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Bandit *Singsing*: The Tourism Unexperience

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We left on Friday morning but this short weekend trip now seems much longer. Our neighbours, Nick and Irina, who live across from us on campus at Divine Word University, had told us that there was a *singsing* (dance festival) being held at a Rai Coast village. They have been exploring every suggestion of the Tourism Bureau with some energy, so their invitation to join them at the *singsing* was most welcome.

Through the week, we visited the Tourism Bureau and found the staff very friendly and helpful, although one of them looked like she was about to burst into tears and run away if anyone asked her anything! A few repeat visits and phone calls confirmed arrangements for the trip and in the end we added Monica, another neighbour with several years experience of living in Papua New Guinea (PNG), to the list of guests.

We were told to get ourselves to the Tourism Bureau by 'eight o'clock, maybe seven-thirty' so that they could take us down to the wharf for a two- or three-hour boat trip to Saidor on the Rai Coast. We would need to leave early in the morning because the sea would be too rough later on. So, at quarter to eight, we met in the space between our three houses and Nick dropped us off. The security guards there gave us

a blank look as no one had arrived to open the place but then we saw Joanne, one of the more outgoing tourism people, across the road, waiting to hail our transport. She came over and began ringing around to try and contact the driver with apparently little success.

I amused myself by watching Madang's peak hour traffic. It is by no means insubstantial. Every minute or so at least 10 vehicles carrying 10 people passed by, so I think that between 7:30 and 9 am, perhaps some 10,000 people come into Madang town. Hard to imagine that there could be so much work or activity here.

By 8:30 Joanne had given up on the driver and so decided that we should get a PMV (bus) down to the wharf. This was the cue for rain to start falling and, by the time we got to the wharf, the rain was heavy and prolonged. Some friendly betel nut sellers offered us shelter under their umbrella but we still got wet because of the angle and strength of the rain.

The rain cleared and, after an hour or so, the boat arrived, having come all the way from Saidor. We went off and got some provisions (bread, roast chicken and banana) before setting out just after 10:30. Not quite the early morning start envisaged (I could have slept another two hours and avoided getting rained on) but a reliable guide to the progress of the weekend.

We were farewelled by some tourism bigwig and joined by Melchior, a local councillor wearing shoes and socks and long pants, who was 'escorting' us to the *singsing*—and with some pride. The boat trip was unremarkable and a little uncomfortable. Many things were familiar from other banana boat trips around the Pacific: the steely eyed driver, smoking during the fuel tank refills; leaving the palms and looking back to the pastel greys and purples of the coast; flying fish zipping past; and of course the choppy crash of the boat against the waves and the discipline of not checking the time.

At Saidor, we beached the boat, interrupting a village full of playing children. Oniel, our hostess from the Tourism Bureau, had come down from the *singsing* to meet us. We sat in the shade, to the great fascination of 20 or 30 children and adults, before walking through the village towards the cocoa and coconut plantations that surround it. I got talking to a man about cocoa and the economic struggle of daily life. He cut a cocoa pod to show us the sweet pulp inside that bears no discernable relationship to chocolate.

On the boat, we had been told we'd have to walk two (or three) hours up a mountain to the village. News to us, as we'd thought the *singsing* was being held in Sidor itself. None of us had suitable footwear. One might think that a two- to three-hour walk was a fairly important detail that might have been passed on to us in advance. Monica almost certainly would not have come had she known of such a walk. Irina only had strappy sandals.

To our relief, a decrepit Land Rover turned up and drove us up steep and heavily rutted roads to our destination. Every 20 minutes or so, we had to stop to refill the radiator to stop it from overheating. In steep stops, a rock was placed under the wheels to stop it from sliding backwards down the hill. At the first of these stops, by a river and just past a former soccer field, now covered in metre-high rushes, we took photos of the entourage on the back of the truck, including the delightful Rudolph, a teacher from Bandit village. His contribution to the discussion of what the Tok Pisin word for 'smile' was, 'smael long mi!', accompanied by a great and winning betel nut smile.

The road became steeper and steeper and eventually we arrived in Bandit village. We looked up at a delightful freshly thatched house with arabesque weaving for windows and, before we knew it, had decamped. Our luggage was taken from us and we were rushed up the hill to catch the remainder of the day's program.

We passed through a few family compounds and soon could hear singing and drums. As we came closer, groups of people in dancing costumes and smeared with a copper-red body paint stopped to wave at us. Here was a field full of dozens of people and surrounded by stalls. We were taken to a makeshift pavilion which the Governor had recently delivered an address, before quickly heading back down to Sidor and boarding a chartered flight back to Madang. We were welcomed as VIPs and a man in a large suit jacket (several times larger than his proper size) stopped the dancing to introduce us as 'tourists from Australia and Divine Word University' through a megaphone. The dancing resumed but we hadn't eaten and so opened up our chicken and bread and filled our faces while trying to be inconspicuous. Soon the handful of other tourists came in and without hesitation made us welcome: Elsa and Julian from France, Kathleen and Tom and their teenage children Jenna, Kali and Ben—American yachties who have been sailing the Pacific for the last seven years. All were smeared with

the copper-red paint. Descending to the field, we took some photos of one of the dance groups who recommenced their dances for us but only after daubing our faces with the now ubiquitous red paint.



Figure 120. The beautiful guest house at Bandit village.

Source. Photo courtesy of Dr Georgina Phillips, 30 May 2009.

Walking back down the hill, we returned to the guest house, found our rooms, showered and made ready for the evening program. Our hosts served up a large meal of taro, cooked bananas, greens, rice and *tinpis* (canned fish). At 8:30 or so, several of us headed up to the *singsing* ground. Tom stayed behind to help his two girls dress for dancing. Already they were being absorbed into the village, not least due to Jenna's complete lack of social skills beyond an innocent and enthusiastic affection for everyone she meets. Monica and Irina decided to miss the all night festivities in favour of sleep and the prospect of a full day and night of dancing ahead.

Soon after nine, the first group entered the field. We could hear their drumming and *singsing* from afar but this did not prepare us for the amazing sight of their headdresses shimmering in the darkness. The *singsing* is a *kangal* festival, *kangal* being Tok Pisin for 'feather' and the distinctive headdress of the Rai Coast peoples. These are

bamboo frames dressed with cockatoo and other feathers. They are mostly crescent-shaped and designed to sway from side to side as the dancers circle around, skipping to the beat of *kundu* (handheld stretched hide) drums. Others are very long, almost like flagpoles, and certainly up to five metres high. It is quite extraordinary to see how the dancers balance these great works on their heads. One group had headdresses boasting images of fish and other sea creatures, including a stylised canoe prow. Another had a stylised horse but the meaning of these symbols was lost to us beyond the most obvious. They were most eerie emerging from the drumming and the darkness with their white feathers luminescent. We were quite awestruck.



Figure 121. Dancers emerging from the darkness.

Source. Photo courtesy of Dr Georgina Phillips, 30 May 2009.

Dancers wore mostly red paint, often with black facepaint and tapa loincloths, beads and pig tusk decorations. To our surprise, Jenna and Kali danced bare breasted in their group and Tom emerged drenched in red paint, wearing only a loincloth, pig tusk necklace, sandals and a bird of paradise on his head to complement his own blonde mane.



Figure 122. Kangal headdresses.

Source. Photo courtesy of Dr Georgina Phillips, 30 May 2009.

The dancing was cumulative, not sequential. Each new group of 20 or 30 dancers would arrive out of the night, dance a few turns under the pavilion and the only spotlight and then head off to the corners of the field to continue dancing and singing. New groups would come in with new and amazing *kangals* and simply add a new hypnotic drum beat to the several already beating through the darkness. Watching on the field, the audience would swarm around each new group and then be swept out of the way by the next one arriving. Hundreds of people were there crowding together in the dark.

Somehow amidst this foment of people, I struck up a long and serious conversation with Timothy, a pastor in the Evangelical Church from a nearby village. He sidled up to me and we got talking about dancing and church cultures and this led on to many other things. He told me about U-Vistract, the pyramid scheme I had come to study.¹ Years earlier, the promoter of the U-Vistract scam on Manus Island had had to flee to Bougainville for fear of reprisals. We talked at some length about the Bible and his suspicion of Pentecostals and their prosperity

1 John Cox, 2011, 'Prosperity, nation and consumption. Fast money schemes in Papua New Guinea', in *Managing Modernity in the Western Pacific*, ed. Mary Patterson and Martha Macintyre, pp. 172–200, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

theology. This led on to questions of reconciling culture and Christianity, divisions and tolerance of diversity within the church. I showed a bit of knowledge and he must have thought me a Christian, even though I explained that I was studying anthropology. We also ventured into politics and the lack of services in PNG. He wanted the Australian Government to come back and take over, so they would get good services. I thought he was up for it, so tried my hand at explaining how the free market ideology was responsible for governments globally relinquishing their responsibility for services.

Knowing that the dancing would go on all night, we rested in the pavilion from time to time. Early on we decided to get some coffee from one of the stalls. This provoked a megaphone announcement and a police escort across to the coffee shop. I guess if you have a megaphone, you may as well use it! It was used again at the end of our night to summon our police escort again to walk us down the hill. The place seemed entirely safe to us. We left at about 1 am, after all the dance groups had arrived and been performing for a while. The dancing continued for several hours longer, our American friends retiring at 4 am.

The next day we slept in a little, knowing that the dancing would not start until the afternoon and would go all night. But as we woke, we became aware of a committee meeting under the house in which we were sleeping. We could only catch the gist of the discussion but the tone was of disappointment. Money was clearly involved. We thought of the other tourists telling us how uncomfortable they felt as the megaphone introduced them and told all present that the tourists would bring money. By the time we rose, they'd forgotten we were staying there and were quite surprised to see us, as we in turn were surprised to see some 30 men sitting underneath the house, the leaders talking in hushed tones.

Things were clearly not going according to plans. For some reason, we were discouraged from going up to the field. A much smaller dance group from the village began performing next to the guest house. Before long the hidden tensions became apparent. An angry man entered the crowd and denounced the dancing, saying that the field above was the proper place for the *singsing*. Nobody replied to him and security guards tried to shepherd him away from the group. The dancers and

drummers looked on waiting to resume without inflaming the man's anger. Eventually he stormed off. I was surprised, because it seemed that he had made such a fool of himself for so little return.

No one was volunteering explanations and our curiosity was not rewarded in further inquiries. The big, bald-headed man who seemed to chair the organising committee and who had a prominent stall on the dancing ground with a generator and a fridge was dismissive of any concerns. Our Tourism Bureau escorts did not know how to begin explaining what was becoming a debacle. Nevertheless, it became clear that the other villages were expecting a share of the K2,000 donated by the Governor the previous day. Given as a cheque, this money could not possibly be cashed and was therefore not suitable for redistribution. Perhaps there was also a longer history behind these resentments.

As the day went on, another angry man came down from the top and demanded to speak with the leaders. Another pointed performance of anger: no one responded as he berated the villagers and he eventually tired of his tirade and left. Clearly there was going to be no dance program for the rest of the weekend and it was now unwise to venture up the hill.

So, we lazed about, opened some tins of sardines and had them with stale bread from the previous day. Opening the first tin was OK but the point of the knife bent, making it impossible to open any other tins. Or so I thought: I took the knife and sardines out of the guest house compound across to the group of villagers hanging out across the way. Rudolph took the knife and slid it into the tin as if the steel were soft as a pawpaw. His wife Ruth explained to me that white people didn't know the 'way of the knife'. Fair call, although I've never thought of Papua New Guineans as Melanesian Samurais.

Soon after we'd finished the sardines, a cooked lunch was served up to us and the Americans returned from their walk. Another example of the poor sense of timing and mixed up expectations that characterised the weekend.

It was very disappointing to realise that there really would be no more dancing. There was little else to do in this small mountain village but walk up and down the road. Rudolph and his wife Rose took us up past the dancing field and up to their hilltop school. We rested at the

summit and looked out at the sea and the approaching mist. Rose is from Bandit village and Rudolph from the coast north of Madang. They wish to stay here but have no security of tenure. As teachers, they can be moved to other schools each year—a huge disruption, expense and waste of bureaucratic resources almost deliberately designed to ensure low morale.

As we came back through the dance field, it was obvious that the pavilion and some of the stalls had been burnt down, indicating the strength of the feud. Rudolph explained that many of the villagers had spent up to K10,000 in their preparations and had been led to believe that there would be government funding to reward their contributions. At the previous year's festival, a representative from the National Museum had made a promise he had no chance of keeping and, in his absence, the *singsing* groups from other villages blamed the organising committee.

The tourists' perceptions of the weekend's events chopped and changed. On Friday night, Elsa and Julian, who work in humanitarian emergencies in Africa and who had just come from trekking through remote West Papuan villages, were amazed at the *singsing* being organised without the input of foreigners behind the scenes: no UNICEF funding! For the backpackers, they had met some interesting and welcoming Papua New Guineans and felt that the K600 or so that our accommodation amounted to would have been fair compensation to the guest house owners.

For Tom and Kathleen, this was an experience of an untouched culture that they admire and were privileged to participate in before it was thoroughly spoiled by the approach of the capitalist system. They said the dancing was a highlight of their seven years of travel, just as they turn their thoughts homewards, returning to a society whose materialistic values they reject. Their daughters were drawn into participation before it even became an option, particularly the gregarious Jenna, who was commandeered by Rita, a local teenager who hardly left her side.

Monica's resignation and ennui was salted with genuine affection and good humour. She had quickly decided she didn't want to be there and shouldn't have come but one never had the sense that she didn't want to be living in PNG. Irina only became more disoriented

as she attempted to make sense of what was going on. Nowhere was this clearer than in her sense of time, where her requests assumed an association between events and specific time commitments. Seven o'clock meant seven o'clock for her, not an approximation meaning 'sometime in the morning'. Neither of them saw the dancing that night, so enjoyed all the petty discomforts without the compensation of such a magnificent spectacle.

For us, the expectations of the villagers and our ill-preparedness to meet any of these or even to adequately provision our own expectations (tea and coffee for instance but at least we had a torch and toilet paper!) were a failing of the Tourism Bureau, whom we'd allowed to give us an inadequately interrogated impression of what to expect. But, of course, I must also blame myself for ignoring what I know about travelling to a village.

Had we just been going on our own, we would have been much better prepared but we consented to the very silly idea that we didn't need to bring anything and stupidly accepted answers from the wrong people without question. We had specifically asked about footwear and were told there was no need to bring walking shoes (no mention of the 2–3-hour walk). I asked about mosquito nets and was told the guesthouse would have them (they didn't but thankfully there weren't any mosquitoes to speak of). Really we should—and do—know much better.

We allowed ourselves to believe that all food would be provided, not thinking that that might be fried bananas for breakfast and lunch. What on Earth were we thinking? We also submitted to an idea of preposterously low costs—K70 per person each way for the canoe, K20 per night for accommodation and food and K5 per person for the village museum. We were already in the habit of carrying minimal cash so, while there wasn't much to buy, we shouldn't have let ourselves swallow the idea that 'they don't need money in the village', as Oniel and Joanne told us. Fortunately we did have enough for a nice Madang style *bilum* (woven bag) but we fell far short of the promise of tourists bringing the kind of money that would support a cottage industry.

I feel particular regret at not having brought anything with us that could have represented a show of practical appreciation of the efforts the village had gone to for our entertainment and comfort. Just weeks

ago we visited a north coast village and took a hand of betel nut in appreciation of their hospitality but somehow that kind of intuition left us for this journey.

For all the hospitality we received, we gave little in return, beyond the prestige of having white people come to the village. We were celebrated as the first tourists there, heralding many more to come. People were shy to approach us so milled about whispering to each other and occasionally coming over to make conversation. It would have been so easy for us to bring some bags of rice and tinpis to show our gratitude but this did not occur to us (or the tourism people) until it was far too late. Instead, the Americans received dancing skirts, bilums, tapa cloth and necklaces, leaving with a sense of 'how generous these people are', seemingly blind to the possibility that the gifts were intended to provoke something in the way of reciprocity. In fairness to some very decent and adventurous people, the yachties had been generous in other ways; not least in the spirit in which they immersed themselves in the dancing.

With a colder economic eye, it was hard to see much potential for tourism in Bandit. While the *singsing* was magnificent and a true privilege to watch, the remoteness of the village and the small-scale facilities there make it unlikely that more people will come. This presumes that village resentments can be resolved amicably enough to organise another festival. Many Madang expatriates will be turned off by the long canoe journey alone, not to mention the walk. Only so many tourists have the adventurous spirit shown by our French and American friends. That aside, the lowly charges for accommodation, the modest standard of the food, and the lack of an admission charge make commensurate tourism revenue for this particular activity impossible. If six dance groups want K10,000 each—not such an unreasonable claim for weeks of preparation, travel, food and accommodation for the dozens of people in each group—then that makes for a hefty charge for the few visitors intrepid enough to make the trip. It seems grossly irresponsible for local and national authorities to encourage dreams of tourism as a money-making venture. For the tourist, such expectations make the stay rather discomforting, particularly when local disputes become visible.

By the end, the transparency of this conflict shamed the village. They clearly felt that they had failed the tourists and were ashamed. As we left, we were lined up to be presented with bilums and to shake hands with everyone from Bandit. I detected an apologetic tone in our hosts and a wish to ensure that we would not leave angry with them.

We piled onto the back of the decrepit Land Rover, knowing this was unsafe; but none of us wanted to walk down the mountain in the wrong shoes! The truck set off and immediately lost control of the brakes. We careened around the first corner, in front of our guest house, where one of the locals leapt off with a frightened look on his face. The truck was clearly out of control and I was worried it would tip over. I saw Julian leaping off the side before we crashed through a low rock wall and into the bush that stopped us.

It was a relief to stop uninjured. As we came back to the road, the mamas of the village began wailing and ran towards us crying hysterically and hugging each of us who emerged alive. Julian had landed badly and dislocated his knee, which fortunately had snapped back into position. People swarmed around him as he sat there in shock. Eventually we bandaged him up and treated his abrasions. He and Elsa waited for a stretcher to carry him down the mountain and the rest of us set off on foot with women carrying our backpacks on their heads.

Actually the walk down was very pleasant, not the ordeal we had dreaded. Having the women to carry our luggage certainly made it an easy trip, even in the wrong footwear. We were foolish to insist on a vehicle. A steep and sometimes slippery road and the odd blister were more than compensated for by beautiful trees and a river stop where we cooled our feet and drank coconut juice.

The river was also where the stretcher caught up with us. Julian would need some recuperation and would not be able to continue his tour of PNG as planned but was otherwise in good spirits. Rudolph and Oniel both attributed his injury to him jumping too soon—he should have held on or leapt into the bush as Oniel did! In this version, the driver did a good job (yes ...) to steer away from the slope into bush that stopped us and didn't damage the vehicle.



Figure 123. The author at the end of the ‘unexperience’.

Source. Photo courtesy of Dr Georgina Phillips, 30 May 2009.

But that’s not how the white people saw the risks: the more we think about it, the more incredible it seems that this was the only injury. Someone could have so easily been killed or seriously hurt with just a slightly different turn of the wheel or slip of the road. We imagine the horror of bodies (ours and our companions) thrown into trees, crushed under the truck, or of trying to stabilise someone’s neck, instead of knee.

The village will not remember the accident in terms of risks and possible disasters that didn’t happen. I asked Rudolph about sorcery (in fact we had joked about it the previous day) and it was clear that others would believe that the accident was sorcery and therefore connected to the conflict of the weekend. Indeed, Rudolph himself believed that sorcery was involved (‘There are many strange powers operating in this area’). He says they had tested the Land Rover’s brakes the previous night, so the malfunction was not the result of the condition of the vehicle or its overloading. That leaves malicious sorcery as the only remaining explanation. No doubt this event will fuel the animosities of the *singsing* with sorcery accusations and make future Kangal festivals impossible.

The son of one of PNG's most famous artists sells his works outside the Madang Resort. Several have the caption, 'Papua New Guinea, Land of the Unexpected: Experience the Unexperience [*sic*]'. The Bandit *singsing* was certainly a tourism unexperience.

References

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