressed the Korafe. This modern technology was the catalyst the missionaries needed to convince the local people to embrace Christianity and abandon their previous ways.

Basically the villagers believed that somehow the missionaries had more powerful "magic" and so Christianity was the way to go!

Over the intervening years Puri Puri has waxed & waned and from nearly being wiped out after the arrival of the missionaries it reached an all-time high again in 1990's when over a 100 people

are rumored to have died from poisoning. So bad was the situation that the villagers rose up and forced the Puri Puri men to stop.

I had heard that the Puri Puri men administer their spells & potions by chewing certain secret ingredients from the sea and the rainforest with their betel nut and then blowing out the concoction from their mouths in a kind of mist.

Johnson confirmed that this was indeed the case and then explained that actually there are three levels of Puri Puri, starting with the local village level whereby everybody knows which herbs & plants can be used to treat common ailments

The next level is still local village based, but more specialized and administered by dedicated Puri Puri men who claim expertise in specific areas such as traditional medicine, good weather, rain, wind & sun.

For example when somebody gets sick in the village they will go to the main clinic in Tufi, which rarely has the medicines required, so it's a logical step to go to the Puri Puri man for treatment

which comprises of certain secret ingredients chewed with betel nut and then "blown" onto the affected area.

Alternatively if somebody is planning a long journey by canoe they will go and see the weather Puri Puri man and request good conditions for the required time. This is usually obtained by a betel nut based spell being blown on a coconut containing water that is kept undisturbed in a special place for the required time.

The third level is very secret & specialized, only done by the elders in the Puri Puri villages such as Tuvirade and is focused in two areas – advanced medical problems and dealing with "bad fellas" who are causing problems in the village.

Johnson explained that for the medical problems there is a kind of network in the Tufi area so "specialists" in specific illnesses & problems can be consulted & brought in as required to heal or counteract a spell or a poison.

The other side of this is that the Puri Puri elders can also induce illness and even death if necessary to deal with people who are causing problems. These

illnesses vary in length, depending on the severity of the problems, and these days only result in death in the most extreme cases as the induced illness is usually enough to straighten out trouble-makers.

I listened intently to Johnson as he explained all this to me, pausing occasionally to double-check points in my notes with him to ensure I had got it right. It was quite an overwhelming experience, because to my western educated mind none of what he told me made any sense, but there was no doubt that everybody present believed completely in what he had said.

So when he told me that the elders had decided that I should be allowed to visit the secret place in the rainforest where all the potions were prepared I felt a mixture of excitement at being the first white fella to do so, laced in with just a touch of fear about what I was about to do.

It took about 30 minutes to get to the bottom of the steep gully that lead to the secret place, and once there I paused for a minute to take a few quick photographs of the location, and some of



" It was an eerie experience, made considerably so by the fact that almost as soon as I arrived the skies opened and it poured with torrential rain! ... "



my guides, before starting the rock-hop up the stream.

About 50m up the stream I caught sight of the first Puri Puri guard, almost invisible in the rainforest in his traditional dress and body & face paint. Then I saw the other two guards whose job is to make sure nobody comes close to the secret place.

A call was issued and Ramsi said it was the all clear to proceed and 10 minutes later I was face to face with the village's two main Puri Puri men as they stood in front of the clay pot used to make their potions in. It was an eerie experience, made considerably so by the fact that almost as soon as I arrived the skies opened and it poured with torrential rain!

For the next hour they demonstrated how the potions were made by mixing the ingredients gathered from the

rainforest, together in the clay pot over an open fire to bake it into a powder-like mixture that is then scooped up and stored in bamboo tubes.

The tubes are then placed in a special pouch that has great significance in the Tufi area because everybody knows that when they see one of the Puri Puri people carrying it, serious business is afoot...

Throughout the process the Puri Puri men wear a ginger-like root around their neck and constantly chew from it and then "blow" the juices onto their hands & arms to protect themselves from the effects of the potions they are preparing.

When all the potions were completed and stored in the pouch the head Puri Puri man gave Ramsi a nod, indicating that my time in the secret place was up and it was time to leave. The walk back out of the rainforest took longer because

of the heavy rain that was still falling, but when we got back to Tuvirade the elders were waiting for us and then it was my turn to answer questions as they asked about my understanding of what I had seen.

Finally after about an hour I thanked them all profusely for allowing me to witness & photograph such a unique event and bade them farewell as we made our way back to the dive resort.

We arrived after sunset as everybody was gathering round the bar to discuss his or her day and I have to say that I had a grin bigger than Simon Tewson's the night before as I shared my adventure! ▲

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