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# Placing the Past and Moving the Present Myth and Contemporary History in Telefolmin

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### Article abstract

A striking feature of myth among the Telefolmin of Papua New Guinea is the way in which narrative events are situated in known and named places. Myth's inscription on the landscape contributes to ritual's evocative power, but, beyond this, it gives myth a bridgehead in the everyday world that invites a mythic construction of contemporary events. Using the visit of Papua New Guinea's Governor General as an example, I argue that Telefolmin were able to effectively mobilize the power of the sacred site of Telefolip — and its mythic associations — in novel historical circumstances, a possibility enabled by myth's presence in particular places. Sacred sites are not only places where things happened: they are also places where things continue to happen.

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# Placing the Past and Moving the Present: Myth and Contemporary History in Telefolmin<sup>1</sup>

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A striking feature of myth among the Telefolmin of Papua New Guinea is the way in which narrative events are situated in known and named places. Myth's inscription on the landscape contributes to ritual's evocative power, but, beyond this, it gives myth a bridgehead in the everyday world that invites a mythic construction of contemporary events. Using the visit of Papua New Guinea's Governor General as an example, I argue that Telefolmin were able to effectively mobilize the power of the sacred site of Telefolip — and its mythic associations — in novel historical circumstances, a possibility enabled by myth's presence in particular places. Sacred sites are not only places where things happened: they are also places where things continue to happen.

*La place qu'occupe la mythologie dans la vie quotidienne du peuple Telefolmin de la Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée est d'une importance spéciale. Des inscriptions relatives à certaines histoires se retrouvent dans différents lieux bien connus; la puissance évocatrice du rituel mythique est ainsi décuplée, la mythologie s'insinuant ainsi dans la vie quotidienne d'aujourd'hui. L'auteur relate la visite du gouverneur général de la Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée et montre comment les gens de Telefolip ont profité de cette occasion pour entretenir, comme ils le font depuis toujours, la survivance de leurs mythes.*

To talk about the cultural construction of the past suggests that the past is not simply there, but rather, that it is something that people build, and that it has an architecture. This is by now an anthropological commonplace which we tend to see as a kind of revisionism, the familiar reconstruction of history in the light of present concerns. Historians, of course, are aware that our representations of the past are stitched together according to narrative (or, if one prefers, theoretical) conventions. White, for example, has argued that historiography should

recognize that every history worthy of the name contains not only a certain amount of information and an explanation... of what this information 'means', but also a more or less overt message about the attitude the reader should assume before *both* the data reported *and* their formal interpretation. (1978:105)

White's insight is that we should treat history as discourse. As such, we should be attuned to the messages situating the reader (or listener) vis-a-vis the narrative, as well as those features of the narrative that give it its specific qualities as a story. There are many ways of building stories, and in this paper I wish to consider the relation between certain genre conventions and what is made of the past. But rather than being concerned with how cultural conventions

order 'actual events' in the past, I propose to look at matters front-to-back, as it were. That is, I want to explore how a mythic past achieves an *effet du reel*, and how, in the process, it is mapped in the world of the present.

The ethnographic context for the discussion is provided by the Telefolmin of the Sandaun (formerly West Sepik) Province of Papua New Guinea. Like many other Melanesian peoples, Telefolmin have been subject to a number of historical transformations, the most dramatic of which followed in the wake of the establishment of the nearby Ok Tedi gold and copper mine in 1982 (see Jorgensen 1981; n.d.). Wage labour and everything from motorbikes to videotaped episodes of *Dallas* have become familiar features of the Telefol scene. Yet mythical narratives retain a surprising relevance for the present, and I want to show here how certain properties of Telefol myth suit it for the cultural construction of contemporary events.

My argument, briefly, is this. Myths are one of the genres Telefolmin have at their disposal when they speak of the past. Like folktales, myths refer to events outside experience, but they also have a number of features which lend them the realism of reminiscences. The most significant of these is their anchorage to known places in an everyday world. Identified by name and having the status of sacred sites, such places have the effect of bringing myth into the present. More than that, such sites are not only places where things happened, but are places where things *continue to happen*.

The localization of myth is a familiar feature of a number of traditional narratives, not only in Telefolmin, but elsewhere. Malinowski's famous work on myths as charters takes the significance of local reference as central to the whole argument (1922, 1948; see also Harwood 1976). In her work on the Mountain Arapesh, Mead contrasts two informants and their treatment of texts in terms of the extent to which they localize their accounts, and points out that local reference has a vividness that serves to bring things to life (1940:340-3). Williams identifies two genres of tales at Lake Kutubu, *tuni* and *hetagho*. The latter are marked by definite locales, are repositories for magical allusions and comprise that portion of the narrative corpus containing constitutive myths (1977:302-3). In a like fashion, the Daribi distinction between myths (*po page*) and other tales (*namu po*) shows a marked preponderance of place names in the former (Wagner 1978).<sup>2</sup>

Much recent work has stressed the contextual linkages between narrative and audience, and in all

of this it seems clear that where narratives are held to communicate something of immediate relevance, spatial reference has a key role to play. For example, Schieffelin has shown how the evocation of familiar places in Kaluli *gisaro* songs can recall memories of the dead with striking results (1976; see also Schieffelin 1979), while Western Apache story tellers use localization to anchor contextual associations 'aimed' at particular individuals in an audience (Basso 1984). In both cases, spatial reference is a powerful way of transforming experience, either by mobilizing memories or by establishing a link between personal behaviour and cautionary tales. More apposite for the current case, however, is Bruner and Gorfain's article about Masada, where a sacred site becomes a lightning rod for contending accounts of the relation of past to present, an argument which on inspection reveals itself as a contest to establish the meaning of the present (1984). In Telefolmin, myth and sacred sites are powerful allies in their insistence that the past is never very far away, a proposition as true in the Sepik headwaters as in the land of the Old Testament.

### *Telefol Narrative Genres*

When Telefolmin talk about the past, they do so by telling stories, and they have three narrative genres from which to choose. One of the most readily available kinds of story is called *sogaamiyok sang*, 'old stories', or, perhaps, 'reminiscences'. These are tales of the relatively recent past involving persons known to the speaker. They are for the most part concerned with what we might call the 'old days' in Telefolmin, i.e., the days before colonial administration was imposed, and generally deal with local events associated with warfare. Often as not the narrator is also the tale's protagonist, and what the tales do is to exemplify the protagonist's character. So, for example, Dagayok loves to recount how he ambushed a nocturnal sorcery party in the forest, turning an attempt on his life into a fine story of stealth defeating stealth. At a slightly greater remove, one may talk about one's dead kinsmen. So Dugasim tells of his grandfather Tetumnok and his wife, who routed a Falamin raiding party through gutsy trickery. Reminiscences are thus exemplary tales whose rhetoric is of a personalized past.

*Utuum sang*, 'folktales', are a second genre of narrative concerning the past. The actors in these tales are Utuummin, human-like beings who inhabited the Telefol world in the remote past and are characterized as mountain-striding giants or short people equipped with tails. The protagonists in these tales are stock characters who lack personal

names, generally going by terms such as Elder Brother, Little Child, etc. These stories are told mainly for entertainment and often contain elements of the fantastic, though they often convey a moral as well. So, for example, a greedy hunter gets his comeuppance and must depend on his gardening cross-cousin for rescue; a brother and sister commit incest and are swallowed by a flood; a foolish man tries to marry a corpse with predictably disastrous results; a youth chastises his elder brothers for a trivial complaint and is abandoned. Rhetorically, the narrator and audience connive in poking fun at human failings projected onto fictitious characters.

The third genre, which for our purposes is more significant, consists of the tales known as *Afek sang*, which are sacred myths. Afek is the Ancestress of the Telefolmin and their neighbours, and these myths are stories concerning Afek and the events that constituted the Telefol world: they are origin myths. While it is out of the question to provide a complete account of the myths and their content here, it is enough to say that they deal with such things as the dispersal of wild animals in the bush, the founding of the ancestral village of Telefolip, the origin of taro and why people die. The context *par excellence* for *Afek sang* is male initiation, in which these tales are communicated. In contrast to reminiscences, myths concern events and protagonists outside experience but differ from folktales in what strikes the outsider as an almost obsessive preoccupation with names for the characters and locations in which the narrative events take place.

It might be possible to get some idea of what the differences between these genres amount to by taking a simple narrative incident and casting it in the conventions of each. For example:

- (1) "Old man killed a man he encountered in the bush and brought him back to his village and ate him." (folktale)
- (2a) "My father killed Dusengim when he discovered him in Nanbil and brought him back here and ate him." (reminiscence)
- (2b) "I killed Nobisep when I discovered him in Nongkaman and brought him back here and ate him." (reminiscence)
- (3) "Afek killed Sapsabim at Afekimaal and brought him to Telefolip and ate him." (myth)

Each of these variants conveys different narrative expectations. The first example, corresponding to the general format for folktales, commits the audience to no particular relation to the incident. As in our own fictions, the logical question is simply "what

happens next?" It is not particularly relevant to ask *why* the event took place — it is simply part of the story. The second set of examples (in reminiscence format) differs insofar as the narrator claims a particular relation to the tale and its setting. A whole host of circumstantial questions become pertinent: it is reasonable to ask, for example, who Dusengim was and what he was doing in Nanbil. At the same time, there is an additional claim to veracity based upon the narrator's relation to the protagonist. This claim is intensified in the case where the narrator *is* the protagonist, since the claim is made on the basis of direct experience. In the case of myths, however, matters are different. No direct appeal to experience is made, since Afek died long before the oldest of living men were born. But, on the other hand, Afekimaal and Telefolip are known places that can be seen and visited, and under appropriate circumstances the bones of Afek herself can be seen. Further, the very fact that the stories are about Afek entails for Telefolmin a special series of conditions: the tale concerns Telefolmin as a whole, since Afek is their mother, and the tale has significance for the world which Telefolmin inhabit since this world is the outcome of Afek's exploits. In the present instance the episode is held to account for part of the traditional pattern of enmities between Telefolmin and their neighbours. Finally, the tale must be true, for to lie about Afek is held to be dangerous.

The significance of these differences in narrative conventions can be amplified by considering some extra-textual features. As I have already hinted, reminiscences are of relatively restricted scope in the sense that they tend to focus on the particular relation of the narrator to actors in the tale. It is in fact held to be poor form to tell such a tale unless it concerns oneself or a relative. We can say, then, that reminiscences are notionally true accounts which have a deictic quality, that is, they take the narrator as their point of orientation. Folktales, on the other hand, are devoid of such deictic reference: there is no *here* to the tale, save for the context of the narrative itself. Not only is the question of the setting of the plot moot, but so is the identity of the characters *and* of the narrator. Anybody, including women and children, may listen to or tell such tales whenever the mood strikes them. They may, as I have said, have a relatively transparent moral, but they are in themselves held to be inconsequential and anyone is at liberty to make of them what they like. Folktales make no pretence of experiential validity. Their plots often contain fantastic elements such as talking dogs, fruits that transform into people, self-propelled body parts, and so on — but this matters little

since they are not themselves held to be true, and people cheerfully admit that they are made up.

Now what is interesting about all this is that when we turn to the myths we find that they are often more like folktales than reminiscences in content. At the same time, however, myths resemble reminiscences in terms of their claims to truth, a fact made evident in the insistent grounding of narrative events in named — and known — locations. Their temporal distance from the present corresponds both with their mythic claim as originating events and with the fact that Afek herself (rather than the narrator) provides the focal orientation. They are thus given a sort of twofold objective quality: they are spatially anchored in the external world (in a way that folktales are not), and they are held to originate from a transcendent source outside the narrator (in a way that reminiscences are not). Finally, space provides the axis along which the familiar everyday world and the temporally distant world of the myths are conjoined.

By such means the myths achieve verisimilitude despite what may seem to be the improbability of the narratives themselves: if mythic events are outside experience, the myths are at the same time immanent in the surrounding world. This is the sort of thing repeatedly brought home by men when they told me such tales: the evidence of the narrative was *there* and plain to see.<sup>3</sup> The tree where Afek's brother Umoim slaughtered the marsupials stands on the margins of Telefolip, the village she built, behind which stands the grove of hoop-pines called Delitem where she conversed with the Sun, which stands adjacent to Ifi stream, where she washed Sapsabim's entrails, and this is next to the hill called Ilintigin, where she made an oven to cook him and from which she cast her firebrands to burn the forest on the slopes of the Behrmanns, and so on... Given all of this, it is possible to understand that Telefol myths — and the mythic past — are inscribed on the landscape. For those acquainted with Afek's tales, the landscape bristles with reminders.

### *Place, Time and Myth: Telefolip*

The grounding of Telefol myth in the present is nowhere more evident than in the case of the village of Telefolip (Jorgensen 1990). Telefolip is the ancestral village of Telefolmin now inhabiting more than a score of villages. It is their home, built by Afek, and all of its houses must be rebuilt on the same site generation after generation. Because it is their home, Telefol men must be initiated at Telefolip and it is to Telefolip that Telefolmin return at death, for here is

where Telefolmin pass through the entrance to the Land of the Dead.<sup>4</sup>

The village of Telefolip is named after *the Telefolip*, the first *yolam* or spirit house. Afek inaugurated the Telefol world when she built the *Telefolip*, and the fortunes of Telefolmin as a people are said to be bound with the fortunes of this house. Made of perishable materials, the house's progressive deterioration over time is matched by a progressive waning of garden fertility, only renewed when the house itself is rebuilt in a rite drawing men from all Telefol villages. It is an article of faith that the strength of Telefolmin is at low ebb when the *Telefolip* is in bad repair, and a failure to rebuild the house on precisely the same site would be an invitation to cosmological dissolution: taro would flee the gardens, women, children, and pigs would run off to enemies who would make short work of those who remained. The *Telefolip* was destroyed only once, burned in the 19th Century by the Iligimin. In a graphic demonstration of the effectiveness of symbols, the Telefolmin mobilized to exterminate the Iligimin — but only after first rebuilding the *Telefolip* to renew their strength.<sup>5</sup>

The *Telefolip* is also about time. Telefolmin repeatedly stress the *Telefolip's* age and permanence, and attribute their persistence as a people to the *Telefolip's* continuity. The bone relics housed there repeat the message, for if the house itself deteriorates over time, the bones endure as a tangible link with the past. Part shrine and part museum, the *Telefolip* offers an objectification of Telefol identity saturated with values of continuity, a monument to the Telefol denial of transience. In this sense the past is embodied in the *Telefolip*, its relics, the myths taught initiates in its precincts, and in the numerous sites adjoining the village that provide the setting for mythic events.

Sacred sites anchor myth in the present and this *presence* is actively mobilized in ritual, especially in initiations where mythic narrative and rites converge in particular locations. Often the logic of ritual hinges upon an evocation of the mythic in a living context. For example, garden fertility is renewed with the help of materials gathered from the site where Afek buried her brother's umbilical cord, and this is supplemented by his bones, housed as relics in Telefolip. When novices are initiated, the ochre for their face paint must come from Saafoltigin, where Afek's first menstruation turned the earth red, and in senior initiations the novices are shown Afek's bones at the site of her grave. In these and in numerous other instances, there is a reciprocity between myth and rite which is mediated by space, and to the extent

that the rituals are efficacious, they validate the myths. Put somewhat differently, sacred sites are not just the locations of mythic events in the past: they are, for this very reason, also places where things keep on happening. Seen from this perspective, we can understand something of the power of myth and of its continued relevance in the present.

### *The Telefolip, the Min Association, and the Governor General*

To insist that mythic events took place *here*, where we stand, is to insist that they are in some sense part of our world. For Telefolmin this is no less true in a world subject to historical forces radically different from those of precolonial times. Since the 1940s Telefolmin have been brought under Australian and then national administration, missions and churches were established, public schools were built and cash cropping was introduced. More recently Telefolmin have become involved in Papua New Guinea's most ambitious development project, the nearby Ok Tedi gold and copper mine. Dreams of prosperity flourished with the announcement of plans for the scheme, but as details became known it was clear that wages were the only benefit local people could expect from the project. Popular sentiment among Telefolmin and neighbouring peoples resulted in agitation for the formation of a separate "Min Province" with the rich deposits of Mount Fubilan as its centrepiece.

Speaking related languages, the "Min" all affirm a common ancestry: they are the children of Afek, the architect of Telefolip. The movement for a "Min Province" asserts a common Min identity over and above more particular ethnic identities, a common identity tied to Afek and the *Telefolip* (see Barth 1971, Jorgensen 1990). This assertion has teeth, for it is linked to claims to Mount Fubilan. Mount Fubilan is located precisely atop the Land of the Dead established by Afek's younger brother, Umoim. This is well attested in myth, and the *truth* of it is clinched by the fact that Umoim's relics are in Telefolip. Although the national and provincial governments have resisted all attempts to gain recognition of their claims, the Min movement has not been without success. It was largely on grounds of an appeal to unity whose evidential basis was objectified in the *Telefolip* that electoral boundaries were redrawn shortly after independence, resulting in the formation of the Telefomin Electorate. This, in turn, gave Min peoples a legitimate and officially sanctioned voice at the national level, and many Telefolmin regard this as the first step to the realization of their ambitions for provincial status.

More recently, the inauguration of the Ok Tedi project coincided with the formation of the Min Association. Formally defined as a community development association, it was launched with the construction of a house built on the outskirts of Telefolip.<sup>6</sup> Modelled on traditional spirit house, this house is itself called the Min Association and is sometimes referred to as the "child of the *Telefolip*." The completion of the house was attended by Sir Julius Chan, then Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, who brought government funds to celebrate its opening and get the association off the ground.

One day in late October 1983 roughly twenty men were busy weeding the fenced enclosure surrounding the Min Association. Normally speaking, the yard surrounding a spirit house is only weeded on ritual occasions, the most important of which is the invocation of spirits prior to the harvest of consecrated gardens, all of which fits into a larger ritual series promoting taro fertility. The yard of the Min Association was being weeded in much the same fashion, with men of the Arrow ritual moiety weeding the enclosure while men of the Taro moiety prepared a small feast at the Taro Hearth inside the house. On this occasion, however, there was no question of performing garden rites. The Min Association houses no relics (only some pigs' jaws) and the feast consisted of rice and tinned fish. The reason for the weeding was the impending arrival of the Governor General of Papua New Guinea, Sir Kingsford Dibela, who was coming to formally announce the signing of the Telefomin District Development Agreement between the national government and the political representatives of the Telefolmin and their neighbours. What was at issue was not taro, but cash.

Two days later Sir Kingsford arrived, and the cash did too: with the conclusion of the Telefomin District Development Agreement the people of the district were allocated a sum of K2,000,000<sup>7</sup> plus an equal amount for the completion of a new high school to be built near the government station. The agreement was reached as the result of protracted negotiations between local representatives and the national government concerning the distribution of benefits accruing from the Ok Tedi project. The basis for the agreement was the recognition of a special relationship existing between the Min peoples (Telefolmin, Tifalmin, Ulapmin, etc.) and the project. As with the previous visit of Sir Julius at the founding of the Min Association, Sir Kingsford's visit was seen by local people as a reaffirmation of this relationship.

Much to the consternation of local people, when Sir Kingsford did arrive his itinerary was confined to the station area and the expected visit to Telefolip and the Min Association never came off. There was nonetheless a public ceremony welcoming him in which he formally announced the conclusion of the development agreement and its terms. At the end of his speech he was presented with a gift. The gift was a traditional stone adze, a *fubi*, which was formally handed from the Councillor for Telefolip to the president of the Local Government Council, and thence to the Governor General. After a brief tour of the new high school facilities, the Governor General's party boarded their aircraft and flew off.

### *A Story about Umoim, Telefolip, and the Land of the Dead*

In the beginning Afek and her brother Umoim lived at Telefolip. There was no death, nor scarcity: animals presented themselves to Afek at the *Telefolip* for killing and taro issued spontaneously from her vagina. But Umoim became envious and spied on his sister and all this changed. The animals scattered to the bush and taro could only be planted in forest gardens. Afek gave the *Telefolip* to Umoim and took the family house for herself. She also killed Umoim, and, taking his bones as relics, sent him off to the west to establish Bagelam, the Land of the Dead. There he created stone adzes (*fubi*) and then returned to visit Afek. One of these adzes remains in Telefolip to this day, at the entrance to Umoim's underground track to Bagelam.<sup>8</sup> When Umoim returned to Telefolip he was riddled with maggots, and Afek's children shamed him when they became frightened at the sight of the writhing mass. But they erred by failing to recognize the maggots for what they were: the *bonang* shells with which people marry and make mortuary payments. The result was the estrangement of the dead from the living and the loss of access to wealth except through trade. Umoim transformed himself into a bird and flew off.

### *Ok Tedi and the Gift of an Adze*

Sir Kingsford's visit was understood as a visit to Afek's home. More than this, it was a sort of homecoming full of mythological resonances, resonances which were deliberately invoked in the gift of an adze from Telefolip. Bagelam is, according to myth and popular agreement, the source of the old stone *fubi* adzes and of shell wealth. Indeed, the association with *fubi* is what lends Mount Fubilan — the site of Ok Tedi's gold and copper deposits no less than the mountain standing above Bagelam — its name.

Hence, the T-shirts sported by Min workers at the Ok Tedi mine carry the design of a *fubi*, understood by outsiders as a sign of local culture, but equally understood by Min people as an icon of their connection with the site. A figure known as Ok Tedi Tiin-Molin (The One Watching Over Ok Tedi, or the "watchman") is popularly identified with Umoim. People say he returns to Telefolip each night, following the underground track from Bagelam/Mount Fubilan with a *fubi* tucked underneath his arm.

The presentation of the *fubi* to Sir Kingsford was orchestrated by the West Sepik Provincial Mines and Resources Minister (himself a Telefolmin), who saw this act as a dramatic public affirmation of the truth of Min claims to the mine site. In the local view, the acceptance of the gift and the Development Agreement were an integral transaction signifying the government's acknowledgement of the facts of the case. This amounted to a reaffirmation of what Telefolmin had known all along: that Telefolip and Bagelam/Fubilan are inextricably bound.

This political discourse is accompanied by a developed local exegesis. In mythic contexts the adze signifies productivity, a tool the living are given in compensation for the burdens of scarcity and mortality (Jorgensen 1985). Traditionally presented to novices in the fifth initiation, the Taro Rite, adzes are the powers of labour. In the present context, the adze is also a token of the role Telefolmin play in the Ok Tedi mine as workers. The exegesis is extended with a direct reference to wealth. When the mine went into production the flow of shells along trade routes through the Ok Tedi area ceased. At one level this is understood as the result of waning interest in traditional trade on the part of the Wopkaimin, who live near the mine site. But at another level, people explain that the excavations into Mount Fubilan directly destroyed the source of shells. Gold and copper are now under the mountain in their place, and Telefolmin know that this is transformed into money. Telefolmin thus see money as substituting for shells, accounting in part for the role of cash in contemporary bridewealth transactions (Jorgensen n.d.). At the same time, Telefolmin see claims in respect of Mount Fubilan as an attempt at restitution, given the destruction of the source of shells that Umoim had created.

Sir Kingsford's visit was thus a mythic return, a contemporary replaying of Umoim's first return to Telefolip. But Sir Kingsford was honoured instead of shamed, and his return was a return with a difference: instead of bringing an adze, he was presented with one. In return, access to wealth — now money

instead of shells — was opened rather than fore-closed.

### *The Min Association, the Telefolip, and the Power of Place*

The question immediately arises as to whether the Telefol version of this episode in local history is to be understood in *literally* mythic terms. The short answer to this is clear enough: the reading is, and must be, metaphorical. Nobody seriously believed that Sir Kingsford was Umoim or his incarnation.

For Telefolmin, if practical relations with government officials are entered into often enough, government people remain for the most part more distant than Afek and her brother: the alienness is to some extent irreducible. This becomes clear if we reconsider the relationship between the *Telefolip* and the Min Association. Not only was it the case that prime ministers and their like would recognize the Min Association in a way they could not recognize the *Telefolip*: Telefolmin themselves constructed the Min Association as the site for such encounters so as not to put the *Telefolip*'s sanctity in jeopardy. The Min Association was itself a figurative construction modelled on a spirit house, but it housed no spirits and, in the ultimate incongruity, it presided over no community. Isolated, surrounded by its tanket fence, it stood alone on a path between the government vehicle track and Telefolip. A metaphorized version of the *Telefolip*, it stood not only as a focus of a newly emerging pan-Min self-awareness, it also stood as a meeting ground for the Min world and the world beyond it. Thus the weeding and the feast, recalling first-fruit rites, were a recasting of Telefol imagery to meet the world of government and mines.

But, feasting on tinned fish and rice, there was a harvest nonetheless — of cash instead of taro. And here lies a deeper puzzle, for if all of this was a trafficking in metaphoric extension and revision, the efficacy of the *Telefolip* in all of this was *real*. The reality was based on the *Telefolip*'s ability to confer objective existence on the intangibles of ethnic identity.

To return to what Telefolmin say about themselves in relation to the *Telefolip*, we may remain skeptical about the historicity of Afek, but not about the *Telefolip*. As only one of a congeries of related peoples — those now going by the name of Min — the Telefolmin are broadly similar to all in a number of cultural features. Certainly one such feature is adherence to a mythic tradition of descent from Afek. In these narratives, however, Afek — which all have in common — is consistently linked to the building of the *Telefolip*, a singularity setting Tele-

folmin apart. Interestingly, if one asks a Faiwolmin or Tifalmin, or any of the other Min about Afek, they defer to Telefolmin as being better acquainted with the details of her exploits. Telefolmin pride themselves as the custodians of Afek's lore, and explain their privileged relation to this mythic legacy by saying that they are her last-born, remaining where she ended her days. They thus have a special and direct connection to her. The objective evidence for such claims is plain for all the see: the *Telefolip* itself.

In a similar vein, if one pokes around in local narratives about Telefol origins, one finds that not all Telefolmin are directly descended from Afek. Instead, the majority came from various bush locations to congregate at Telefolip, where they intermarried. Since Telefol descent is bilateral, such grafting provides an authentic enough connection, but to emphasize descent in this way is to miss the point that it was the central site of Telefolip — the village built around *the Telefolip* — that was the focus of attraction. In a like manner, all Telefolmin living outside Telefolip trace their common ties to the site itself. Casual and indifferent genealogists, all that is required is the assertion of a link with Telefolip to make good the claim. This is a connection that was renewed for each generation of men who, regardless of natal village, completed their senior initiations in the *Telefolip*. In a multitude of ways, then, the *Telefolip* itself is what has always defined the Telefolmin, and it is arguable that the mythic framework elaborated in the context of this centralized initiation system owes its existence to the house, and not the reverse: the place is a charter for the myth, and validates it.

The power of the *Telefolip* is, in one sense, the embodiment in material terms of collective commitment in a way Durkheim (or Bourdieu) would readily recognize. It is this very property of objectification that is so compelling. Standing after the dispersal of the ritual congregation, it transcends the ephemeral nature of particular events and mediates past and present. More than that, the house's very singularity gives focus and centrality to a score of villages scattered through two valley systems. Visible with its towering pine grove from the far end of its own valley, the *Telefolip* is an architectural landmark. In a region where settlements are small and scattered, it exerted an attraction that precipitated the existence of the Telefolmin as a people.

It is this property, the objective singularity of the *Telefolip*, that renders it so admirable as a focus of collective identity. When, following independence, Telefolmin and their neighbours saw advantage in



more effective political representation, the *Telefolip* paved the way. Following traditional administrative practice, acceptable grounds could be founded on the existence of a coherent and distinctive identity. Evidence was had for this with recourse to myth backed up by a reference to what was there for all to see: the sacred site of *Telefolip*. With the advent of Ok Tedi, pan-Min sentiment was once again activated in similar fashion, culminating in the formation of the Min Association, localized and objectified with the construction of a house which attracted the Prime Minister.

## Conclusions

What I have argued is that the linkage between named locations and myth gives the latter an indispensable bridgehead in the everyday world. This lends myth a kind of concreteness that vouches for its authenticity. The use of spatial reference as a form of validation — an empirical proof of narrative claims — has been recognized since Malinowski's day. As one Trobriander put it,

"Our stories about Tudava are true; this is a *lili'u* [myth]. If you go to Laba'i you can see the cave in which Tudava was born, you can see the beach where he played as a boy. You can see his footmark in a stone at a place in the Raybwag. But where are the traces of *Yesu Kerisu*? Who ever saw any signs of the tales told by the *misinari*? Indeed, they are not *lili'u*." (Malinowski 1922:302)<sup>9</sup>

The linkage between named locations and myth is a kind of testimony that *Telefolmin*, too, find particularly compelling, but the significance of such linkage goes beyond offering verification of mythic events, for the grounding of myth in space invites a mythical construction of events taking place in the terrain it maps. From this point of view the *evidentiality* of myth is a *realization* that is not far removed from what we have learned about the logic of *mana*, namely, that the notions of efficacy and potency are joined to those of truth and confirmation (Keesing 1984:151).<sup>10</sup>

The potency of spatial anchorage as realization is particularly clear in Barton's work on the mythology of the *Ifugao* (1955). Barton draws attention to a recurrent feature of *Ifugao* myths, something they call a *tulud*. A *tulud* normally appears at the end of the myth and is akin to an invocation. The way it works is that the narrator recites a series of place-names in an attempt to bring the principal actor of the myth to the locale where the rites are being performed. Barton goes on to say that "the primary

meaning of *tulud* is 'pushing', but it also means 'compelling' (p. 8)." In Barton's words, the *tulud*

serve the function in magic of bridging from the past to the present and from the 'there' to the 'here'. The myths are in the historical present.... In *Kiangan* this follows the formula: 'Be it not then but now; not there, but here...' (p. 9)

What is worth noticing about this is that the *Ifugao* seek to empower their myths by linking them to familiar places in order to compel events. In this sense the construction of the Min Association and the weeding of its grounds were themselves a *Telefol* version of '*tulud*' linking past and present in order to reshape the present. Likewise, the gift of an adze to the Governor General was an evocation of the myth connecting *Telefolip* with Mount *Fubilan* and evidenced the truth of claims based upon this myth, an aim achieved by orchestrating spatial cross-references. This owes a great deal to traditional ritual strategies in which sacred places — most notably, *Telefolip* — provided a focus in which mythological references were mobilized. Put differently, *Telefolmin* were able to effectively use sacred places to sustain a discourse in which myth and history confronted each other, in which myth was able to inform historical action. It is in this sense that placing the past helps to move the present.

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## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia in 1986. Some of the material discussed here is analyzed from a different point of view in Jorgensen (1990).

2. Melanesia seems particularly rich in the development of the spatial dimension of symbolic structures. For additional examples, see Leenhardt (1979), Rodman (1986).

3. Telefolmin distinguish between two kinds of knowledge, based upon the ways in which one comes to know: *tinangkamin*, literally 'to hear', and *utamamin*, 'to see'. In everyday talk the former can be taken to indicate comprehension or understanding, while the latter is closer to the certain knowledge of a witness. One of the things that spatialization of reference in myth accomplishes is the validation of one form of knowledge by the other, in this case, of comprehension (having heard the narrative) by witnessing (the place or places in which the narrative is set). For more on these and related themes, see Munn (1970), Jorgensen (1980), Parmentier (1987), Battaglia (1990), and Wagner (1986).

4. In the wake of the Christian Rebaibal movement of the late 1970s it appeared for a time that male initiations at Telefolip were in jeopardy (Jorgensen 1981). By 1989, however, the initiations had been resumed and there now appears to be a rapprochement between Christian Telefolmin and aspects of traditional religion focused on Telefolip. Christian Telefolmin are held to go to Heaven instead of the Land of the Dead.

5. In the context of local ideas about the power of sacred places it is worth noting that the Telefol victors spared the lives of a number of senior Iligimin men on condition that the latter instruct the Telefolmin in the names and stories of Iligimin sacred sites in the Eliptaman valley. Ubtemtigin was the ancestral Iligimin village (analogous to Telefolip), and Telefolmin built a replica of the *Telefolip* — referred to as *Telefolip neeng* [the *Telefolip's* younger sister] — incorporating some posts from the *Telefolip* when they occupied the site. While not having the status of a regional cult centre in the same way as the true *Telefolip*, the house at Ubtemtigin had also been rebuilt repeatedly on the same site until it was destroyed in the Rebaibal in the late 1970s.

6. Barry Craig's photographs of the Min Association and of the *Telefolip* appear as Figures 49 and 71 of Craig and Hyndman (1990).

7. Worth approximately CAD \$ 3.2 million in 1983.

8. An archaeological team from the National Museum went to Telefolip in 1982 as part of a project to establish the antiquity of local settlement in the Ok Tedi impact region. Although not permitted to dig under the *Telefolip* itself, the team did discover an adze not far from the entrance to the Land of the Dead, a fact which occasioned many knowing nods in Telefolip. Here, in local eyes, was evidence of the truth of their claims, and this is not far from the view taken by academics (and bureaucrats) in Port Moresby (see Swadling 1983; Jorgensen 1983).

9. Examples of validation by spatial anchorage are readily multiplied; for a quick sampling, see Fox (1979:16-8), Kahn (1990), LeRoy (1985:23), Strehlow (1947). Telefolmin, incidentally, go Malinowski's informant one better: one of the secret names of the village of Telefolip is Yesubip, after the wild fig tree (*yet*) in which Umoim's corpse was placed; in esoteric discourse this resonates with another myth in which Afek is said to have killed Jesus at Telefolip. An analysis of the relation between the

layering of sacred knowledge, processes of innovation, and the "sedimentation" of associations at sacred sites is beyond what I can accomplish here, but it should at least be clear that a lively dialectic between myth and history is played out on this terrain; for an interesting South American case, see Rappaport (1989).

10. This probably accounts for the epistemological significance Telefolmin attach to cult relics (bones, ancestral artifacts, etc.) which play so prominent a part in traditional religion. I am also convinced that the particularization involved in locating mythic referents in places or objects shares in the efficacy commonly attributed to esoteric names in many parts of Melanesia (see, e.g., Young 1983:11-13). For an example of a ritual performance in which recitations of place names seem crucial, see Lewis (1980:61ff). See also note 3 above.

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