

# **Our Culture Our Currency: The Custom of Selling Pig Meat for Shell Money for the Payment of Bride Price on the Gazelle Peninsula, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea**

**By Stephen DeMeulenaere, 2002**

*Note: This document contains graphic images of the death of an animal.  
If you do not wish to see such images, please do not scroll down.*

## **Location**

The Gazelle Peninsula is located on the northeastern end of New Britain Island in Papua New Guinea.



## **The Traditional Currency**

Tabu, meaning the same as it does in English, *sacrosanct*, is the traditional shell money of the Tolai people of the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain and nearby Duke of York Islands. Produced by women who string the *nassa camelus* shell onto rattan string. This string can be broken, allowing this traditional currency to be denominated in any unit. The standard unit is one fathom (6 feet, 1.83m) of shells, with sub units in tens of shells, and named denominations up to 5,000 fathoms (1,500 feet, 450m). The shells are purchased or collected, and once strung onto the rattan are rolled by the men onto wheels for long-term storage. At ceremonies for marriage and death, Tabu is distributed freely among those who come, in amounts corresponding to side (matrilineal line), clan and social rank. Tabu received can be rolled into another wheel for long-term savings, but usually circulates as a medium of exchange, facilitating purchase of all locally-produced goods and some services. It is also convertible into the national currency, the Kina for about 3.50 Kina (1.75 Australian, .75 US) per fathom but the rate varies. Although it is not known exactly when the Tolai

## **The Custom of Selling Pig Meat for Shell Money in order to pay Bride Price**

In order to accumulate sufficient amounts of Tabu to pay the bride price, which is usually between 200 and 300 fathoms and to have Tabu to distribute to the guests who come to the

wedding, a groom and his side must acquire as much Tabu as possible. One customary way of doing this is to raise a pig for 18 months, kill it, cut it up and sell it for shell money. This tradition demonstrates that Tabu, unlike any other form of traditional shell money in circulation today, can be used for both large and small purchases, is divisible and useful for a wide range of locally-produced goods.

The bride price cannot be paid in anything other than Tabu. Not gold, jewels, items or least of all cash. Although the conversion value of 200 fathoms is 700 Kina (350 Australian, 175 US dollars), if one were to successfully negotiate the payment of bride price in Kina, it would be in the area of 4,000 Kina.

### The Process

On Saturday, July 6, 2002, Ian Stevenson, a local architect and builder and I went to this event and photo-documented it using a digital camera.



Everyone gathered around to take one last look at the Pig and to help the men to do their work by making sure the Pig didn't escape.



The Pig's legs are tied up, its mouth and nose are tied and sealed shut. The Pig suffocates to death within one minute.





A pole is inserted between the dead Pig's legs, and the pole is rested between the branches of two trees. It is then covered with dry palm branches.



The palm is set alight, creating a very hot fire that burns for just a few minutes. This sears the skin, making it easier to cut and removes the hair.



The fire burns until it dies out.



Ash is dusted off the body, which is then washed with water and scrubbed with branches and leaves.



The body is washed and the seared skin is shaved with a knife and machete.



The body is then placed on some banana leaves.





An incision is made in the anus, allowing for clean and easy removal of the entrails.



The belly is sliced open and lifted off.



The entrails are exposed but not disturbed.



Ferns are placed into the bowel cavity, and with a gentle pulling motion the entrails are separated from the wall of the body. The ferns are used like a sponge to remove blood, to be used later.



Ferns are placed in the intestinal cavity in order to facilitate removal of the entrails.



With no cutting involved, the entrails are cleanly and completely removed from the body, from the throat down.





With years of skill and a sharp knife, the butcher deftly slices the body into chunks.



The son, raising Tabu shell money funds to pay the bride price for his wedding, takes over from his father to finish the job.

Everything is used, including the head and brains.





The pieces are displayed for the buyers to see.

ALUANA BHAYALI

→ JOHN DEVI	-	1 ARIV
→ BERUKLIT	-	5 POKONO
→ TOLIQUE	-	4 POKONO
→ DELILA TITMARI	-	4 POKONO
→ CUTAUN	-	5 POKONO
→ EASTEN	-	5 POKONO
→ J. REELING	-	1 ARIV
→ TO MIFEL	-	4 POKONO
→ JEFFREY	-	2 POKONO
→ ENDE A.	-	2 POKONO
→ J. VITRINE	-	4 POKONO
→ W. PALLEE	-	1 POKONO
→ TICHARUC	-	1 ARIV
→ LINDO	-	150 & 5 POKONO
→ POKONT	-	1 ARIV
→ SANDRE	-	5 POKONO
→ DICI	-	2 POKONO
→ KINGG VANWARD	-	1 POKONO

The list of buyers and their contributions in shell money are listed, and they receive portions in proportion to their contribution.

1 Ariv = 10 fathoms

1 Pokono = 1 fathom





The meat is cut into small chunks, and wrapped in banana leaf. The stem of the banana leaf is stripped from the leaf, and used to tie the package together.



The Tabu paid by the initial buyers is laid on a banana leaf, with a little sign saying Babali at the top.



Those who arrived late place their Tabu on the banana leaf with the little sign that says Vavalua at the top.



Having paid my share, 1 fathom (3.5 Kina, 1.75 Oz, .80 US), I am entitled to receive my share, which is about 2 pounds. Remember, the point is to raise money, not get a good deal !



## Conclusion

Fearing the possible risks involved in purchasing home-made fire-distilled alcohol (1 fathom for a 375ml bottle), I decided to spend my Tabu on Pig meat. The groom raised about 150 fathoms, valued at 500 PNG Kina or 250 Australian dollars or 125 US dollars from his Pig. This 150 fathoms, combined with contributions from his mother's family will be presented to the bride-to-be's family on Sunday after church.

The Tolai are a predominantly Christian people, and most of the people I have met speak English fluently. They are very proud of their culture, and its values of trade, industry, agriculture and hard work.

However, the declining value of the Kina and the fact that the national government has not been paying the Provincial Government what it collects in Value Added Tax (VAT) has put the Provincial Government in a revenue and cash-flow crisis. As one possible solution they are considering standardizing and mobilizing the Tabu currency as a second official currency in the Province. Having already officialized use of the currency for taxes, fines and other payments to the government, they have in effect established one of the few Provincial-level "dual currency" systems in the world.