

## Chapter 9

# Black Powder, White Magic: European Armaments and Sorcery in Early Mekeo and Roro Encounters

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“Actions speak louder than words”, they say – especially if you are holding a gun. As a Euro-American I take this to mean there is something self-evidently coercive about the use and effects of firearms beyond their ability to wound and kill. And, as a social scientist, I recognise that the same is usually held to be true with regard to the deployment of “physical force” generally. Where non-Western people’s responses to tokens of Western culture such as money, Christian missionisation, literacy, Hershey bars, Adidas tennis shoes, rock music and the internet seem necessarily variable and unpredictable, owing at least partly to the choices afforded by people’s pre-existing cultural schema, physical force by definition allows little scope for subjects’ volition.

In this chapter, I question the role that physical force, primarily in the form of guns and firearms, played in Pacific Islanders’ experiences of Europeans in the earliest phases of the colonial establishment of British New Guinea at the end of the nineteenth century. While there might be some interest in examining these claims in relation to the long history of Western political philosophising, I am interested here in the initial meanings that physical force assumed in the particular form of firearms and explosives and specifically for the Mekeo and Roro peoples – Austronesian speakers living on the coast and sub-coast at the western margin of the Central Province of Papua New Guinea, some 150 kilometres to the northwest of Port Moresby. I suspect these meanings were instrumental in setting many of the parameters distinctive to subsequent interactions with subsequent colonial agents. Did guns and explosives have the same meanings for Mekeo and Roro, to whom they were directed, as for the Europeans who deployed them? If not, what were those meanings? For I do not accept that they were at all self-evident, either to Mekeo and Roro or to the Europeans. And, if Mekeo and Roro understandings of guns and armaments differed from the colonists’ presuppositions about the compulsive character of physical force, what might this imply about villagers’ responses to the colonial presence and their own agency? Eventually, how might the subsequent history of Mekeo/Roro-European encounters be re-read? Also, given the salience of guns

in early Mekeo/Roro contact history, how did the asymmetry of their use and possession affect actors' perceptions of their own and others' identities and capacities?

Of course the written records of the early European colonial agents' experiences provide the most concrete available evidence of villagers' contemporaneous responses to Western armaments. But those Europeans' ethnographic comprehensions of Mekeo and Roro generally, and of endogenous Mekeo/Roro perceptions of *them and their guns* specifically, were necessarily very limited. Thus, I bring to bear on the events of a century ago, my own ethnographic knowledge of modern-day Mekeo and Roro cultural understandings accumulated over the past thirty-five years, to illustrate the value of conjoining ethnographic with historical approaches. For, in doing so, I believe it becomes possible to gain additional insight into subsequent colonial encounters up to the present. Of course, subsequent investigations may eventually challenge these findings but, for the time being, I believe the analysis which follows constitutes a considerable enhancement of our existing perceptions of the initial encounters between Mekeo and Roro peoples with European colonialists.

It just so happens that the role of physical force in these encounters is not at all straightforward in the existing historical accounts. Mekeo historian Michelle Stephen, who examined all of the early patrol and government reports held in the archives, reports numerous instances where guns and other firearms were employed by colonists, particularly government officers, in the first decade of official penetrations, even noting a few instances of "disturbances" and "revolutions" against colonial agents (1974, 63–115). Regardless, she concludes that there was a "smooth establishment of European control," and on the basis of villagers' oral traditions that she collected in the early 1970s the newcomers' military powers were accepted as signs of their "superiority" (92). This, she argues, allowed for a "reinforcement of certain underlying indigenous values" – namely, those associated with hereditary chieftainship and sorcery – enabling the "traditional structure of leadership to adjust without a great deal of difficulty to the imposition of control by a higher authority" (114). Noticeable change in Mekeo local authority structures for Stephen, therefore, did not arise until the time of World War II and its aftermath (1974: xxiii, 1979: 88). "This illusion of stability and permanence was to survive several decades of slow, seemingly unimportant changes" (1974, 114). In other words, Mekeo cultural values and social institutions, being already highly hierarchical, facilitated an easy and barely noticeable transition to colonial domination with relatively little reliance on interventions through physical force. Since colonial officials tended to administer their policies as far as practicable through local leaders, it was little more complicated than a gradual and barely perceptible augmentation of chiefs' and sorcerers' pre-existing powers (xxiii).

However, the Danish ethnographer Steen Bergendorff, who has poured over the same materials, has reached essentially the opposite conclusion (1996, 92–130). To establish peace, he writes, colonial authorities used physical force through the deployment of heavily armed police and patrol officers. Also, contra Stephen, he stresses the numerous cases of villagers' organised resistance to physical domination particularly in the decade 1890–1900 (94–5, 98, 100). And with reference to Sahlins (1981, 1985), rather than a mutual accommodation to the seemingly obvious superiority of colonial agents he argues that: "The encounter between the government and the Mekeo population was no mere clash of cultures, in the form of different mythopractices, or even differences in fighting techniques, or articulated exchanges of meaning; it was a case of the use of brute force and technological superiority by the Europeans" (1996, 102; see also 1996, 9–10, 94, 128, 129–30).

Thus, for Stephen, villagers' capacities to interpret and accept the Europeans' imposition of physical force was culturally conditioned by their prior experiences of chiefly and sorcery domination, especially as the Europeans, soon after arriving, tended to rely on local clan and village chiefs for enforcement of their policies. But, for Bergendorff, the events surrounding the arrival of missionaries and government officials was principally the consequence of an asymmetrical distribution of physical force which all parties understood more or less in the same terms, leaving little scope for Mekeo agency or cultural nuance. From these two perspectives, it is not at all clear what the roles of physical force *or* of cultural perceptions of the imposition of physical force were in the early encounters of Mekeo with European colonists.

Nevertheless, Stephen's and Bergendorff's otherwise discrepant interpretations do agree on one key point: that villagers' perceptions of the physical force imposed upon them coincided with the assumptions and intentions of the European colonists who did the imposing or who have subsequently done the interpreting. For Stephen, the Europeans' obvious military superiority was sufficiently similar to the chiefly domination with which they were already familiar that it facilitated a relatively easy acceptance of the colonial authorities. For Bergendorff, the facts of Europeans' military superiority through firearms were also obvious to the chiefs, sorcerers and warriors who resisted them. Neither Stephen nor Bergendorff, in other words, have allowed for the possibility that the meanings involved in the imposition of physical force may have been projected and perceived in altogether different terms by the various actors, and that these alternate understandings may have contributed significantly to the trajectory of early and subsequent events.<sup>1</sup>

There is an even more fundamental ethnological and historical issue at stake here. Mekeo and their coastal neighbours, the Roro, have been accepted as among the most hierarchical chiefly societies of Melanesia, and also two of the more

sorcery-ridden (Haddon 1901, 262; Seligmann 1910, 278; Stephen 1974: xx, 15, 1979, 1995, 1996; Hau`ofa 1981; Monsell-Davis 1981, iii, xi; Godelier 1991; Bergendorff 1996; Scaglione 1996). Stephen and Bergendorff, like most other observers, presume that the systems of chieftainship and sorcery which were recorded by the early observers shortly after the imposition of European colonial domination at the end of the nineteenth century (and which tended in several respects to persist up until at least the 1970s) were more or less indicative of the state of affairs prior to European encounters. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Mosko 1999, 2005) and as I shall document below, there is considerable evidence that various exogenous factors introduced early on contributed to the very rapid and substantial escalation or inflation of both chiefly and sorcery power and authority in the wake of initial European encounters. The systems subsequently observed and taken as “traditional” by European observers were ones greatly changed by their own actions and intentions as well as villagers’ interpretations of and responses to them. In this chapter I elaborate on the role that Europeans’ superior physical force played in those dramatic transformations.

I shall attempt to shed some new light on these matters through consideration of two narratives of early encounters between Mekeo/Roro and Europeans, which, incidentally, Stephen and Bergendorff cite but basically disregard<sup>2</sup> – on the one hand, the journal of the Italian naturalist Luigi d’Albertis (1881), describing his experiences over eight months in 1875 living among Roro and Mekeo some fifteen years before they were “pacified” by government forces; on the other, C.A.W. Monckton’s (1920) account of his experiences as a Resident Magistrate stationed among Mekeo for four months in 1898, just eight years following the start of the British campaign to establish colonial peace in the area. Certain patterns that arise from the juxtaposition of these two accounts, separated by a generation or so, are, I argue, indicative of some of the parameters that were set early on and that continued to affect subsequent Mekeo–European relations at least through to the end of the colonial period. It might be worth mentioning in passing that certain distinctive elements of these parameters resemble details of Sahlins’ account of Hawaiians’ initial perceptions of Captain James Cook and members of his crew as deities (Sahlins 1981, 1985, 1995).

## Background

In the proto-contact era, Mekeo peoples were living much as they still do in consolidated villages along the Angabanga and Biarua waterways of the coastal plain at the western end of what is nowadays the Central Province of Papua New Guinea. They were bounded from the coast by a narrow strip of land occupied by Roro peoples, with whom they shared many features of language and culture. A key aspect of both Mekeo and Roro social organisation from pre-contact times to the present has been a complex system of chieftainship and official sorcery. Among Mekeo, every patrilineal clan ideally consists of patrilineages, each

specialised in the performance of one of four politico-ritual functions: peace-chief, peace-sorcerer, war-chief, war-sorcerer. Ideally the most genealogically senior male member of a lineage would be installed as either the chief or sorcerer of the appropriate category, heir to the secret ritual powers of the lineage ancestors traced all the way back to the Mekeo creator deity, A`aisa (Akaisa among North Mekeo, Oa Lope among Roro). Details of Roro social organisation and politico-ritual specialisation differ from Mekeo but only slightly (Seligmann 1910; Monsell-Davis 1981).

The powers and authority of indigenous clan leaders were greatly enhanced following initial European contacts as a result of the complex interaction of various factors, including the introduction of epidemics of foreign diseases, a consequent increase in the intensity of inter-tribal warfare, and the imposition of numerous colonial policies including “pacification,” Christian (Catholic) missionisation, the appointment of chiefs as Village Constables, and regulations for carrying out government patrols, for burying corpses in cemeteries and for suppressing the practice of sorcery (Mosko 1999, 2005). The epidemics of pneumonia/bronchitis and measles in 1874–75 and typhoid fever, bronchitis/pneumonia and dysentery in 1896–98 are directly relevant to the events discussed below (D’Albertis 1881, 28; Blayney 1898a: 52–3, 1898b: 86, 90, 1900: 68; British New Guinea Colonial Report 1898, 26–7; 1899a: 59–60, 1899b: 39–40, 1900: 22; British New Guinea Annual Report 1898a: xxiii, 1898b: 52–3, 1898c: 86, 90, 1898d: xxxiv–xxxv; MacGregor 1898a: xvi, xvii, xviii, 1898b: xvi, xxxv; Seligmann 1910, 196; Papua Annual Report 1912, 156; Monckton 1920, 124–6; Dupeyrat 1935, 118; Oram 1977).

By all ethnographic accounts of Mekeo, the specialised powers of the four categories of clan official and, for that matter, all other categories of indigenous “magic” or “cleverness” (*etsifa*), consisted in rigorous bodily preparations and abstentions, the manipulation of numerous charms (ancestral bodily relics), various “medicines” (*fuka*), and the recitation of chants or spells which instructed spiritual beings (*tsiange*) to perform the desired actions. Of particular relevance to issues of physical force, all knowledge of homicidal killing, whether in war or in peace, required the appropriate kind of “sorcery,” for in “traditional” Mekeo and Roro cultures there apparently was (and still is) no recognition of death from natural causes. Most forms of death from sickness and poisoning as well as snakebite were attributed to official peace-sorcery (*ungaunga*), which is effective through the manipulation of various categories of spirits, especially spirits of the dead and the culture hero and creator deity, Akaisa. Several specific illnesses, such as tetanus, were attributed to knowledgeable specialists’ secret control of non-human “bush spirits” (*faifai*). Deaths through violence – the wielding of spears, clubs or bows and arrows in warfare, or attack by wild pigs, cassowaries, crocodiles or falling tree branches – were typically attributed to official war-sorcerers (*faika*, *paiha*) and war-chiefs (*iso*, *i`o*) who similarly relied

on manipulation of spirits. Also, the weapons that were regarded as particularly effective in killing were those that had already been successfully used in homicides, as the person wielding the weapon could draw upon the spirits of previously slain victims to assist him. The key point is, it was never enough among Mekeo merely to strike at one's enemy to kill him/her; one had to master all of the ritual ingredients of charms, spells, prayers, medicines, etc., through which spirits were bidden to assist. Thus, homicidal violence was as much a "sorcery" or "magical" skill as killing through the spiritual causation of illness, poison or snakebite.

Finally, as will be apparent in the narratives to follow, guns and other Western armaments figured significantly in initial direct contacts between Mekeo/Roro and Europeans. Unsurprisingly, firearms continued to have a salient role through the remainder of the colonial era. According to my North Mekeo respondents, their ancestors did not themselves acquire shotguns until several decades into the colonial era when the government allocated guns, ammunition and licences to village constables and, later, to other "responsible" men in compensation for their service as carriers on administrative patrols into the mountains. But well before they were allocated shotguns for hunting, villagers evidently presumed that efficacy in the use of firearms required secret knowledge and skills analogous to those they employed with their own weapons. Even today there are men in every North Mekeo village where I have conducted the majority of my enquiries who are expert hunters with shotguns. To be successful at shooting cassowaries, pigs, wallabies, flying foxes, crocodiles, etc., it is not sufficient merely to aim the gun at the quarry and pull the trigger; hunters must employ the spells, medicines, and other techniques to which they are heir in order to enlist the aid of ancestral and other spirits. And to the extent that over the course of Mekeo/Roro colonial history Europeans have demonstrated proficiency with firearms, it has been assumed that they have similarly relied upon the control of spiritual agents much in the manner of the indigenous sorcerers and other ritual adepts.

### **Luigi d'Albertis – "White Magician of the Mountain"**

The record of known contacts between Europeans and the Roro and Mekeo peoples prior to the latter half of the nineteenth century is scanty. Available evidence suggests that initial encounters with explorers were relatively brief and intermittent, but not necessarily inconsequential. It is known that Roro, and very likely Mekeo living inland from them, suffered a devastating epidemic of either smallpox or chickenpox in the late 1860s, well before any Europeans had entered into sustained relations with villagers in the area (Chalmers 1887, 318; Seligmann 1910, 35; Mosko 1973: 66, 2005: 186-99; Oram 1977, 92; Monsell-Davis 1981, 40-2). Oral traditions indicate that the subsequent deaths

were attributed to new kinds of sorcery that resulted in many deaths, not just single attacks as with indigenous peace- sorcery (Mosko 1985, 61, 271n).

The first European to enter into continuous relations with Roro and Mekeo peoples was the Italian naturalist Luigi d'Albertis, who left a fairly detailed and candid account of his daily experiences between 16 March and 8 November 1875 (1881, 223–421). D'Albertis did not arrive alone, however. Besides himself and a Genoese companion, Signor Tomasinelli, he was accompanied by two Cingalese servants (a cook and a preserver of specimens) and sixteen "Polynesians" (actually four men from the New Hebrides, and seven men and five women from New Ireland) (225, 233, 254–5). Soon after their arrival, d'Albertis established his camp on Yule Island opposite the strip of coast inhabited by several communities of Roro and, behind them on the plain toward the mountains, the Mekeo.

As a naturalist, d'Albertis was primarily concerned with the collection of as many specimens as possible of native fauna: insects, marsupials, reptiles, amphibians and, most particularly, birds. To acquire these, d'Albertis relied on three principal techniques. For many species, he bartered with villagers who procured specimens from the bush. Giving some idea of the intensity of these exchanges with local peoples, he reports that after six months, including several trips to inland Roro and Mekeo villages, he had collected "twenty thousand [butterflies], seven hundred reptiles, and a great number of fish, mammalia, and birds" (D'Albertis 1881, 374). Otherwise, he used dynamite exploded in rivers and streams to kill vast numbers of fish (330). And to bring down birds, given that his primary interest was ornithology, d'Albertis regularly used shotguns, as villagers' hunting techniques were inadequate to produce the number and variety of specimens he was seeking. On one mainland outing, for example, he notes: "When I arrived at Bioto, the natives took me to a lagoon, where I found an extraordinary number of waterfowls, among them *Porphyrius*, and *Parras*, water-rails, and ducks. In a couple of hours I killed such a number that I was forced to desist, because the canoe would hold no more" (373).

D'Albertis was personally responsible for all of the shooting and numerous other pyrotechnic demonstrations performed while his party lived among Roro and Mekeo. And the arsenal of weapons he had with him was considerable: twelve shotguns, ten fouling pieces, a double-barrelled rifle "with which explosives may be used," and five six-chambered revolvers (D'Albertis 1881, 254). Only one other member of his party – one of the Cingalese "boys" – knew how to use a rifle. D'Albertis notes: "I try to instruct them in the use of the gun, but most of them are so much afraid of it that my efforts have hitherto been in vain" (255; see also 379). Thus, on practically a daily basis, d'Albertis embarked on shooting and exploding forays either on Yule Island itself or in the grasslands and forests of the mainland. By my count, d'Albertis' text makes explicit

reference to twenty-four separate occasions over eight months wherein he fired his munitions, but it is fairly clear that he was firing his guns or exploding dynamite on a more or less daily basis, which would have been easily detected, to say the least, by the local populace.

But on numerous occasions, d'Albertis relied on his munitions in his direct dealings with villagers. For example, he writes soon after his arrival:

I seized that opportunity to show the natives what sort of things our guns are. I killed two hawks (*Milvius affinis*) with two successive shots. The natives were terrified at the report, but their wonder at seeing the two poor birds fall down from on high was still greater than their fright. I quieted them by signs; and they all then wished to see, touch, and examine the two birds, showing their astonishment by their gestures, their animated chatter, and a peculiar shooting out of their tongues (D'Albertis 1881, 247–8).

Eventually, d'Albertis' relations with the local villagers deteriorated, especially after his entire stock of cargo and supplies was stolen at the end of July – everything except his guns, ammunition and explosives, that is (see below). In the events that followed as he sought the return of his goods, he describes thirteen occasions when he deliberately fired at local peoples either to hit them or merely to impress upon them his ability to wound them. Not surprisingly, his account of these events is replete with references to the fear he had inspired in his neighbours. Several times also he detonated dynamite and “Bengal fire,” i.e., flares emitting steady blue light (*Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2), in people's vicinity – where a few moments earlier people had been standing or sitting – as further demonstrations of his pyrotechnic abilities (D'Albertis 1881, 298, 331, 352–3). In nine further incidents, he relates how he threatened people with his guns if they resisted doing as he instructed them.

As explained above, in light of indigenous assumptions about the skills involved in killing through violence, there can be little doubt that d'Albertis' effectiveness in the use of firearms was perceived by Roro and Mekeo as a competence closely akin to their own notions of *faika* and *iso* war-magic. Also, d'Albertis was not the only European at the time who conspicuously used firearms in villagers' presence. Other parties of Europeans, who laid over on Yule Island to visit him while he was there, customarily participated in shooting forays (see below and D'Albertis 1881, 361–2). Thus, it is likely that the effective use of guns and explosives was perceived by the local peoples as a capacity characteristic of all Europeans and exclusive to them.

However, d'Albertis deliberately employed other tactics to communicate to the local peoples that he was in possession of powers of sorcery that surpassed those of their own peace- and war-sorcerers. In a section subtitled “Rival

Sorcerers", he relates events barely a month into his adventure that suggest he had begun to wear out his welcome:

Several times during the day Oa and his friend Aicci disturbed me with their quarrels, to which I paid little attention; until, thinking perhaps to frighten me, they began to sharpen the points of their spears, and then I changed the cartridges of my revolver and gun. Towards evening they again began to make a disturbance, and soon worked themselves up into a state of excitement against me. Aicci, to insult me, made an insolent gesture with both hands, like one described by Dante in the 'Inferno.' I said nothing, and pretended not to have understood it, although I determined to administer a lesson to the impudent fellow.

In the meantime some unusual occurrence had taken place outside, and one of my men summoned me in haste to Aira's house. I ran, and found the latter, spear in hand, near the stockade behind his house. A huge serpent [D'Albertis' pet python; see below] was trailing itself slowly along the stockade, while Aira was making signs at him. The serpent was looking at him, and from time to time thrusting out his head towards him. My men, who did not know that the snake was tame, tried to kill him before I could prevent them, but fortunately the reptile made its escape. Aira was fuming with rage, and began to vent his wrath by thrusting with his spear at an old cocoa-nut which was lying near his feet. At that moment he looked like a terrible and wrathful sorcerer; but I believe little in such sorcery, and know how to exorcise it. Oa, Aicci, Oona, and the others, were, however, quite dismayed by his wrath, and came to me with threatening gestures and words, insisting that we should depart at once, and camp in the forest. Aira was then evidently a magician; and I determined to become one too, in order to bring him, and all the rest of them, to a sense of duty (D'Albertis 1881, 297–8).

After igniting some gunpowder that he had surreptitiously strewn on the ground, his guests became "terrified, and crying like children", begged him not to kill them. D'Albertis explains:

I told them they had nothing to fear from me if they treated me with respect, but if they repeated their annoyance and insults I most certainly should be revenged. It will hardly be believed, that immediately after the explosion of the powder a violent storm, with lightning and terrific thunder set in; and I greeted every clap of thunder with studied smiles, while the terror of the poor creatures increased with each, as they were fully persuaded that I had invoked the storm (D'Albertis 1881, 299).

The python mentioned here had been taken as a pet by d'Albertis. As he attests, the typical Mekeo and Roro villager is greatly afraid of all snakes. Mekeo classify

pythons as *faifai*, malevolent “bush spirits,” and people who disturb them are thought to be at great risk of contracting *faifai* sickness. A few specialists, such as peace-sorcerers, however, are understood to possess knowledge of either inflicting powerful *faifai* sickness or curing it (Mosko 1985, 30–1, 151). At several points in his narrative, d’Albertis describes how he would impress horrified villagers with his casual intimacy with his pet python, caressing it, allowing it to crawl across his body while he was writing, wrapping it around his torso, kissing it, and so on. From the villagers’ point of view, only an adept in *faifai* sorcery would dare to take such risks.

Just as importantly for his growing renown, on numerous other occasions d’Albertis demonstrated his utter lack of fear of smaller snakes, including poisonous ones, going so far as to skin and preserve many specimens (D’Albertis 1881, 280–1, 284, 298, 311–2, 315, 359, 370, 375, 376, 383). In local Roro and Mekeo understandings, peace-sorcerers are thought to keep poisonous snakes in clay pots, which they use in attacking their victims. These are not merely animal snakes, however; the snakes that sorcerers keep and that kill people are actually ancestral human spirits in snakes’ bodies. Also, the skin of death adders, Papuan black snakes and taipans is used as a powerful *fuka* “medicine” in various categories of peace-sorcery for killing and love magic. There are simply no other cultural uses for poisonous snakes than these types of peace sorcery. Thus, anyone who keeps poisonous snakes in captivity or who seeks to capture their dead bodies is by definition *ungaunga*, a peace-sorcerer. But d’Albertis’ sorcery powers in this context surpassed his peace-sorcerer contemporaries, for on one occasion he publicly ate the flesh of a nineteen-foot python he had shot, remarking upon the tastiness of its flesh and the soup made from it. People nowadays regard the meat of snakes as perhaps the most “dirty” of all meats, with the exception of human flesh. Contrary to villagers’ expectations, d’Albertis is not struck down with sickness or death (312).

For the sake of brevity, I shall list several further indications from my own ethnographic data and d’Albertis’ account which leave little doubt that villagers perceived him at the time as a particularly skilled and dangerous sorcerer:

- The indigenous counterpart of d’Albertis’ intense interest in natural history is the entire spectrum of Mekeo and Roro “magic” and “sorcery” practices consisting in an intimate knowledge of a vast array of *fuka* medicines obtained from animals and plants of the bush, each of which is understood to embody the mystical essence of a particular spirit being. Anyone who goes about seeking animals and plants from the bush nowadays is by definition seeking powerful medicine ingredients for one or another kind of magical or sorcery practice.
- I have been told on numerous occasions that the sorcery for capturing birds of paradise (*opo ungaunga*) is the “hottest” or most powerful type of

peace-sorcery Mekeo possess, requiring greater (i.e. more *tsiapu* “hot” and *kapula* “strong”) skills than are needed to kill fellow human beings with illness through spirit attack. D’Albertis’ (1881, 279) ability to shoot down birds of paradise from the forest canopy with his shotgun was testimony to his possession of an extremely powerful type of peace sorcery.

- More than once, feuding villagers tried to recruit d’Albertis to employ his unique powers against their enemies (1881, 308, 355).
- Villagers nowadays and, I presume, in d’Albertis’ time, argue that the only truly effective source for curing a particular malady is the sorcerer who is causing it. At one point, a number of villagers approached him to cure their ailments, and he attempts to do so (1881, 309).
- At one point, d’Albertis boasted of possessing the ability to control rain and drought, as noted above, when he claims to cause thunder. These are particularly powerful ritual skills monopolised among Roro by weather specialists (1881, 331; see also Seligmann 1910; Hau`ofa 1981, 36; Monsell-Davis 1981, 228–30).
- In addition to the pyrotechnics already noted, d’Albertis challenged local sorcerers numerous times to surpass his mysterious abilities which included the harmless “drinking [of] fire” (alcohol) and threatening to set the sea on fire while deftly brandishing white sheets and umbrellas and singing Verdi arias (1881, 257, 264, 321, 397).
- Stephen’s (1974, 84, 86) and my own (Mosko 1985, 271) informants in the 1970s reported that their ancestors’ initial impressions of Europeans was that they were shape-changing *fai fai*, not human beings.
- Over the course of his visit, d’Albertis progressively acquired a limited ability for conversing in the local language, and at some point he abandoned his European clothes to wear the standard loincloth of male attire (1881, 338). These accommodations to local expectations of human behaviour would have probably facilitated interpretations of events surrounding d’Albertis’ presence in accord with prevailing cultural assumptions.
- During his stay, d’Albertis received visits from representatives of numerous Roro and Mekeo villages who apparently had heard of him and his exploits. Thus it can be assumed that his presence created something of a regional sensation.
- The fact that the thieves of d’Albertis’ belongings left behind all of his munitions, and nothing else, is testimony to the fact that they were locally regarded as equivalent to “hot” sorcerers’ paraphernalia, as dangerous to anyone who is not knowledgeable in their use, as an indigenous sorcerer’s bag with stones, medicines, ancestral relics and so on.

Additional evidence strongly suggests that Roro and Mekeo alive at the time had good reason to suspect the presence amongst them of an extraordinary being, human or otherwise, in possession of unprecedented powers for causing illness

and death. As indicated above, following d'Albertis' arrival in 1875 the region to the west of Port Moresby including Mekeo/Roro was subjected to devastating epidemics of pneumonia/bronchitis and measles. D'Albertis himself makes numerous references to the prevalence of illness and death among the local inhabitants, occasionally expressing annoyance at all the coughing around him (1881, 265, 286, 371). At one point just a few weeks after his arrival, for example, he complains of passing a "sleepless night, owing to the continual coughing, crying, and shrieking on the part of the children, old people, dogs, and pigs" (entry of 28 April 1881; 306). During his stay, passing missionary or other European vessels landed on Yule Island to visit or deliver his mail and supplies at least six times (265, 315, 331, 361–2, 381, 387). It seems that the outbreak of respiratory illness that swept through the region was introduced either by the arrival of his own party on 16 March or by the London Missionary Society (LMS) missionary vessel, the *Ellengowan*, that arrived from Port Moresby on 26 March and on which all of the Polynesian missionaries were infected with "fever" (265). Oram (1977, 91) claims that the epidemic of measles that spread along the same stretch of coastal Papua later that year was also brought by the same vessel. Numerous elderly respondents whom I have interviewed over the past thirty-five years have indicated that their ancestors, alive at the time of the early epidemics, attributed them directly to Europeans or, at least, to the approximate time of Europeans' arrival in the area.

D'Albertis' stay on Yule Island thus coincided with the ravaging of the local population by disease epidemics of unprecedented scale that villagers would certainly have explained in terms of sorcery causation. And there, amidst this catastrophe, was d'Albertis doing his very best to convince everyone that he was a sorcerer in possession of exceptional powers of killing. As elsewhere in Melanesia with missionaries (e.g. Douglas 1989; Jolly 1996), it seems that d'Albertis' hosts attributed the illness and dying to him directly. Hence, as evidence of their agency at the time, villagers' several vigorous attempts to frustrate his various plans, to recruit his malevolent powers to their projects, to encourage him to leave, and even plotting to kill him (D'Albertis 1881; Chalmers and Gill 1885, 181–2; Chatterton 1969, 285; cf. Stephen 1974, 66; Monsell-Davis 1981, 47–50).

Unquestionably, for Roro and Mekeo actors at the time, d'Albertis' rather extreme deployment of "physical force" could only have been comprehended as evidence of new and enhanced kinds of sorcery ritual for both war and peace. However, there is considerable evidence that d'Albertis' impression as a white sorcerer extended beyond those Roro and Mekeo whom he encountered directly. Over eight months he had ample opportunity to set the mould for how other Europeans similarly equipped with guns were seen, at least in the eyes of villagers. But also, with the rapid publication and translation into English of his memoirs, it is very likely that d'Albertis was widely read by those Europeans

who arrived in Roro and Mekeo soon after to establish British and Australian colonial governments, Christian missions and businesses. To them specifically, d'Albertis advised:

In the midst of people who have never seen or heard of a white man, the most potent means of defence possessed by the latter is to act upon their superstitious fears. Courage avails much in most circumstances, though not in all; the natives dared not attack me face to face, nor perhaps even unawares; but when I was alone and asleep, surrounded by them, what availed courage? They could have planted a spear in my heart, or split my head with an axe or a club. How, then, can a man defend himself when he is asleep? The answer is simple enough. Make them believe you are something more than they; that you are not made of the same flesh and blood; make them as much afraid of you sleeping as waking; in a word, inspire them with a wholesome dread of approaching you at all. If there is an art my ignorance of which I regretted more than another in New Guinea, it was that of sleight of hand (1881, 397).

### **C.A.W. Monckton – “Charmer of Rifles”**

At least one subsequent European colonist seems to have taken d'Albertis' advice to heart: Assistant Resident Magistrate C.A.W. Monckton, author of *Some Experiences of a New Guinea Resident Magistrate* (1920), which has been described as “quite likely the most read book ever written on New Guinea” (Lutton 1972, 5). Monckton was assigned to act as Government Agent in a relieving capacity at Mekeo Station, adjacent to Veifa`a village, between May and September 1898, more than twenty years after d'Albertis' departure. Upon close reading of the available documents including Monckton's narrative of his experiences, those several months emerge as among the most turbulent of early European contacts, not the least because of Monckton's considerable deployment of both military-cum-sorcery forces whilst a particularly virulent epidemic swept through the region.

Before proceeding to consider Monckton's narrative and exploits, questions about their veracity must be addressed. It is my understanding that some Pacific historians have more or less dismissed Monckton's account of his experiences, published a decade and a half after he left the colonial service, chiefly because of the extent to which the events he described seem consistently to revolve around him personally and thus to greatly exaggerate the effects of his actions over those of others (Hank Nelson, pers. comm. 2004; see also Lutton 1972, 36, 59; Nelson 1976).

No doubt Monckton reveals himself to be a man of considerable hubris, very much taken with his own self-importance. But it is exactly those personal qualities of Monckton's, which, I believe, fit in with the circumstances and

events that he describes as well as with my analysis of them presented here. In *New Guinea: The Last Unknown*, Souter portrays Monckton as “The Veteran,” epitomising colonial agents of the initial period of British administration:

Monckton always took the most direct and violent course of action. If he suspected a man of malingering, he prescribed an emetic; if a native met with on patrol refused to disclose the nearest source of water, Monckton’s police stuffed his mouth with salt and waited until thirst got the better of him; if carriers refused to work, the police beat them with steel rifle-cleaners; and if a village defied his orders, Monckton’s policy was, in his own words, ‘shoot and loot’ ... ‘The only way you can stop these beggars hurting their neighbours with a club is to bang them with a club’ (1963, 84).

Moreover, Monckton apparently modelled himself on his superior, Lieutenant Governor William MacGovern, “a man of great physical strength ... the most formidable man that he [Monckton] had ever met” (Souter 1963, 60). In this circumstance, it seems reasonable to assume that Monckton’s excesses were not entirely atypical. The sort of character who would compose a text such as Monckton’s, I argue, was quite likely the kind of person who would have acted in the ways described.

Lutton, who attempted to sort out systematically the fact from the fantasy in Monckton’s accounts, is in accord with this view. She concludes:

Monckton drew extensively on published records, mainly those reports of his expeditions that had appeared in [British New Guinea] Annual Reports. ... The only difference is that anecdotes have been thrown in as they have occurred ... Nevertheless, despite the constant exaggeration of his own importance, *Some Experiences* and *Last Days in New Guinea* are on the whole reasonably careful attempts to write of events as he saw them (Lutton 1972, 88).

As for the relation of Monckton’s descriptions and Mekeo and Roro villagers’ experiences of the same events, she writes:

Some of the most enjoyable parts of Monckton’s books are the anecdotes in which he described the activity of the police and other Papuans. There is no reason to doubt the truth of the actual incidents, but Monckton’s emphasis of his own importance in them and his interpretation of the motives of the Papuans was erroneous (Lutton 1972, 35–6).

It is precisely Monckton’s misinterpretations of Mekeo and Roro actions (and possibly their motives) that this analysis aims to clarify. In any event, Monckton’s record of his observations among Mekeo and Roro is directly relevant to the

present discussion, as it is virtually certain that he read d'Albertis' text and modelled many of his own actions and subsequent writings upon it.

## After d'Albertis, Before Monckton

Before examining Monckton's narrative in detail, it will be necessary to outline the course of Mekeo–European encounters that led up to his arrival following d'Albertis' departure a generation earlier.

The same ship that finally carried d'Albertis away from Yule Island near the end of 1875 left behind two English botanists, James and Thorngren, who several months later were killed by Roro, apparently in a dispute over payment for bird feathers. Their deaths and that of one of their assailants seem to have been conditioned, however, by villagers' continuing hatred toward d'Albertis. Several commentators have suggested that the deaths of James and Thorngren may have indicated to local peoples that Europeans were not spirits but human beings (Chalmers and Gill 1885, 181–2, 270, 220–3; Clune 1942, 95; Stephen 1974, 66; Monsell-Davis 1981, 47–50).

Over ensuing years, the LMS and Sacred Heart (SHM) missionaries intensified their activities in the area, which have been variously documented elsewhere (Dupeyrat 1935; Bergendorff 1966; Stephen 1974; Waldersee 1983, 1995). The Protestants began placing Polynesian missionaries in several Roro villages in 1882 and the Catholics set up a base on Yule Island in 1885–86, soon beginning their push inland to establish friendly relations with villagers there. At some early point, the SHM priests and lay brothers established the practice of devoting Saturdays to boisterous hunting forays into the bush with their guns (Monckton 1920, 141–3). The name for Saturday in North Mekeo is *auli tsina*, “steel” or “metal day,” referring to the ongoing practice among villagers of weekly hunting retreats to the bush for meat. Also in the 1880s, the first of numerous European prospectors and traders in sandalwood, copra and rubber entered the area (Monsell-Davis 1981, 50, 52), who, it can safely be presumed, conspicuously carried firearms for their own protection, especially before the arrival of government forces. The British colonial government did not take an active role in the area until 1890, when the administrator himself, Sir William MacGregor, led a punitive expedition deep into Mekeo territory to “pacify” the internecine fighting between various Roro and Mekeo groups (MacGregor 1890a, 1890b, 1890c; Stephen 1974, 66–71). It is clear that he and the police contingent that accompanied him were heavily armed, and that on several occasions they fired their guns to demonstrate to villagers their command of superior force.

Soon after the local fighting was suppressed, the British established its administrative post, Mekeo Station, near one of the larger inland villages, Veifa`a, and in the vicinity of Amoamo village near the boundary of the previously warring tribes. Faced initially with violent resistance from villagers as regards

the latter purchase, MacGregor had to despatch an armed party including twelve constables to secure the land at gunpoint (MacGregor 1892). For most of the next several years, Mekeo Station was run by the Agent for Mekeo, a German: Kowald. Consistent with MacGregor's prior actions, Kowald implemented government policies by appointing chiefs to become "Village Constables" or "VCs" and became himself regarded as a chief. Apparently, Mekeo Station was fortified and well armed with a contingent of native police besides Kowald. Interestingly, in light of villagers' experiences with d'Albertis, James and Thorngren, Kowald was a botanist and horticulturalist and he dedicated several acres of station grounds to experimenting on the suitability of various plants for the conditions on the Mekeo plain (Kowald 1893, 1894, 1897: 78; MacGregor 1897b; Monckton 1920, 117; Stephen 1974, 77–8). Needless to say, Kowald's careful attentions with exotic plants would have been viewed by villagers as corresponding closely with their own magical specialists' manipulations of secret *fuka* "medicines." Similarly, as Catholic missionaries established themselves in the various Roro and Mekeo villages, they planted food gardens with numerous exotic species (see below) (MacGregor 1894c, 44).

Official reports suggest that Kowald was warmly supported by local villagers who contributed considerable labour over the first several months in building the compound and assisting with road and garden work. By September 1891, however, various tensions in the relations between missionaries, prospectors and villagers themselves resulted in the members of a few villages rebelling against Kowald and his forces and attacking their old enemies, killing several. On numerous occasions as well, villagers' hostilities toward the missionaries and the government were met with arms and gunfire, with one man killed and several villagers shot and wounded (MacGregor 1893a, 1893b, 1893c: xvi–xviii; 1894c, 43). The matter was of sufficient seriousness that it drew MacGregor back from Port Moresby with a large armed force to quell the disturbances.

Relations did not greatly improve thereafter, however, as the area was ravaged by new epidemics of introduced diseases – scarlet fever and influenza – lasting from 1891 to 1894 (Kowald 1893, 91; MacGregor 1894a, 15–16; Winter 1896, xv). Undoubtedly these deaths were explained by villagers as the result of large-scale peace sorcery – what my contemporary informants claim refer to as *okauka ungaunga* "everyone (dies) sorcery". For villagers in those times and still today, it was imperative that surviving relatives watch over the graves in front of or underneath their houses so they could protect the corpses from sorcerers, who relied on rotting, bloody, human flesh for further killing. To counteract the spread of the epidemics, however, government passed regulations requiring villages to clear cemeteries away from villages, forcing people to bury their dead where, in the view of the latter, sorcerers would have easy access to them. And as noted above, it had eventually occurred in the minds of many Mekeo and Roro that these new kinds of sorcery-death were associated with the arrival of

Europeans. During 1891–94, therefore, relations between Kowald and Mekeo/Roro deteriorated primarily over the government's enforcement of the burial regulations (Kowald 1893: 90, 1894; MacGregor 1894b: xix, 1897a: xviii; Bramell 1898, 62) and its inability to remove the sorcerers, whom villagers apparently were blaming for the deaths (MacGregor 1898b, xvi).

Also in the same period, villagers mounted increasing resistance to supplying labour to Kowald. At first they were paid in tobacco, salt, steel tools, etc., for their assistance in clearing roads and carrying on patrols, but from 1894 villagers were required to work for the government without compensation. On several occasions, people deserted their villages at Kowald's or the police's approach, and there are reports of other "disturbances." As the situation intensified, in May 1896 a priest warned Kowald that a "revolution" was brewing over the regulations for road clearing (MacGregor 1897a: xxii, 1897b: 58, 1898a: xvi, 1898b: xvi; Kowald 1897, 79).<sup>3</sup>

The situation reached a crisis point in the months following December 1896 when Kowald, away in the Gulf District, was killed while handling a stick of dynamite (MacGregor 1898a, xvii, xxv). According to official reports, Mekeo and Roro took Kowald's death to signify the end of government domination. Thus, when Kowald's replacement, Bramell, arrived in January 1897 accompanied by police reinforcements, he found that the district had slipped beyond government control. People were refusing to work on the roads or carry for mission or government patrols, and there were incidents of villagers assaulting police (MacGregor 1897a: xvii, 1898b: xvi; Bramell 1898, 62; Blayney 1898b, 86).

This "irritation" and "discontent" was intensified in August 1897, when news spread across the district that two Mekeo carriers on a government patrol into the mountains had died and the others had suffered severe privations (Blayney 1898b, 86). Whenever Bramell or other government agents subsequently approached a Roro or Mekeo village, residents fled to the bush for fear they would be recruited as carriers. In desperation, Bramell spent several weeks touring all villages in the district unsuccessfully trying to recruit carriers, putting those who refused in irons – actions described by the Administrator, MacGregor, as "irregular" (1897a, xvii). Many who were recruited, however, deserted while on patrol, and Bramell's police were assaulted while they continued. Report reached Bramell and other officials that villagers were hostile to the government and were conspiring to attack patrols or Mekeo Station itself (Blayney 1898b, 86–7, 89; Monckton 1920, 113).

The government's policy of returning convicted sorcerers to their communities after they had served their jail terms contributed even further at this time to villagers' disaffection (Winter 1898, 74, 76–7). During 1897 and early 1898 the whole region was subjected to two deadly epidemics: first an outbreak of

bronchitis or pneumonia and then, toward the end of the year, by dysentery. The bronchitis epidemic apparently caused a large number of deaths. At Waima, the largest of the Roro settlements, reportedly 50 of a population of 1,050 died (Blayney 1898b, 90; Winter 1898, 75). Many more died in late and early 1898 across the district when the dysentery epidemic erupted (Blayney 1898b, 90; see below). As with prior outbreaks of foreign disease, these and later epidemics were explained in indigenous terms as new types of sorcery (Mosko 2005).

In September, Bramell wrote to Port Moresby for police reinforcements, but when they were not forthcoming immediately he travelled to Port Moresby and returned with a contingent of twenty special constables to quell the disturbance. In October, joined by Resident Magistrate Blayney, Bramell with his police and jailer toured all the villages of the district arresting thirty-five “sorcerers” – i.e. any man who was caught with what appeared to be “sorcery implements” stored in his house – and transported them to Port Moresby (Blayney 1898b, 86–7). The suspected sorcery objects and all weapons the police could find, regardless of whether they were intended for good or evil purposes, were publicly burned in the centre of each village. Without discriminating between harmful and beneficial ritual forms, Bramell’s actions amounted to removing villagers’ primary means of defending themselves against sorcery, their own or foreigners’.

In the view of MacGregor in Port Moresby, Bramell had acted “with far too great precipitancy,” and most of the presumed sorcerers were released (MacGregor 1898b, xv). Eventually, in May 1898, Bramell was reassigned to clerical duties under the Resident Magistrate in Port Moresby (Blayney 1898b, 89; MacGregor 1898b, xv-xvi; Monckton 1920, 112–3).

### **Bramell’s Stockade, Sorcerers, Deadly Snakes and Monckton’s Charmed Rifles**

It was into this highly charged scene on 31 May 1898 that our second protagonist, Assistant Resident Magistrate Monckton, entered to relieve Bramell as Government Agent (Blayney 1898b, 89). Monckton’s view of Mekeo and Roro was that they were “a cowardly, treacherous, and cruel lot, much under the influence of sorcerers, and averse to control by the Government” (1920, 113).

Upon his arrival at Mekeo Station, Monckton found Bramell secluding himself in his bedroom, with tables encircling his bed and loaded guns placed on top of them to confront possible attack from all directions (1920, 113–4). Bramell explained that sorcerers had been climbing over the stockade at night, leaving poisonous snakes around the compound and in his house and bed, firing arrows over the stockade walls and poisoning his food. He also claimed that local sorcerers had killed by snakebite three of his “boys” who were fetching his mail from the coast. It was apparently these attacks that triggered his previous call

to Moresby for reinforcements to arrest the thirty-odd sorcerers he suspected of attacking him.

At a later point in his narrative, Monckton provides additional relevant information regarding the situation left to him by Bramell (Monckton 1920, 128–9). Through station gossip, he learned that members of his armed constabulary had also conspired to kill Bramell. The plan was that all of the police were to fire upon Bramell on the parade ground during inspection, but apparently only one man raised his rifle and shot, missing by some distance. Bramell did not report the incident to his superiors in Port Moresby because he was already in trouble with them, which was confirmed soon afterward with his removal, and he feared being blamed for the incident himself. Apparently, Monckton's discovery of Bramell's actions in this regard led to a breakdown in his own relationship with Bramell (128–9). I would suggest also that the breakdown in Bramell's relations with the local peoples contributed to the deterioration of his relations with his own police; namely, the poisonous snakes that villagers had released in the compound presented a serious threat to the native constables. And inasmuch as some of those police were themselves Mekeo from neighbouring villages, there is every reason to expect some of them would have viewed any deaths by snakebite in their midst in the same terms as the locals: as the result of peace-sorcery. Recall, as well, that three of Bramell's "boys" had died of snakebite while delivering the mail from the coast. Thus, Monckton was faced not only with rebellion from the local Mekeo sorcerers; he also had to deal with a rebellious police detachment which, in villagers' eyes, was itself in possession of powerful (firearm) sorcery.

Soon after Bramell's departure, a "sorcerer" was again detected scaling the compound wall leaving several snakes behind (Monckton 1920, 114). To stop these visitations, Monckton collected the guns of the sentries and other police – who, again, included several Mekeo recruited from neighbouring villages – and replaced the heavy-gauge lead shot with smaller "blue-stone" shotgun cartridges. Apparently, the heavier shot flew straight, but the police were either unskilled in their aim or intentionally missing their targets. Monckton's blue-stone, however, hit a wider target which he strategically exploited. "Now, I explained to the men, who hated the sorcerers as thoroughly as did Bramell, 'I'm going to play sorcery against sorcery; I have charmed these cartridges, so that if you hold your rifle firmly, take plenty of time in aiming at a sorcerer at night, and he is a true sorcerer, you can't miss him'" (114). Then he instructed four of his men to lie flat on their backs each facing one of the four walls of the compound, able then to detect the entry of bodies climbing over. When two intruders were later seen scaling the walls, the sentries shot and hit them both, wounding them, but not seriously enough to prevent their climbing back over. "For weeks after this, we were untroubled by nocturnal visitors; and by every

one on the Station ... the plan was regarded as a gigantic success. My fame as a charmer of rifles, for use against sorcerers, spread throughout the land" (115).

Clearly, Monckton was exploiting villagers' perceptions established since the time of d'Albertis that European mastery of firearms consisted in knowledge and practices analogous to their own categories of sorcery. And in subsequent events, Monckton frequently sought to reinforce the impression that he was a sorcerer in unique possession of powers sufficient to outdo his Mekeo and Roro counterparts while remaining immune to their attacks. Moreover, Monckton's actions in these regards coincided with pre-existing indigenous expectations of how sorcerers establish their fame or renown as such. That is, when a man launches his public career as a sorcerer, other sorcerers will test whether he is truly in possession of the appropriate skills by attempting to kill him or make him sick. This is because competence in sorcery includes the capacity of protecting oneself from one's colleagues' sorcery attacks. Contemporary villagers' term for this form of qualification testing is *pipalau* "competition" (Seligmann 1910, 360–2; Stephen 1974, 60–2; Hau'ofa 1981, 277–82). The basic tenor of Monckton's relations with local village leaders (and Bramell's before him, whether he was aware of it or not) as mediated by firearms consisted basically in sorcery one-upmanship.

### **Contested Burials, Toothless Gums and Dirty Water**

Monckton's European sorcery was not limited to his mastery of firearms, however. There is one extended example that is particularly significant, as it ties Monckton's interactions with local villagers directly to the prior history of epidemics and the resulting inflation in chiefly and sorcery power described earlier. In July 1898, he returned from an absence in the Gulf to find all of Roro and Mekeo villages in the grip of another virulent epidemic of dysentery (Monckton 1920, 120, 124–6). This was apparently the second large-scale outbreak of dysentery in the colony, which proved to be a serious scourge over subsequent decades and which, on its earlier appearance in 1897, had taken a heavy toll across the region. Apparently, a few weeks prior to the first outbreak, the entire southeast coast of Papua was inundated with a rush of four hundred gold prospectors heading up the rivers to the mountains of the Owen Stanley Range, including the Angabunga that traverses the Mekeo plain. It was recognised at the time in Port Moresby that these intruders had brought the illnesses with them, as many of them were forced by violent sickness to return to Port Moresby soon after heading inland (Blayney 1898a, 51; MacGregor 1898a, xviii).

Upon returning to Mekeo Station, Monckton found the neighbouring village of Veifa`a in considerable commotion. Ten people had died while he had been away, and it was reported that the sorcerers were claiming it was the fault of the government and/or the mission. A "savage" fight between two factions in

the village had broken out, and the Catholic priests and lay brothers, in attempting to quell the violence, were at risk of being killed themselves. Monckton led an armed detachment of constabulary to the village. No one was shot, but several villagers were slain with bayonets or clubbed with rifle butts. Monckton left orders that his men were to:

bully and bang the inhabitants about as much as possible, and also that they were to tell the natives that, if so much as a piece of soft mud touched the good fathers or sisters, I would make them believe that millions of devils were loose among them. 'Remind them,' I said to the patrol, 'of what happened to the two sorcerers climbing my fence, and tell them that I am devising a worse punishment still for them, if they offend further' (1920, 121).

Subsequently, the Veifa`a Village Constable explained that the bodies of the first to die in the epidemic had been buried in the village cemetery in compliance with government regulations. But, as other people continued to die, the sorcerers claimed that the deaths were the result of people's abandonment of their traditions "in favour of Government and Mission ways. 'Did we have deaths like this, when we buried our dead under the floors of the houses?' they asked, answering themselves, 'No!'" (Monckton 1920, 122). Under the sorcerers' instructions, villagers removed the fresh corpses from the cemetery, reburying them in the village. The Village Constable then sought the aid of the missionaries to persuade the people to conform to the government's burial strictures. Failing to dissuade the villagers, the Village Constable began to remove the bodies "by force" (122), which triggered the riot. With this report, Monckton ordered the Village Constable to bring the offenders to him, who numbered some forty. No doubt this group would have included many of the active leaders of the community. Monckton relates:

They sat down; the v.c. [Village Constable], glad to get a little revenge, hastening the laggards by sharp blows with his truncheon. 'Now,' I remarked, 'I have heard a lot about sorcery since I came here, I am going to treat you to a little. Basilio [Monckton's Filipino station manager, who resumed care of Bramell's experimental plots], tell them to look at my eyes as I pass down the line, and tell me what they notice!' 'Well?' I asked, when they had all looked, 'what do they see?' 'They say your eyes are not as the eyes of other men, alike in colour, but differ one from the other.' 'Very true,' I said, as I stepped back a dozen feet where all could see me plainly. 'Now tell them to look at my mouth,' and I grinned, showing an excellent set of false teeth. They looked. 'Well?' 'They see strong white teeth,' Basilio interpreted, smothering a grin as he guessed what was coming. Turning my back for a second, I dropped my false teeth into my handkerchief and, swinging round again, exposed a row

of toothless gums. A yell of horror and amazement went up, and fearful glances were cast behind for somewhere whither to bolt. I swept my handkerchief (*sic*) before my mouth, and again grinned a glistening toothful grin. There were no sulky or defiant glances now, nothing but looks of abject fear and horror. 'Ask them, Basilio, whether in all their villages, there is a sorcerer that can do such a thing as that?' 'No,' was the answer, 'the white chief is greater than them all.'

'Now explain to them,' I said, 'that the white men know more witchcraft than their own sorcerers, but they do not practise it, as it is an evil thing. I am going to make things uncommonly hot for the sorcerers in this district: the first one I catch, I will show to you what a feeble thing he is; for I will smell at a glass of clear water and then make him smell it, and he will jump into the air and fall as a dead man.' A wonderful effect can be obtained with half a wineglass of strong ammonia, I may remark in passing. 'Basilio, tell them I am going to punish them but lightly this time; but if I have to deal with this particular lot again, they will get something to remember. First of all, they will return to the village and remove the corpses to the cemetery; then they will clean up the village thoroughly; after that, they will return here and work in the gardens for a week without pay, and will cool their hot blood by living exclusively upon pumpkins' (1920, 122–3).

Here, once again, Monckton sought to establish for the assembled villagers the superiority of European force as sorcery, especially as, consistent with indigenous metaphors, he draws upon the relative "hotness" of his powers including his ability to "cool" theirs (Mosko 1985).

The epidemic was by then taking heavy tolls in all villages, even killing four LMS teachers and several of the SHM staff. The day following the Veifa`a "revolution," some dozen Village Constables from other villages arrived at the station to report that local sorcerers, after persuading the people to bury the recently dead underneath their houses, had fled to the bush (Monckton 1920, 123). Monckton determined that the illness was enteric (i.e. typhoid) fever or dysentery, spread from the still water sources that people were using nearby rather than walking the distance to the Angabunga River.<sup>4</sup> Monckton launched a flying patrol through all villages to dissuade people from drinking from the pools, "but still the natives died like flies" (124).

As he passed through each village, he ordered his police to look for fresh corpses by prodding the ground beneath houses with their bayonets. A common explanation that people gave me in the 1970s for the traditional practice of burying their dead relatives beneath domestic houses is that they can protect sorcerers from stealing the bodies or poking a spear into the flesh from above ground to remove traces of the deceased's, and thus the survivors', blood. The

policemen's prodding of the graves with their bayonets under Monckton's direct orders would certainly have suggested to spectators that the police were trying to steal the hot, dirty blood of their dead kin, putting their own lives at risk (see Mosko 1985). In desperation, Monckton called a meeting of chiefs and village constables at which he:

threatened and prayed them to stop the burial in the houses and the drinking of polluted water. 'We can't stop it,' they said; 'you are strong and wise, tell us what to do.' I racked my brains, and at last I thought I saw a way out. 'Take this message to your people,' I said: 'I am going myself to poison every hole from which they draw water, except running streams, and they can come and see me do it; after that, I shall burn down every house in which a man is buried, and if I find five corpses in one village, I shall burn the whole village. In the meantime they are all to leave the villages, and camp in shelters half a mile away' (Monckton 1920, 124–5).

One of the ways that some peace sorcerers have achieved renown for killing is through the use of poisons (*ipani*). Also, the sorcerers of at least one contemporary village (Imounga) are famous for knowing the secret location of a particular pool or spring, the water of which is poisonous. Monckton's "way out" in this instance was thus a further confirmation in villagers' terms of his sorcery prowess. Monckton continues:

Then I wondered how I could make the people believe that their wells and pools were really poisoned; hunting amongst my supply of drugs, I found about half a pound of Permanganate of Potash, a few grains of which, placed in a bucketful of water, is sufficient to produce a red colour. 'Ah,' I thought to myself, 'now for a little sorcery.' I carefully filled up two wine glasses, one with Ipecacuanha wine, an emetic; the other with water, coloured by Permanganate to a passable imitation of it. Then I returned to my meeting of chiefs and village constables, carrying the glasses in my hands (1920, 125).

By this point, of course, villagers would have been familiar with the Catholic ritual of the Eucharist, in particular the feature where it is the priest only who drinks wine as the blood of Yesu Kristo (Jesus Christ). In contemporary Mekeo ethnography, the blood (or any other bloody tissue) of a human being contains his/her *tsiange* ("spirit") or *lalau* ("soul") and is particularly *iofu* ("dirty" and "life-threatening") to whoever might ingest it (Mosko 1985, 1997). Therefore, for Mekeo and also for Roro, any human who can drink human blood and not only survive but obtain from it enhanced spiritual power is by definition a sorcerer with capacities surpassing indigenous sorcerers.

Now other commentators have reported that villagers early on came to regard the Sacred Heart priests as *ungaunga* "sorcerers". A full documentation of this would require an effort comparable to the one here focusing on d'Albertis and Monckton.<sup>5</sup> I can nonetheless claim that one of the more intriguing obstacles to Christian conversion among Mekeo and Roro has been the notion that, by drinking the blood or consuming the flesh of another human, people's souls might be saved without the destruction of their bodies. Thus, given villagers' experiences of the Catholics, Monckton's drinking of a red fluid in the manner of wine would almost certainly have been interpreted as closely analogous to the sorcery-like Christian drinking of blood that contained the divine capacity of giving life and/or death.

Upon returning to the gathering, Monckton addressed the meeting with these words: "You see these glasses? They contain a virulent poison, the poison I am going to put in the wells and pools. I am going to drink one glassful and Maina, v.c., the other; ..." (Monckton 1920, 125).

This Village Constable, Maino (as his name is spelled elsewhere), was a clan war-chief at Aipeana village, a short distance from the station, and selected from the beginning by MacGregor himself to be the District Chief of all Mekeo.

'... but the strength of my magic will save us from dying, though you will be able to see what a bad poison it is.' Maina was not at all keen on drinking his brew, but as his brother v.c.'s all told him to rely upon me, and I told him he would get the sack as a v.c., and gaol for disobedience of orders, if he did not, he plucked up courage and swallowed the nauseous draught with many grimaces. I then swallowed mine, passed round cigarettes, and awaited developments. In twenty minutes Maina asked whether I was certain of the efficacy of my protection against the poison I had given him, as he was feeling very ill. I explained that I was, and that he would be quite safe, unless at any time he had neglected his duties as a v.c.: should he have done that, he would be extremely ill for a few minutes, and then get quite well again. Somehow or other I think Maina must have been remiss in his duties, for in a few minutes he was most uncommonly sick, after which he rapidly recovered. The meeting then dispersed, fully convinced that my threat of poisoning the water was no idle one, and prepared to explain to the people the colour and nature of the poison I intended using.

Village after village I then visited, drawing from each well or pool a bucketful of water, which I coloured red with Permanganate and exhibited to the natives: after which, I made some hocus pocus passes with my hands over the pool or well, whilst I poured in the mixture, dismally chanting all the time, 'Boney was a warrior, Boney was a thief, Boney came to my house and stole a leg of beef' (Monckton 1920, 125).

Very likely, assembled villagers interpreted these invocations as closely akin either to their own magicians' and sorcerers' spells, termed *menga*, or the priests' prayers (*mengamenga*) or both. Evidently, Monckton could not resist the temptation of including pyrotechnics in these performances. He continues:

At very big pools, I constructed a little boat of leaves – like the paper boats made by children – and placing gunpowder in it, I focussed the rays of the sun through one of the lenses removed from my field-glasses, until it exploded in a puff of fire and smoke. Then, gazing severely at the village constable and assembled villagers, I would groan loudly, and explain that the poison devils I had placed in that particular pool were of the most malignant description, and I hoped that they would not be fools enough to allow them to enter their systems through the medium of the water. 'Not much!' was the equivalent of their reply; 'we are not going to risk magic of this sort. No! Not even if we have to walk miles for our water' (Monckton 1920, 125–6).

The result of contaminating villagers' water sources with poisons and spirits, however, seemed to have worked. Monckton continued his patrols to ensure that his orders were followed. At first, to his relief, the epidemic seemed to slacken and the mortality ebbed. But then a fresh outbreak occurred,

sweeping like a wave with awful virulence through the people, who were now mostly camped away from villages. At my wits' end, I again assembled the chiefs and village constables. 'What foolery are you up to now?' I asked. 'Are you drinking the water from the poisoned wells, or burying the dead in the villages or houses?' 'Oh no,' they said, 'we have obeyed you most strictly; also we have carried out a precaution suggested by the sorcerers.' 'What was that?' I demanded. 'They have told us that when a death takes place, the body of the dead person is to be licked by all the relations.' Frantic with rage, I jumped to my feet and howled for the Station guard. 'Strip the uniform and Government clothes off these men, and throw them into goal, until I can devise some means of bringing them to their senses,' I yelled, as the police came running up. Pallid with funk, and loudly protesting that they were good and loyal servants of the Government, my village constables and chiefs were hauled away. Soon, from the villages, came streaming in the wives, friends, and relations of the imprisoned men, weeping bitterly and praying me to release their husbands, fathers, brothers, etc. Then I took counsel with Basilio. 'The men are not to blame,' he said, 'it is the sorcerers; you will do no good by punishing the v.c.'s and chiefs, who are trying to help you, merely because they are fools.' 'Very true; but how can I catch the elusive sorcerer?' I remarked. 'The v.c.'s are badly frightened now,' said Basilio; 'scare them a little more, and they will

drop a hint as to the whereabouts of some of them' (1920, Monckton 126–7).<sup>6</sup>

Monckton then called the Village Constables and chiefs back, threatening and abusing them, but they continued to deny knowing the whereabouts of the sorcerers. Those Village Constables, who were also chiefs, were, no doubt, in a precarious position, which very likely Monckton would not have fully appreciated. In the pre-colonial times as afterward, according to all ethnographers, peace-chiefs relied on their peace-sorcerers to enforce their rules and commands; indeed, all sorcery attacks were ideally perpetrated only at the expressed direction of chiefs (Stephen 1974; Hau'ofa 1981; Mosko 1985; Bergendorff 1996). Since most of Monckton's Village Constables were chiefs or closely related to installed chiefs, handing over the sorcerers to the government would have cut away at their own base of support in their own clans and villages and risked turning the sorcerers' hostilities toward them.

In any event, Monckton released the chiefs and constables "after uttering the most blood-curdling threats as to what would happen if they indulged in any more corpse-licking" (Monckton 1920, 130). He then led a patrol across the district overseeing the burial of the dead, "harrying the natives" (130) and incarcerating as many sorcerers as he could catch. Eventually, the epidemic died down, but events took another curious turn when, back at Mekeo Station, Monckton came down with black water fever, an often fatal complication of malaria. Evidently everyone at the station believed that he was going to die, including Monckton, as he issued instructions on his own burial under the flagstaff in the government compound, so "I can hear the feet of the men at drill," as he told his lieutenant (135). Probably Monckton did not recognise that to the local villagers this would have corresponded with the very burial practice that he and his predecessors had so fiercely tried to suppress. When news of Monckton's illness reached the jailed sorcerers, they started to sing in happiness (135). But Monckton recovered after being treated first by the SHM priests and then by a certain Dr. Seligmann who happened to be visiting the area on the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Strait (136).<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Monckton left the area for Port Moresby and Thursday Island until he was sufficiently recovered that he could resume his duties, at which point he was likely regarded by villagers as having returned from the dead. Soon thereafter, however, Monckton caught enteric fever. Out of concern for his health and his dislike of Mekeo, he resigned from his posting and was eventually reassigned to the Southeast Division (143).

It appears that Monckton's actions, regardless of their tactical merits, were temporarily effective in suppressing the spread of the 1897 dysentery epidemic, at least among Roro and Mekeo (Blayney 1900, 68). However, by 1899 dysentery had become "endemic" once again causing many deaths, and it remained a

persistent problem for many years throughout the Possession (Blayney 1901, 111).

## Conclusion

The events I have recounted here as presented in Monckton's text culminated in an important turning point for the subsequent history of Mekeo and Roro relations with European colonists. Undoubtedly, because of the inability of government agents and missionaries to break up the traditional alliance of clan chiefs and sorcerers, the practice of selecting peace-chiefs as Village Constables, which had been government policy until then, was abandoned. Patrol officers were instructed to select Village Constables on the basis of their presumed fitness for bearing responsibility, although the endorsement of village chiefs and elders for these nominations was also encouraged. But also, Monckton's consistent insinuation of the white man's sorcery in his deployments of physical force, and villagers' evident interpretations and responses in those same terms confirms what had become by then, following the precedent set by d'Albertis, a generation of encounters overshadowed by contests of sorcery on various sides.

For the sake of Mekeo and Roro colonial history, it can thus be concluded that there was anything but an easy transition from chiefly to colonial hierarchy and that the changes represented by the European presence were for the people far more than "barely perceptible." Contrary to Stephen's view of the early colonial encounter, it was simply not a case where the authority of Roro and Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers were gradually transformed through incremental additions of administrative responsibility. And contra Bergendorff's claim that the encounter was dominated by the imposition of brute physical force free of intercultural dynamics, the key aspect of European relations with villagers was an intense struggle over what was perceived by villagers as the effectiveness of magic and sorcery. Certainly d'Albertis and Monckton represented their actions, including their wielding of physical force, as kinds of sorcery and, in light of the decimation through disease that accompanied their use, there is little reason to suspect that villagers perceived the European presence in terms other than those presented by Europeans themselves – that is, as consisting essentially in the monopoly of new forms of devastating spiritual power. And unlike the sorcery that ideally till then had been used morally – that is, only with the endorsement of chiefs – Europeans' sorcery, whether in the form of firearms or disease, was amoral to the extent that it attacked people more or less indiscriminately. As indigenous sorcery practices were already monopolised by clan chiefs and sorcerers, their struggles against colonial forces over ensuing decades became intensely moral contests – which perhaps go a long way toward explaining the subsequent reputations of both Mekeo and Roro for cultural conservatism, including the persistence of inflated chiefly and sorcerous authority, well into the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

This reconsideration of d'Albertis' and Monckton's encounters with Roro and Mekeo also underscores the significance that the introduction of foreign diseases would have had even before Europeans arrived physically on the scene. There is a particularly strong irony here though, as the reputation of Roro and Mekeo among European observers (including anthropologists and historians) for being traditionally preoccupied with magic and sorcery appears to be in large measure a result of encounters with Europeans.

In these encounters, we can thus discern the outlines of a mythopraxis in Sahlins' sense of the term where the Europeans, to be effective in imposing their wills, consciously revised their identities and actions in ways that happened to coincide with certain pre-existing presuppositions on the part of the village peoples, and accordingly the latter elaborated their views of themselves and their capacities in ways designed to enhance their effectiveness with the new foreign powers.

Finally, I think it is fair to say that "physical force" played a role in early encounters between Europeans and Mekeo and Roro, but not merely as such. At key turns in the narratives of d'Albertis and Monckton, we have seen how Europeans perceived and wielded their weapons, not just as instruments of corporeal violence but as spiritual resources precisely in the same way that Mekeo and Roro villagers perceived and deployed indigenous and introduced weaponry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on some dozen ethnographic fieldtrips totalling nearly four years among Mekeo and Roro beginning in 1974. I am greatly indebted to the many Maipa, Ioi and Waima villagers as well as others who have so generously provided me with their knowledge, insights and hospitality. Numerous archives have also allowed me access to documentary materials which have proven to be critical in my efforts to understand Mekeo/Roro contact history, including the Melanesian Archives at the University of California at San Diego, the Papua New Guinea National Archives, the National Library of Australia, the Seligmann Papers at the London School of Economics, and the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. Funding for these endeavours has been generously provided by the Hartwick College Board of Trustees, the University of Auckland Research Committee, the National Institute for the Humanities, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Marsden Fund of New Zealand, and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. I have benefited also from the comments and suggestions provided by Hank Nelson, Margaret Jolly, Paul van der Grijp and other participants in the CREDO–RSPAS *Pacific Encounters* workshops in Marseilles and Canberra, and also members of the RSPAS Pacific and Asian History Seminar. All mistakes and omissions remain, of course, my own.

With regard to the colonial history of other Melanesian settings, I have elsewhere (Mosko 1991, 1992) characterised these complex interplays more generally in terms of plural, competing “messages” and “missions.” Here I focus upon similar working misunderstandings between Mekeo and Roro villagers and colonial agents over the effect of the latter’s use of Western armaments.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, while they cite d’Albertis and Monckton, neither Stephen (1974, 66, 81n, 82n, 101n) nor Bergendorff (1996) have drawn upon them as historical sources, except in the most cursory of fashions, apparently because elements in those accounts – elements on which I rely heavily in the following analysis – conflict with those two authors’ conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen (1974, 63–82) presumes that from 1891 to 1896, when Kowald was killed in an accident, relations between Mekeo/Roro and government agents continued to improve. The evidence here suggests that relations had been deteriorating for some time, culminating in the near-complete breakdown of colonial order.

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, if the dysentery was introduced by the prospectors who had gone up the Angbunga River into the mountains, it would appear likely that it was from that source that the disease was transmitted to Mekeo and Roro living downstream.

<sup>5</sup> Other investigators have noted how the Sacred Heart missionaries came to be seen by villagers as sorcerers. Hau’ofa emphasises how Bishop Vangeke, the first Papua New Guinean priest and later bishop, was widely regarded as a sorcerer by his parishioners. Stephen (1974) and Bergendorff (1996) have noted how early priests endeavoured to learn the ritual of sorcery from the sorcerers so that they could understand it. My village friends insist that the only reason one would want to have such knowledge is to use it in one’s own personal projects. In my own discussions with several priests over the years and combing through Sacred Heart archives, I was surprised to learn that since the beginning the priests have argued with villagers – not that their beliefs in the spirits of the dead or the deity Akaisa were false, but that those spirits did indeed exist as devils or the minions of the devil. The priests thus declared that it was a sin to pray to Mekeo or Roro spirits, which of course was required to perform all

indigenous ritual actions, especially sorcery. Also, the missionaries devoted considerable time from the beginning to cure villagers of any ailments that they could, some of which were regarded as caused by sorcerers and, thus, could only be cured by sorcerers (cf. Jolly 1996). Monckton notes how he himself would frequently practise surgery on villagers, and that MacGregor was also a medical doctor, as was the colony's Resident Magistrate at the time, Blayney (Monckton 1920, 10, 113, 131–2). Also, Monckton gives a very lively account of the shooting parties of the priests, their inferior guns, etc. He mentions as well how the priests were adept at hunting with packs of dogs, which to Mekeo similarly requires considerable secret ritual knowledge involving spirits, medicines, etc. – ingredients amounting to sorcery. But the point is, it was not only the government officials and police who monopolised firearms; even the missionaries were included among the proficient gun sorcerers.

<sup>6</sup> To counter those who have dismissed Monckton's account out of hand for his tendency to sensationalism and bravado (e.g. Stephen 1974, 101n), I believe that Monckton's candid seeking of counsel from his assistant, Basilio, at this critical juncture lends certain credibility to his account of these events.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to consider the extent to which Seligmann's classic description of Mekeo and Roro cultures elicited mainly from the Sacred Heart missionaries was conditioned by the fact that he had arrived on the scene in the immediate aftermath of the 1898 dysentery epidemic. It is therefore unsurprising that he would have gained the impression, as noted above, that Mekeo and Roro were sorcery-ridden to such an extraordinary extent – without appreciating the contributions to that development which Europeans including d'Albertis, Monckton, and the missionaries whom he was interviewing had made and were still making.

<sup>8</sup> This trajectory of Roro and Mekeo transformation is rare, if not unique, in Melanesia. According to Zelenietz and Lindenbaum (1981), it is the *breakdown* of "in-group authority" that has typically accompanied the inflation in sorcery and hostile magic, and usually it has been sorcery suspicion of hostile neighbours that has been emphasised. The Mekeo case would seem to parallel instead the classic case of Hawai'i, where, in Sahlins' (1981, 1985) account, the initial rise in chiefly ritual authority was closely tied to Hawaiians' perceptions of the spiritual powers of Captain James Cook and members of his crew. Nonetheless, Zelenietz and Lindenbaum note that novel fears about sorcery and magic may follow new patterns of disease transmission, which is, I think, clearly the case with Mekeo and Roro, as some have argued for Hawai'i and elsewhere in the Pacific too (Douglas 1989; Stannard 1989; Jolly 1996; Denoon et al. 2000; Bayliss-Smith 2005).