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**NABUAPAKA**

**Social Change in a Roro Community**

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**Thesis submitted for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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HIGHER DEGREE THESIS (PhD)

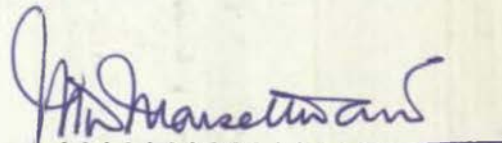
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Except where otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents my original research. No part of this work has been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Monsell-Davis". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "M" and a long, horizontal flourish at the end.

Michael Monsell-Davis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the recent history and ethnography of the Roro people - Austronesian-speakers who live in the vicinity of Yule Island about 100 miles north west of Port Moresby. It shows that, like their neighbours the Mekeo, Roro have an authority structure that differs considerably from the big man systems commonly ascribed to Melanesia in that it is based on hereditary chiefs and sorcerers.

The document indicates some of the changes that have taken place as Roro leadership and laws have been subordinated to a wider polity, and as they have come to depend on money rather than solely on the resources they obtained locally or through trade with their neighbours. In particular it shows the lessening of ceremonial, of chiefly prestige, and of people's dependence on chiefs for initiative and resources.

Despite the changes, however, the Roro traditional belief system has remained largely intact, in particular belief in the power of sorcery has enabled chiefs to retain control despite their waning prestige and commoner assertions that they are not doing their jobs.

Finally the thesis shows the impact of the opening of the road between Bereina and Port Moresby in 1973. It has brought new life to the village in that people can now travel easily between town and country, and those working in Moresby can return home often with money and news. But the road has also opened new opportunities for entrepreneurial enterprises such as transport and tradestores. The final part of the thesis examines some of the problems faced by these ventures, particularly the fears and guilt arising out of the clash between a growing, largely unperceived individualism and dependence on money, as against traditional values that stress equal access to resources and that prestige and status are normally conveyed only by birth. These values are supported by strong persisting fears of sorcery.

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ADDENDUM : Response to Examiners - inserted at end  
of volume.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
ARM	Assistant Resident Magistrate
BNG	British New Guinea
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
K	Kina (major unit of PNG Currency)
LMS	London Missionary Society
MSC	Mission de la Sacré Coeur (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart)
PO	Patrol Officer
RM	Resident Magistrate
TPNG	Territory of Papua and New Guinea
VC	Village Constable/Village Councillor



## INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

Nabuapaka is a small coastal village about 100 km north west of Port Moresby. The people speak a dialect of Roro, an Austronesian language which they share with over 7000 other people living in 15 village complexes on either side of the Angabunga Delta.

Since the latter part of the nineteenth century they have been subjected to the influences of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, the London Mission Society, and a Colonial government whose methods included regulations that invaded every nook and cranny of village affairs with coercive threats of imprisonment or fines for non-compliance.

Despite the changes that have stemmed from these influences, the everyday life of the village continues to revolve around the rhythm of the tides, the moon and the seasons, obedience to their chiefs and belief in the efficacy of magic and sorcery. In recent years a number of men have attempted to establish small-scale businesses such as trade-stores and transport ventures.

### The research:

This thesis is based on over 20 months of field-work in the Roro area between June 1973 and February 1977. The major period was from June '73 to June '74, followed by shorter periods of 8 to 12 weeks each at the ends of 1974, 1975 and 1977. In addition I was able to visit Nabuapaka a number of times during 1975, although not normally for more than two or three days at a time, while I was teaching at the University of Papua New Guinea.

I first met the Roro early in 1965 when the PNG Department of Education sent me to teach at the Kairuku Junior Technical School, as it was then called, on Yule Island. Many of the schoolboys were from nearby Roro villages on the mainland, and during school holidays they often took me to their homes. Later, while I was an undergraduate at UPNG in Port Moresby (1968-1970), the

Roro students made me an integral part of their group - a fact for which I shall be forever grateful.

During those six years my friends taught me, in an unsystematic manner, and without my keeping notes, much about their society and that their leaders differed from the big-men I was learning about in my anthropology classes. Rather, the Roro have hereditary chiefs who acquire their status by primogeniture, and accede to their offices at major installation ceremonies attended by chiefs and sorcerers from all neighbouring communities.

In 1971 Hau'ofa reported his initial findings that Mekeo too possessed a highly structured leadership based on hereditary chiefs, and I determined to learn more about the Roro. Thus when the opportunity arose to take up an Australian Commonwealth Post-Graduate Research Award, I had no difficulty in deciding on a field area.

I chose Nabuapaka as my principal base because I already knew the village, and because it was on the new road linking Port Moresby and Bereina, opened just as I arrived in mid-1973.

In earlier years when I had visited Nabua I had always stayed at the home of Paru Aihi and his wife Taita Paru. Paru is the elder brother of one of my students from Kairuku Tech. When I arrived for this longer visit he insisted that I again stay with him and Taita, and my deepest thanks are due to them for their hospitality over the years.

I worked in a mixture of English and Roro. Most of the young men and women under 35 speak excellent English, as do several much older people, and while my use of Roro improved continually there were always occasions, particularly when emotions were excited, when I found it necessary to seek translations and post hoc explanations.

I participated in most village affairs, usually as a member of the Kivori sub-clan with whom I was living. People became used to my continued scribbling in little notebooks, understanding that I was "learning about their customs". I was also actively involved in projects such as one to re-open the village Co-operative store, and have been concerned since 1969 in the affairs of the Nabua Brothers band, assisting them to acquire a hire purchase agreement for their instruments and in other matters. The young men sometimes looked to me to make arrangements for transport if we wanted to go to a party in a distant village - not because they expected me to pay for the petrol, but anticipating that I might have greater success in persuading the driver to take us. More than once invitations from neighbouring villages to a soccer match or a party arrived addressed to "Mike Davis, leader of the Nabua Home Scholars". The last being the term by which village youths refer to themselves.

#### The aims

From the start my intentions in this study have been broadly ethnographic. In my original proposal I stated that I wished to centre my research on traditional leadership, in part because the Roro authority structure of hereditary chiefs and sorcerers, like that of the Mekeo, differs from the big-man systems popularly ascribed to much of the remainder of Papua New Guinea, but also because I was interested in its relevance or otherwise to innovations such as Local Government Councils and the development of business enterprises. In this, the opening of the Hiritano Highway linking the Roro and Mekeo to the National Capital was also significant (Monsell-Davis 1973:2-3; 18).

This thesis then, centred largely on a single village, Nabuapaka, is intended to show some of the changes that have taken place in the 100 years or so since the Roro first encountered Europeans. During this time the

colonial authorities have subordinated Roro leaders and laws to the wider polity, and attempted to harness their energies to the needs of the central government through the imposition of compulsory planting, carrying and taxation. In the process the Roro have been transformed from a politically and economically autonomous people into a peasant fisher-folk who now depend upon a cash income for a part of their subsistence.

Despite the changes that have seen a considerable reduction in the ceremonial and ritual of the past, Roro chiefs have retained much of their authority, primarily because of the people's strong belief in the spiritual powers, particularly sorcery, to which chiefs have access. This thesis indicates the strength of traditional leadership and its bases in heredity and spiritual power, and attempts to show its relevance to understanding the difficulties surrounding the small-scale village entrepreneur.

Inasmuch as this account has a central theme, therefore, it is the question of where the Roro stand today. They are a people with their own history and traditions who aspire to the new life of formal education, adventure, money and possessions that the colonial era opened up for them. Yet the new world sometimes seems an ephemeral thing that cannot simply be grafted onto the village.

In order to understand the fears and jealousies that make people hesitate, and limit their ambitions, I have found it necessary to provide detailed ethnographic descriptions to support arguments in later chapters that the difficulties faced by village businessmen are a combination of their own social structure and belief systems and their dealings with colonial officials.

This thesis as a result, while not strictly the "straight reportage" recently castigated by Hinton as "at best of interest to a few specialists, and at worst downright boring" (1980:285), is necessarily largely ethnographic but makes reference to theoretical matters throughout in respect to various aspects of Roro life.

Chapter I sets the scene by describing the Roro environment and traditional economy including their trading relationships with neighbouring communities. The chapter also briefly introduces recent economic developments that I return to in more detail in chapter 8. Chapter 2 takes us through the history of the Roro, beginning (in part I) with oral tradition and the studies of archaeology, and leading (in part II) into the arrival of the missions and the history of the people's relations with the colonial government. The latter is the more significant for this thesis as it indicates the troubled nature of Roro dealings with the central authorities, particularly as a result of enforced planting, carrying and participation in economic and political ventures in which they perceived little benefit to themselves.

Chapters 3 to 7 are a detailed study of the ethnography. Chapters 3 and 4 show the Roro life-cycle and the relationship between sub-clans. Chapter 5 discusses leadership and places it into the general context of south east Papua, indicating the importance of the inheritance of magical powers in defining a "catchment" (Ryan 1974) of men who could compete for significant influence. The process reached its most structured at the two extremes of Austronesian-speaking territory on the south coast of Papua, with powerful chieftainships in the Trobriand Islands to the south east, and Mekeo-Roro in the north west. The theme is continued in chapter 6 with a detailed discussion of Roro religious beliefs and their part in supporting the political organisation.

Chapter 7 examines dispute settlement, showing that although the elected Local Government Councillor is important in the formal adjudication of disagreements, he gains much of his authority from the backing of the traditional chiefs.

Chapter 8 returns to the theme of economic development, looks at colonial attempts to effect changes and at recent village and individual initiatives. In the chapter I try to show that many of the problems faced by rural entrepreneurs stem from a combination of colonial history and the Roro's own social structure which discourages individual ambition through the coercive force of sorcery.

Finally, in chapter 9, I have tried to draw all the material together and assess what it is telling us of the trends in Roro society today. The chapter indicates the increasing dependence of the people as a whole on the wider national economy, but also the growing, but largely unperceived, emphasis on the individual and the nuclear family rather than the sub-clan and the village. This shift towards individuality and dependence on cash conflicts with traditional ideology that emphasises co-operation and reciprocity, equal economic opportunity, and notions that rank and privilege are normally conferred only by birth. The ideology is backed by the punitive use of sorcery - the defender of tradition and of chiefs.

#### Nabuapaka as representative of Roro

There is one question that must be raised, and that is the extent to which Nabuapaka, where I lived, is representative of the remaining Roro-Waima villages.

In broad outline I am satisfied that my account reflects the main features of the whole Roro-Waima domain, but there are some respects in which Nabua differs from other communities - in fact each village possesses unique features. First, and most obviously to the outsider, there are environmental differences. Nabuapaka, Delena and Poukama share, with Tsiria village on Yule Island, access to reefs rich in shellfish and other marine life, especially crayfish, one of their

principal sources of cash. Waima, Kivori and Hisiu are on deep water beaches, but the first two possess fertile soils lacking in the coastal strip to the south-east of Yule. The so-called Paitana Roro - Mou, Rapa, Babiko and Bioto - are inland, but all on productive land within the broad delta of the Angabunga River. Pinupaka, on a narrow sandy spit at the north end of Hall Sound, is slowly disappearing into the sea. The people are in the process of relocating their homes across the strait on Yule Island.

Second there is the division into the Waima-Kivori and Roro-Paitana tribes. Nabuapaka and Hisiu, to the south east of Yule, belong to the former while all other villages are members of the Roro-Paitana. The differences between the two require further study of a kind which I have not undertaken. But even within these groupings there are differences. Nabuapaka and Hisiu both ostensibly colonies of Waima, are nucleated villages with all sub-clans living together without obvious boundaries between their dwellings. Waima, on the other hand, is a collection of well over a dozen sub-clan-based hamlets separated from each other by wide strips of bush.

The principal mission influence on villages to the south east of Yule has been the London Mission Society (LMS), and while the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) are strongly represented in Nabua and Hisiu, they are dominant in Tsiria and in the inland Paitana villages. The two churches share influence in Waima-Kivori.

Some communities have retained fully-functioning chiefly ceremonial houses (marea) while others have replaced them with simple roofed platforms alongside their chief's homes. Waima was the only place where Seligmann (1910) found any trace of initiation rites for youths with separate marea in which the young men were secluded.



Again, there are differences, sometimes reflected today, in the ethnic ancestry of the sub-clans, some of which were refugees from war or sickness or quarrels. Descendants of Motuan sub-clans in Delena, for instance, are said to be the best fishers for turtle and dugong on account of their ancestors having brought with them the appropriate magic. Otherwise the Motuan and Roro sub-clans are not overtly distinct, but at the turn of the century, living on opposite sides of the street, they spoke different languages.

I mention other distinctions in the body of this thesis, and while I do not want to over-emphasise them I believe it useful to stress that my account is based primarily upon Nabuapaka.

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MMD

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