

# WANTOK SETTLEMENTS IN NEW GUINEA

*Wantok is pidgin that literally means “someone who speaks my language”, which by implication means someone from the same village or nearby settlement.*

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## THE COUNTRY AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

### Introduction

Ritual has dictated to a significant degree the form and layout of human settlements in rural areas of Papua New Guinea, where over 90 per cent of its nearly three (*now six*) million people live and work. In this paper it is proposed to examine 2 contrasting rural Wantok communities of highland and coastal regions and the way ritual has influenced the development of their settlements over hundreds of years.

### The Country

The islands of Papua New Guinea are just below the equator and are located in a key position between South-East Asian – Australasian and the Pacific regions. The country is about the size of the United Kingdom and its main island consists of the Eastern half of New Guinea, which it shares with the Indonesian territory of West Irian. It is one of the last colonial territories to achieve nationhood.



The land presents extreme varieties with high mountain ranges up to 13,000 feet above sea level. Large rivers flow down these mountains and end up in mangrove and sago swamps. The mountain climate is cold, but generally the rest of the region is hot and humid. Rainfall is high. In fact, it is one of the wettest parts of the world.

## Population

Most Papua New Guineans are Melanesians whose forerunners migrated from the Malay Archipelago. Because of peculiar geography and difficult country, different groups have remained comparatively isolated from each other. They have been separated into inbreeding sub-groups living along the coastal strips, on islands, in the valleys and in the mountains.

This isolation helped each community turn its back upon itself and encouraged the development and refinement of a whole range of languages and customs. As a result, there are remarkable differences in their cultural and social organisation.

In some areas a man and his wife (or wives) live in separate houses; in others, a single building serves the whole community. But most live a community life, the large social unit of which is a village or a group of villages. Their dwellings vary greatly, some being temporary huts, while others are elaborate and well-constructed houses. In some settlements decoration hardly exists; in others it is essential, and the wood carver and the poet and the dancer are the most honoured men in the community.

## RITUAL AND RURAL SETTLEMENTS

### Highland Settlements

In the centre of the great island, away from the coast, are the most thickly populated areas of highlands. Here, some hundreds of thousands of people live on crags above fertile valleys. Many of the existing mountains were closed until two decades ago, not only because they were wild and difficult, but also whose lives did certain tribes like the Giolalas and the Kukukukus largely govern by blood feuds and long cycles of murder.

Just across the wide stretch of the Wahgi Valley on the other side of the mountain is Mt Hagan. Here the design and layout of buildings provides an interesting physical framework for living and reflects to some degree the kind of life people lead and the way in which they are organized.

The village as many of us know it hardly exists; low thatched shelters hug the ground. There are separate houses for men and women. The women are largely responsible for the painstaking day-to-day care of the pigs, the most prized possession of these people and the focus of their ceremonial life. On special occasions they are killed for communal feasts, which are accompanied by dancing, and singing and which often continue for two to three days, without a break.

The women's (Meries) houses are built primarily for the convenience of the pigs with whom the limited accommodation is shared, near the street potato gardens from which pigs are fed, close to the ground and within easy access to the jungle. The village green (or *Sing Sing Ground*) remains the focus of the village life, and the grouping of the houses around it indicates the vital part which ceremonial, dancing, the entertainment of visitors and social activities of all kinds play.

The location of the chief's house, standing higher than the others at the head of the ceremonial grounds overlooking the village reflects the traditional political structure of the community based as it is, on the respect for the hereditary authority.

## Lowland Settlements

Stretching all along the north and south of the great mountain ranges which run like a spine through the centre of the main island, are swamps and lakes of the drowned areas where mouths of major rivers are spread. The tribes living here were once as shut and isolated as the swamps in which they lived. But those closer to the coastal strips had increasing contact with the outside world through fishing and trading in their big canoes.

Across the northwestern part of the main island, life is very much dominated by the Sepik River. It is a big river which runs a course of well over 1000 kilometers within a corner of

the country only 300 km wide. Like an enormous snake, it twists across its plain interspersed by stretches of lakes and marshes. People of this region are known to be very artistic. They possess carving and decorative skills in a variety far richer than any other section of Oceania.

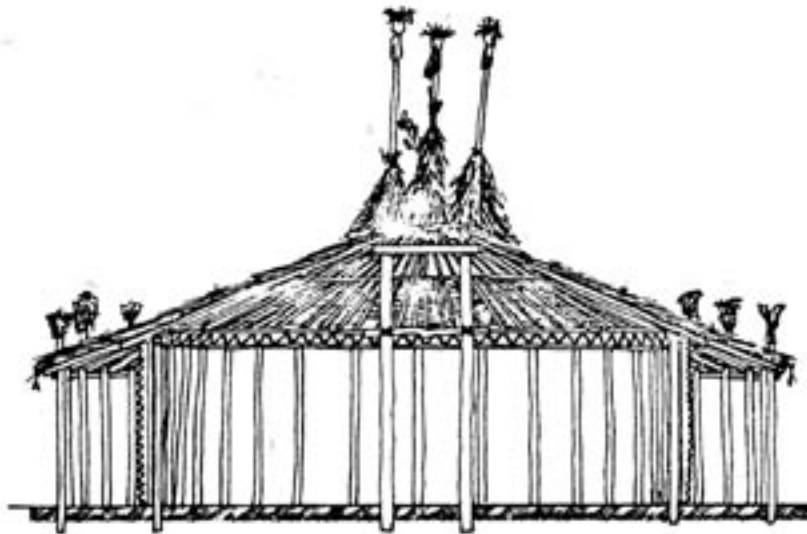
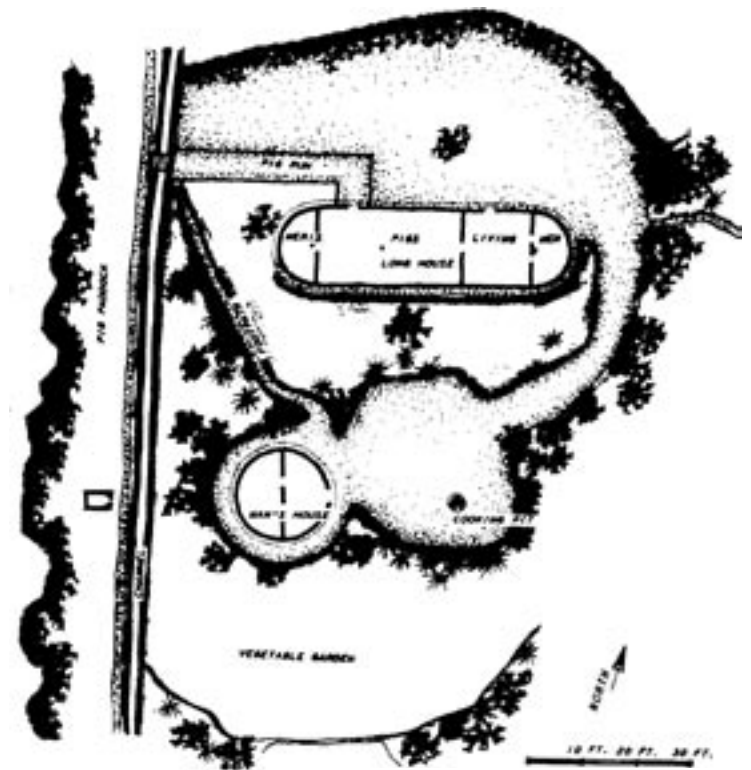
The House Tamberan or sacred house in Sepik culminates what is perhaps the most exciting example of indigenous architecture and dictates the layout of the human settlements there. I first encountered this when flying low over the mountains on the way to Maprik, where the present Chief Minister of the Country Michael Somare was born and grew up.

Perched on the smaller ridges of this broken rich, volcanic country are a series of villages which can be spotted from the air as much as by the rich patterns of surrounding gardens of yams and taro, sugar cane and bananas. Sepik houses are simple A-framed huts scattered along the ridges of different levels and enclose a variety of open spaces. The roofs and walls are covered with dry sac palm leaf and the peak forward like a leaning tent with an open front. A slow walk through these houses finally ends up near the large structure of House Tamberan. Each house accommodates a family, which sometimes includes grand parents. The men spend most of their time in House Tamberan during the day and return to their individual houses at night.





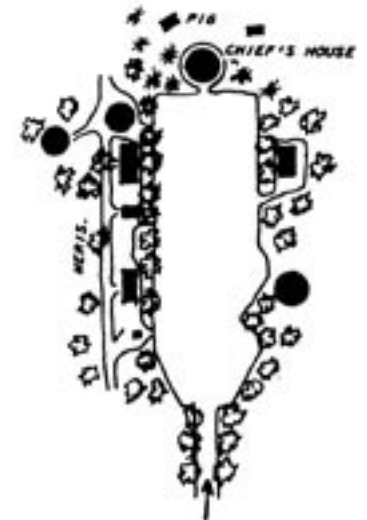
*A village in New Guinea Highlands*



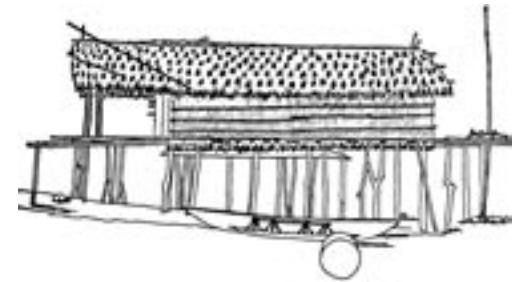
Above right: A village in New Guinea Highlands

Right: Village Sing sing ground

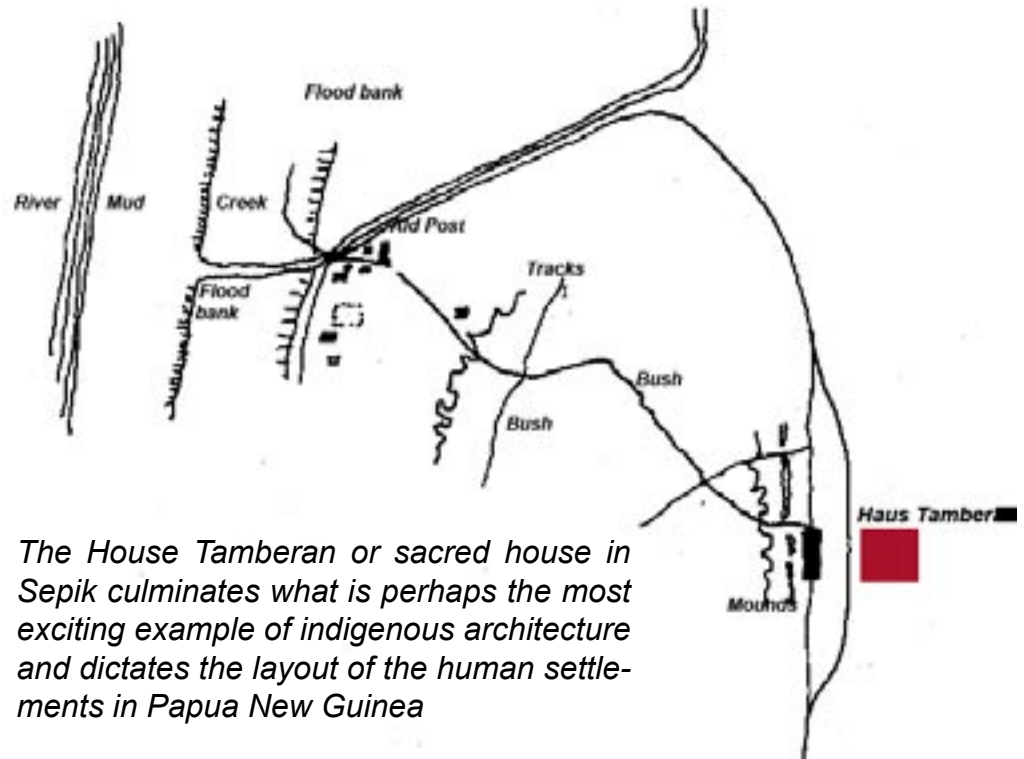
Left: Village Chief's hut.







A coastal village over the water in Papua



*The House Tamberan or sacred house in Sepik culminates what is perhaps the most exciting example of indigenous architecture and dictates the layout of the human settlements in Papua New Guinea*



House Tamberan or sacred house is basically a giant size version of the ordinary house, the only difference being the front, which is closed. The base is approximately ten (10) meters wide and the series of A-frames made from log timber sometimes soar as high as twenty five to thirty meters into the sky. The structure is held together with lashes of vines and the outer surface is covered with thatch. The front is then closed with flat sheets of sago palm bark all sewn together and smoothed for painting a series of what must be one of the most dramatic and colourful patterns and designs found in the Pacific region

Mostly they are rows and rows of faces, which depict ancestral spirits, long, and vivid, with staring eyes and scarlet peak-head dresses, all very clear, strong and beautiful in the blazing sun of the tropics. The log timber used for framing are very carefully selected usually at the recommendation of the man who knows the history of the particular tree. He is considered as the owner of the post made from the tree. The story is passed on to the other men and this story finally determines what is carved on the post.

House Tamberan, which houses ancestral spirits, is only accessible and used by grown up men. It is a sort of “exclusive men’s club” which is barred to women and children. The belief is that the spirits cast a spell and bring bad luck. A pregnant woman for instance who goes anywhere near the structure could end up delivering a still born baby or become barren for the rest of her life. The children who dare go near

the House Tamberan could well be exposed to ailments of incurable nature.

The maximum distance up to which ancestral spirits can influence is estimated to be approximately 100 meters. Consequently the location of House Tamberan not only determines the layout of the whole settlement but also the relationships of dwellings and the adjacent road pattern. All roads for instance leading to House Tamberan have a by-pass approximately 100 meters away largely used by women and children. When a boy comes of age, he is then ready for initiation into man-hood at an elaborate ceremony involving non-stop singing, dancing and feasting often lasting for days. It is usually held on an open cleared ground close to House Tamberan.

In a Sepik village, land is inherited on father's side and is always handed to the oldest son. Its north-south boundary is determined by the mounds and rows of coconuts, the west by House Tamberan or others land and unless another family owns lands to the east, there is no limit. In case of a family without sons, the land is taken over by another group whose needs are found to be greater.

## RITUAL AND URBAN PLANNING

The above two examples of traditional rituals in rural areas of Papua New Guinea are deeply rooted in the soil of the country. It is likely that they will continue to influence the formation of rural settlements for some generations to come. But,

following trends in many other developing countries, Papua New Guinea is also experiencing urbanisation where people are increasingly moving away from somewhat stagnant rural economies and are arriving in significant numbers to live and work in that country's urban centres such as Port Moresby, Lae, Goroka and Madang.

Once in town, they settle anywhere they can and set up temporary migrant settlements in and around the urban areas. Generally they tend to congregate among their own 'Wantok' and thus manage to retain some, if not all, the rituals and ceremonies in an urban environment even though they may consider it somewhat foreign and hostile.

In Papua New Guinea, planners and architects have attempted to deal with the influx of migrants in two ways. The first is to allow squatters to secure legal ownership occupied by them and assist them to improve their existing environment by providing essential services such as water supply, waste disposal and access roads. Secondly, recognise the reality of the problem of continual migration and plan new settlements so that migrants could be channeled to build their own shelter on adequately serviced plots of land.

For planners the real challenge lies in providing an urban environment in which ritual, so essential to maintenance of continuity, mental well-being and sense of security, could flourish. The land is limited and there are other constraints in a town, which is forced to receive large number of people



of diverse background. The planners have to decide as to how many people of a particular 'Wantok' should be allowed to live in a specific location so that they are not a threat to the safety and security of others. Concentration of a large numbers of 'Wantok' in close proximity to rival groups can result in unhappy confrontation, hostility and, at times, even open warfare. Instances of this have already been reported from one or two places during the last few years.

One way to deal with this problem is to control the flow and growth of various 'Wantok' groups into the towns. But, this is not so simple to accomplish without the use of force and totalitarian measures. However, once in, the migrants could be dispersed in what may be described as salt-and-pepper manner through the urban areas. But in all such actions, the ritual and other associated activities are sacrificed in favour of order and safety for all. Law and order is assured, but people are forced to abandon the practice of beliefs and rituals which have been part and parcel of their lives for many generations and as a result the whole country is poorer for this loss.

## Publication

*Gutschow, N. & Sieverts, T. Urban Space and Ritual Proceedings of an international symposium on urban history of South- and East Asia. 2-4 June 1977. Fachbereich Architektur – TH Darmstadt, Germany.*